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Tauf and the North Arabian Desert

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Source: *The Geographical Journal*, Oct., 1923, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Oct., 1923), pp. 241-259

Published by: The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1781017>

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The Geographical Journal

Vol. LXII No. 4

October 1923

JAUF AND THE NORTH ARABIAN DESERT

H. St. J. B. Philby, C.I.E.

*Read with the following paper at the Meeting of the Society,
12 February 1923. Map follows page 320.*

IT is a great pleasure to me to comply for the third time with a request from the Royal Geographical Society for a paper on my experiences in Arabia, and my only regret is that the necessity of being at my post on the north-western fringe of the great Arabian peninsula prevents me from being present in person to communicate this paper. Major Holt, with whom I made the journey which I am to describe, has, however, kindly undertaken to act as my proxy before you in addition to reading his own paper, which I understand will deal more fully with the technical aspects of our journey from the point of view of a railway engineer. No one is more competent, I may perhaps be permitted to say, than Major Holt to talk about the engineering possibilities of the desert, for he came early in 1922 to my headquarters at Amman in Trans-Jordan after several years spent in an exhaustive study of the desert-railway problem on a line extending east to west from the Euphrates at Hit and Ramadi to the Hejaz Railway near Amman. I was at the time contemplating a visit in the ordinary course of my political duties to the famous oasis of Jauf, and Major Holt jumped at my suggestion that he should accompany me thither to study the railway possibilities of the depression of Wadi Sirhan. There would, however, have been no justifiable occasion for writing this paper had not our "studies," after an exasperating series of failures and trials, eventually carried us beyond Jauf itself across the wilderness to the Mesopotamian border at Karbala.

Our first attempt to reach Jauf was a failure. Major Holt had just piloted a party across the desert from Ramadi via Azraq to Amman, following for the most part the well-marked line of the air track used by the Cairo-Baghdad air mail. He had with him a number of specially fitted Ford cars, and it was with some of these that we decided to make the attempt as far as the oasis of Kaf near the head of Wadi Sirhan, trusting there to collect camels and an escort for the rest of the journey. We left Amman on 10 March 1922 with three cars, and on the following

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day picked up Mithqal Pasha, chief Shaikh of the Bani Sakhr tribe, with one car at his black-tented camp on the edge of the desert in the neighbourhood of Ziziyah station on the Hejaz Railway. At this point we were roughly some 25 miles from Amman and 80 miles from our first objective—Kaf.

We started off again on the morning of March 12 in two parties : the first, consisting of the four cars, arrived at Kaf at 4 p.m. on the following day, while the second, consisting of Mithqal's attendants mounted on camels, arrived at our destination no less than twelve hours before we did. They travelled of course during the night as well as by day, while we had to camp for the night, and moreover we were without the services of Major Holt's trained British mechanics, as I had deemed it advisable to keep the British element down to a minimum—in fact, our two selves. To anticipate the course of events, we had a similar experience on our return journey, the camels reaching camp within half an hour of the cars on a six hours' run. I note these matters to justify my personal preference for camels over mechanical transport in the real desert—that is to say, in country where no organized route exists. With proper—and expensive—organization mechanical transport can beat everything else, but the superiority of the camel lies in the fact that no organization whatever is necessary, plans can be left to depend on circumstances, and one is untrammelled absolutely.

The desert country between the Hejaz Railway and the Wadi Sirhan depression calls for little comment. In former times—notably under Roman rule and again in the days of the Umayyid dynasty of Damascus—it was more prosperous than now. The rainfall must have been heavier certainly in Roman times, for the line of cultivation extended further east than it now does ; while the numerous hunting-boxes of the Damascus Caliphs are ample evidence that game was abundant, where now an occasional gazelle or bustard is all that may be met with in a long day's march. The introduction of modern firearms has been a curse and veritable scourge to Arabia and its independent, individualistic denizens. There is no law here for the protection of game, and nobody would respect it if there were ; but, worse still, the Arab social code of raid and rapine has not shown any signs as yet of adjusting itself to the sudden change which has come over the desert with the advent of the modern rifle. If the necessity for such an adjustment is not realized soon, Arab society will decimate itself in a short space, but I should perhaps modify this somewhat sweeping generalization. Every crisis must produce a cure, and, though the northern desert of Arabia is at the present moment unsafe in the widest sense of that term—unsafe for the innocent traveller, the merchant, and the shepherd—there are already signs of a welcome change in the south, where Ibn Sa'ud has created a well-knit polity on a religious basis and has found himself strong enough to prohibit tribal raiding within his borders. Those borders are gradually creeping

further northwards and already march with 'Iraq and Trans-Jordan. It is only beyond them that the lives of the faithful are in jeopardy, while within them those who reside as of right, acknowledging the rule of Ibn Sa'ud, and those who travel with his permission and protection are safe.

My main object in making this journey was to investigate the actual political situation at Jauf, which was exceedingly obscure, and it may be convenient to take a general survey of the position before proceeding with the narrative of our experiences. The fortunes of Jauf have oscillated violently since the 'sixties of last century, when, it would seem, Faisal ibn Sha'lan, the first of his house to occupy the district, seized it from the Ibn Rashid dynasty of Hail. The Sha'lan occupation appears then to have lasted for about twenty years until the great Muhammad ibn Rashid recovered Jauf and added it to his empire, which before his death embraced practically the whole of Central Arabia. His successor, 'Abdul'aziz, was unable to preserve the integrity of his frontiers against the growing power of his namesake, 'Abdul'aziz ibn Sa'ud, the present Sultan of Central Arabia ; and his losses in the south were followed in the north by the loss of Jauf about 1906 to Nawwaf ibn Nuri, a scion of the collateral branch of the Sha'lan family. Nuri who had become paramount Shaikh of the Ruwalla tribe by murdering his brother, Fahad, appears to have contented himself with the position of chief of the Badawin and to have left the settlements of Jauf and Sakaka to the governance of his son, Nawwaf, who seems to have ruled the somewhat difficult citizens thereof with wisdom and moderation until about 1920, when Hail again asserted its claim to suzerainty over the northern oases, and Sa'ud, the reigning Amir, was able to attack Sakaka with the treacherous collusion of a member of the premier family of the town, Hamad ibn Muwaishir. The slave governor, left by Nawwaf to administer the town, was treacherously murdered and his signet-ring of office sent to Sa'ud, who proceeded to occupy the whole district after some desultory fighting. Meanwhile Ibn Sa'ud had been carrying on a desultory campaign against Hail since 1918, and Sa'ud himself was murdered early in 1921 by a treacherous relative, being succeeded by 'Abdullah ibn Mit'ab. The summer of 1921 witnessed some intensification of Ibn Sa'ud's campaign, and the position became so uncomfortable that 'Abdullah abandoned his post to his cousin, Muhammad ibn Talal, and was given an asylum at Riyadh by Ibn Sa'ud. Muhammad was forced to surrender Hail and led captive to Riyadh in August of that year, and Ibn Sa'ud added the Shammar Amirate to his dominions. Not the whole of it, however, for in the same month, Nawwaf having died prematurely in Syria during the summer, Sultan, his son, assisted by his cousin, Mujhim ibn Sha'lan, marched down to Jauf and occupied the district without serious opposition. Hamad ibn Muwaishir was punished for his former treachery by being deprived of his lands and other pos-

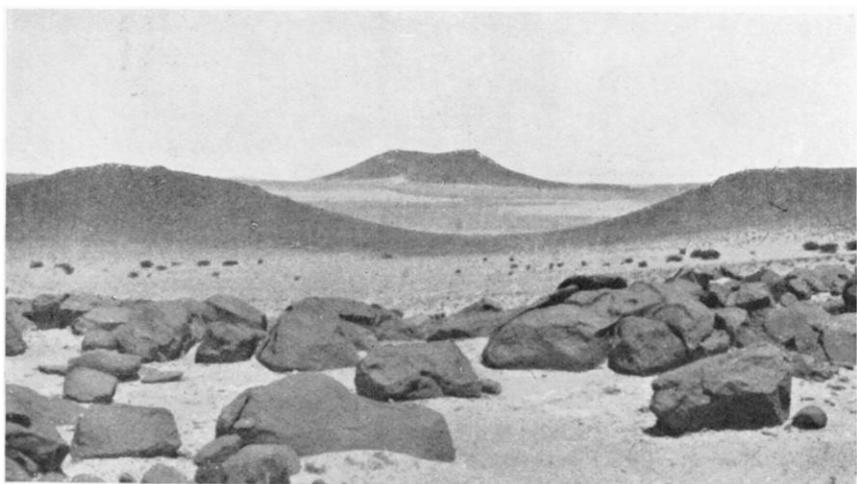
sessions, and thus by the beginning of 1922 the Jauf tract, after many vicissitudes, seemed to have settled down to its old allegiance to the Sha'lan family, while their former rivals, the Rashid dynasty, had ceased to exist.

From the Sha'lan point of view that was the position. But Ibn Sa'ud had his own view of the matter—namely that, having destroyed Ibn Rashid, he was the natural heir to the dominions which Ibn Rashid had formerly ruled. In favour of his view was firstly the consideration that he was in a position to enforce it if challenged, and secondly the fact that the majority of the people of the Jauf settlements were for him—not so much for him, perhaps, as against the Sha'lan, to whose unfitness to rule over Jauf, or anywhere else for that matter, Major Holt and I are more than ready to bear witness in support of the unfortunate citizens of the settlements in question. Meanwhile rumour, taking its colour, of course, from the various sources from which it emanated, represented Ibn Sa'ud as being in varying degrees in effective possession of Jauf and its environs, and Nuri ibn Sha'lan alternately as having done obeisance to his new overlord and as having defied the would-be intruder. It was clear that we should not arrive at the truth of the matter except by personal investigation, and it was of some importance to know the truth—Trans-Jordan and its ruler, the Amir 'Abdullah, being vitally interested in the affairs of its near neighbour and their possible consequences to themselves.

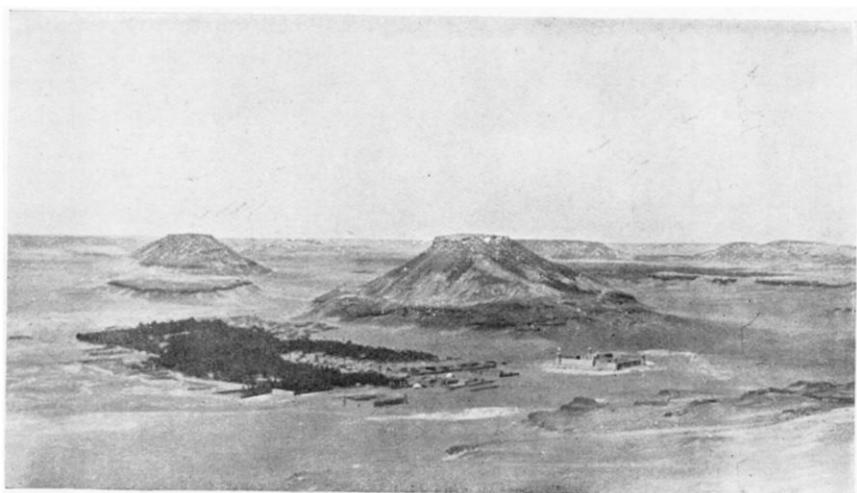
And so after a journey, made exasperating by a fair selection of the troubles to which cars in general are subject but otherwise without incident, we came to Kaf, the most important of a group of villages situated in this section of Wadi Sirhan and known collectively as Quraiyat al Milh—the salt hamlets. The name is taken from the only industry of the locality, for the whole area is a collection of salt-pans in the bed of the Wadi under the lea of the limestone and basalt cliff which divides it sharply from the broad strip of lava-covered hills extending from Jabal Druz in the north to a point about 50 miles south of Kaf. These salt-pans are worked by the Badawin on payment of a fee of 2 majidies per camel-load to the local owners of the pans and a royalty of a similar amount to Nuri ibn Sha'lan, the acknowledged overlord of these villages. The salt, which thus costs 4 majidies per camel-load at the pans, is mostly sold in the villages of the Hauran—a journey of three or four days—at a charge of 20 majidies a load; it is extracted by the simple process of evaporation, the surface of the soil being dug out in small rectangular pits about a foot deep; the sub-soil water thus exposed slowly evaporates, leaving a solid residue of white salt of fair quality, which is taken out and piled up in little pyramidal mounds against the coming of the carriers. Seen from the air, as I saw them frequently during August and September when we at Amman had many alarms and excursions arising out of Wahhabi activities, these salt-heaps look



ARCH AND RESERVOIR, QASR AMIJ



VOLCANIC CONE OF JABAL MAQALL, NEAR KAF



KAF FROM THE NORTH-WEST

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KAF AND THE SALT-PANS FROM THE AIR



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for all the world like white bell-tents and, collectively, like a vast encampment ; indeed, they stand out so prominently in the scene that the dark palm patch and drab village of Kaf itself near by almost escape notice.

So much for the salt of the Quraiyat villages. In other respects Kaf, which may be taken, though the most important, as typical of them all, shows all the characteristics of a typical village of Nejd. Northward of Ma'an, which with the settlements south of it on the railway line, should be counted to the Hejaz, Trans-Jordan has characteristics of its own differentiating it from Arabia. It is a high rolling plateau country with vast stretches of cornland and even vaster possibilities of development in this direction ; its proximity to Palestine, its road to Jerusalem, and its railway from Haifa and Damascus class it in the modern world ; moreover it has no palms and its village life is that of Palestine and Syria—squalid and unattractive. But at Kaf and its subsidiary settlements we plunge into the depths of Arabian civic life ; the visitor is admitted as of right to the benefit of the three-day rule of hospitality ; the rule of respectable life is unadulterated idleness, whose monotony is varied only by punctual attendance at the five daily prayers, excursions to the houses of neighbours to drink coffee, and attendance at the evening and morning *levées* of the local governor outside the wall of the fort-like structure in which he resides. Many of the citizens of Kaf and its villages were formerly denizens of Central Arabia ; the governor at the time of our visit (since deposed) had left Buraida to come here forty years ago ; the local Qadhi was from the same town, which he left fifteen years ago seeking repose from the growing vigour of the Wahhabi revival, as he told me ; many there are here from 'Anaiza and other Qasim centres ; but the most recent arrivals are perhaps the most noteworthy—a band of some ten or twelve Wahhabi enthusiasts who have settled here with the professed object of spreading the true faith and no one says them nay. They have not yet succeeded in stopping the practice of smoking, but I make no doubt that the Quraiyat settlements will in their due course lapse through pure inertia into a creed and rule of life which are so admirably adapted to their character and requirements.

Our reception by the authorities of Kaf was cordial enough though guarded. We had thought it best not to give notice of our coming beforehand, and the car we sent ahead to announce our arrival when within sight of Kaf—certainly the first car to enter the oasis—was the first news the governor had of our projected visit. Holding his post at the pleasure of Nuri—doubtless he sent off word of our arrival to his master at once—he dared not accommodate us in the matters in which we required his help. We were not allowed to visit the natural fortress on the top of an isolated lava-capped hillock, called Qasr Sa'idi, overlooking the oasis, in which is stationed a small guard of some twenty-five men with machine guns, a striking provision of nature for the defence of the locality. for every road leading to Kaf is commanded by this eminence and all

arrivals are brought sharply to a halt by a shot or two from the garrison and move on at their peril until their business is known. We were also not permitted to enter the governor's fort-residence, built only a year before at the foot of the hillock above mentioned and known as Qasr Nuri. Otherwise we were made reasonably free of the place to visit its surrounding ridges, whence a fine view of the basalt country and volcanic cones to the eastward is obtained, and the copious somewhat sulphurous springs which provide the inhabitants with water and the palms with nourishment. These springs issue from the ground quite close to the surface, and the irrigation of the palm groves is a matter of no difficulty.

But of all things we wanted the governor's help in procuring us camels and attendants for the onward journey to Jauf, and it is perhaps unnecessary to relate the exasperating details of our negotiations with the local authorities, which ended with our three days of free board and lodging in complete failure and in our return to Amman. To tell the truth our own companions—Mithqal Pasha, whom I have already mentioned, Haditha al Khuraisha, another important Bani Sakhr chieftain, and Ghalib Pasha, a swashbuckling general who had served with the Turks at Medina during the war and was now in the service of the Amir 'Abdullah—had so little stomach for the matter in hand—a visit to Jauf, which was reputed to be the centre of Ibn Sa'ud's military activities—that they exerted themselves to the utmost to dissuade the governor from giving us any facilities, while coming to us with tales of their heroic efforts against odds to win over the governor to our side. To cut a long story short our efforts failed, and we arrived back at Amman on March 18 after a three-day journey, whose only incident of note was our meeting with an ancient member of the Bani Sakhr, who claimed to be 120 years old and to remember as a young man the operations of Ibrahim Pasha in these parts during the 'twenties and 'thirties of last century. Incidentally Kaf itself is said to have been destroyed by him.

Our experiences during this visit only served to whet our appetite for more, but we determined to set out next time on camels and thus be free, if necessary, to circumvent the Kaf authorities. But now fortune began to treat us more kindly and it was with much gratification that, about the end of April, I received letters from Nuri's representatives at Jauf—his young grandson, Sultan, and his cousin, Farhan ibn Mashhur—explaining their regret at not having known of our previous visit to Kaf in time to make arrangements for our onward journey, and their hope of our visiting them at an early date.

We did not need a second invitation and all was ready, camels, escort, etc., on May 2, when we gathered at Mithqal Pasha's tent at Manshiya close to the railway line. The next day we reached Haditha's camp by the Roman ruins of Muwaqqar, about 21 miles from Amman by road. Here we were met by emissaries from Kaf, now all smiles

and enthusiastic to help us in every way, and hence we started off on the morning of May 4 in full strength towards the prominent landmark of Kharana, a well-preserved specimen of an Umayyid hunting-box. That evening found us camping in Shaib Shammary, a shallow drainage channel trending eastwards from the Muwaqqar watershed towards Wadi Sirhan. The following day we arrived at the wells of 'Amari at the eastern edge of the Sirhan depression and spent the night with a section of Ruwalla. May 6 saw us back again at Kaf, where we were warmly welcomed by no less than six members of Nuri's family, the most important of whom were Mujhim ibn Sha'lan, Farhan ibn Mashhur, and Faraj ibn Sha'lan. We dined as a matter of course with our hosts within the precincts of Qasr Nuri, but it should be noted that it was now the month of Ramdhan, a fact which resulted in our having to go on short commons during the daytime, though in Nejd the traveller-guest would not have been allowed to realize from his own treatment that his hosts were fasting according to the law.

It was however not in this matter alone that our present hosts disappointed us. From this moment onwards, though we can look back with some satisfaction on the successful achievement of the main objects of our journey beyond our reasonable expectations, the story of our dealings with the house of Sha'lan was one of constant wrangling and disappointment, bickering and bribing, chiding and cajoling and deception. Without shame we may confess to the joy with which, within a month of our sojourn at Jauf, we heard of the downfall of the house of Sha'lan at the hands of Ibn Sa'ud. As rulers they were detested by their own people, whom they treated with insolent harshness, while as hosts we had ample proof of their unfitness to be classed among the Arabs. As princes of the Arabian borderland they have trafficked too long with Syria and have drunk too deeply of the golden stream, which we poured out during the war, to have retained the Badawin virtues to which they are heirs by blood.

The news from the Jauf district which we now had from our hosts was far from reassuring. Hamad ibn Muwaishir, of whom I have already spoken, had been pardoned soon after his punishment and fully reinstated in his properties, but this act of weakness on the part of the Sha'lan was soon to prove their undoing. Hamad, nursing his resentment rather than feeling gratitude for his lenient treatment, had lost no time in offending again by evading an edict of Nuri for the effective disarmament of the people of Sakaka and Jauf, and was denounced as having concealed a large store of arms and ammunition under the floor of his residence. Called upon to surrender his arms and submit to punishment, he raised the standard of revolt in the name of Ibn Sa'ud and the Wahhabi faith and shut himself and his considerable following in behind the walls of his gardens and fortress-residence at the western end of the Sakaka oasis. This had actually happened only ten days

before our arrival at Kaf, and, Sultan having occupied the eastern hamlets of the oasis with a view to besieging the rebels into submission, while Jauf itself remained outwardly loyal under its slave-governor, Daujan, watching events, Mujhim and Farhan had hastened to meet us with a view of enlisting our assistance in the Sha'lan cause.

But Mujhim and his fellows, always thinking back to the war period rather than forward to the fate awaiting them, imagined we had come to sow their deserts with gold and to place all the resources of the British Empire at their disposal. They agreed to take us to Jauf on condition of our sending for aeroplanes and armoured cars to support the expedition. We maintained that we could not on any account undertake a military demonstration until we had examined the situation at Jauf on the spot and satisfied ourselves of the feasibility of the roads leading thither for mechanical transport. We were also anxious to examine the railway possibilities of their country—hence an expert engineer among our party. Mujhim was the senior member of the family present, though Farhan had actually been named by Nuri to conduct business with us. With either alone we might have been able to drive a bargain with a straight bribe, or we might have played one off against the other at the price of a written promise that that one should specifically participate in the substantial subsidy, which they imagined His Majesty's Government to be desirous of conferring on them collectively in perpetuity ; but in the long run the discussions ended in a deadlock and the matter had to be referred for the orders of Nuri, then located at a distance of two days' journey northward on the confines of Syria.

We possessed ourselves in patience during the four days of Mujhim's absence, for he did us the honour of carrying our message to Nuri himself, and he returned with Nuri's permission for us to go on to Jauf and with a letter appointing himself to continue negotiations with us in supersession of Farhan. I had the pleasure of twitting Farhan on his failure to win our favour and on the loss of his job, but, thinking him more likely to be useful to us than Mujhim, I promised to make it good to him if he now arranged to accompany us to Jauf and serve us without further deception. This was duly arranged and everybody was in a good temper.

On the afternoon of May 13 we left Kaf to spend a day at Mujhim's camp at Minwa, only some 6 miles distant and near the second biggest settlement of the Quraiyat, namely Ithra. Here in a great plain we saw in their hundreds the black tents of the Ruwalla and the more squalid brown booths of the Shararat, a large and well-known tribe occupying an inferior position in the scale of Badawin society. Here too we saw in thousands the Ruwalla camels at the watering of Minwa, while we spent the whole of May 14 in a little excursion to the volcanic crater of Maqqal to the northward, from whose summit we had a wide and splendid view of the lava country all round. We lunched at Ithra on our return journey, seeing the remnants of a large building constructed of basalt

blocks, some of which had inscriptions and figures in low relief. Other petty settlements in this neighbourhood are Washwash and Qarqar, the characteristics of all these villages being exiguous palm groves, ruinous mud buildings, salt-pans and sulphurous water, the water of Ithra being particularly copious and issuing from springs.

Our start was fixed for May 15, but we had yet to experience an exhibition of the true character of our hosts. On the night of the 14th, while we were preparing for bed in view of an early start on the morrow, Mujhim appeared with his clerk in attendance and produced the draft of a "treaty," which, he explained, had to be signed as a condition of our departure. Discussion would only lead to delay, while I knew full well that the "Treaty of Minwa," the terms of which it is perhaps unnecessary to disclose, would never commend itself to His Majesty's Government. I was not however in the mood to consider the niceties of diplomatic procedure and I signed—as it happened it was most fortunate that I did so. The treaty was duly repudiated by the British Government, not however until the house of Sha'lan had ceased to be an independent power, and we not only visited Jauf, etc., without having to pay a penny in bribes, but were spared the pain of being present at the battle of Minwa, which took place within thirty-six hours of the signing of the treaty and in which Mujhim and his family made amends for their scurvy treatment of their guests by very gallant behaviour in the field against the Wahhabi host, which fell upon them unawares at dawn on May 16 and was heavily defeated, its leader and a standard being captured.

Meanwhile on the morning of May 15, Farhan having at the last moment been superseded in charge of our party by Faraj, who had implicit instructions to take us to Jauf and bring us back to Mujhim without delay, we set forth for Jauf. Our course lay southward through the broken hill country of the Quraiyat tract until we crossed a sluggish salt stream (Sha'ib 'Aqiq al Milh) and passed into the Wadi Sirhan depression again. Thence we steered south-south-west to the wells and ruined grange of Al Ghatti, where we passed through a large encampment of Shararat. Some voices were now raised in favour of spending the night here, while we pressed for the continuance of the march to the watering of Baidha some 10 or 12 miles straight ahead, but fortunately neither set of counsels prevailed. Our leaders were all agog with nervousness about the vaguely reported activities of the Wahhabis, and finally their fear got the better of them to such an extent that nothing could dissuade them from deflecting their course due east to the wells of Qaraqar, a desolate spot well within the folds of the hill country to the east of Wadi Sirhan, where we camped for the night.

That night a large force of Wahhabis camped at the watering of Baidha; next day at dawn they annihilated the Shararat encamped at Al Ghatti and passed on to Minwa, where they were defeated in a battle royal by Mujhim and his men. So by a series of flukes we missed several

opportunities of disaster and passed on to Jauf blissfully ignorant of the tragedies being enacted behind us, and it was not till we had safely arrived there that we had news of them. The Wahhabis had worked up from the depths of Central Arabia, a distance of some 700 or 800 miles, round the western flank of the Great Nafud, and, while it is impossible to say what may have been their numbers—perhaps 500 or 600 in all—some 200 of them perished at Minwa and the fate of the survivors is unknown. It is curious that we saw no signs of their retreat on our course, for they must have travelled very much faster than we were doing, and it is not unlikely that the majority of them lost their way and perished miserably of thirst. Such was the first warning we had of the definite approach of the Wahhabi menace to the borders of Trans-Jordan.

Our intention, when leaving Minwa, had been to march as far as possible down the depression of Wadi Sirhan with a view to finding a suitable line for railway or road development in case of need, but the fears of our companions had brought us abruptly out of the Wadi into the unsuitable hilly country to the east, and at Qaraqar, though we had actually marched about 21 miles, we were not more than 11 or 12 miles distant from Minwa in a straight line. Next morning we pressed for a return to the Wadi, but nothing could induce our companions to agree to this, and we had to content ourselves with the negative conclusion that the country over which we marched for nearly 30 miles during the day was devoid of railway or road possibilities. Basalt ridges and hummocks succeeded each other with wearying regularity, and we spent the night close by a volcanic cone called Buraik, from whose summit we had a splendid view of the country. Not far south of this point the lava country comes to an end, and, marching next day with the vast dazzling white salt-marsh of Nuqrat al Hadhaudha away on our right in the Wadi, we came after about 15 miles to water at the numerous wells of Ma'asir scattered about an extensive limestone basin, the water appearing almost at the surface level in cracks of the rock. The salt-marsh, lying on a slightly lower level than this basin, extends for many miles north and south and is a species of quagmire rendering a long basalt outcrop in its midst an unapproachable island, on which Arab imagination and legend have located a valuable treasure. Attempts to reach it have been the cause of many deaths in the treacherous bog.

Our next objective was the watering of Nabk abu Qasr, so called from the remnants of a former mud fort still visible on the edge of the circular depression, in which water lies in a number of shafts about 18 feet deep. The distance from Ma'asir to Nabk abu Qasr was about 35 miles over a vast limestone plain with a good firm surface, on which we came across the tracks of ostriches, though we never had the good fortune to encounter any of these creatures in the flesh (except a few we saw in captivity at Jauf) during the whole of our journey.

Nabk abu Qasr lies at the edge of Wadi Sirhan, which contains a

considerable number of waterings in this section, and from it we proceeded hugging the eastern bank of the depression across heavy sand-ridges which appear to extend most of the way across the valley. Negotiating these we came on the night of May 18 to Wadi Ma'arik, an affluent of Wadi Sirhan from the high country to the eastward. Next day we marched in an easterly direction away from the Sirhan trough ascending into the uplands, in which we encountered a minor adventure, for, as we rounded a hill lying across our path, our leaders espied and gave chase to three camel-riders, who immediately put their camels to a gallop up the hillside and escaped in safety. Every human being seen in the desert is an enemy, and the weaker party must make its best speed away if it would escape death.

We reached the crest of the uplands in the late afternoon and looked across the wide plain below us to the golden-red sands of the Great Northern Nafud reflecting the red sunset behind us. A hundred miles and more this sea of sand-billows extends southward to the north fringe of the Shammar territory whose southern boundary I had just touched at Qusaiba in 1918. In the plain before us, where the sandstone comes to the surface from beneath the cretaceous limestone of the country we had left behind us, lies the wide depression of Juba with its prosperous settlements of Jauf, Sakaka and their subsidiary villages, but we were already late and had to leave our entry into Jauf till the morrow, camping meanwhile at the edge of the plain.

The Juba depression has often been spoken of as an ancient sea or bay with the limestone encircling it, but if, as seems to me the case, the sandstone of this tract, like that of Petra and the neighbourhood of the Tubaik hills, dips under the limestone, it would be more correct to speak of the Juba as having been part of a land area washed on the north by the Cretaceous sea. The reason for its lying now below the level of the Cretaceous limestone would seem to be that the sandstone has worn away more rapidly under exposure than the hard flint cap of the limestone area. Wadi Sirhan, in spite of its appearance on the map, has apparently no geological connection with the Juba depression. Fossils, which I brought home recently from this area, indicate that the western bank of the Wadi is Pliocene while the centre and eastern fringe is Eocene, the western desert north of the latitude of Petra-Jauf being Cretaceous, while the eastern lava tract is presumably of comparatively recent origin as it overlies rocks similar to the Eocene rocks of the Wadi. South of the Great Northern Nafud and the Shammar district with its granite ranges we come to the Jurassic beds of Nejd. The sandstone of the Jauf-Tubaik-Petra area is presumably therefore early Cretaceous, or at any rate intermediate between the Cretaceous and Jurassic limestones, but I regret that all my efforts to find fossils in the sandstone area were without result.

On May 20 we were up betimes to march on Jauf, now some 20 miles

distant. The rebellion of Ibn Muwaishir had begun about three weeks before, and anything might have happened in the interval, so we had taken the precaution of sending messengers ahead overnight to spy out the land. They met us on our arrival within a few miles of the oasis with news that all was still well, though the rebels, despairing of holding out indefinitely at Sakaka, had sent a deputation to Ibn Sa'ud to seek his help. Jauf was still loyal, awaiting the result of the Sakaka rising.

In a short time we were at the edge of the depression and descending the rough path down to it. Jauf itself could not be seen from here, but we soon came to the ancient town-wall built of uncemented slabs of stone and formerly encircling the whole oasis though now existing only in patches. We were soon threading the winding lanes of Jauf through its palm groves, with here and there groups of ruined habitations and decrepit palm groves, to which Faraj pointed proudly as the result of the operations leading up to the Sha'lan occupation of the district in 1906. A few steps brought us into the midst of the oasis, and we were soon dismounting before the walls of the splendid old fort of Qasr Marid, in the hamlet below which rooms had been provided for us by Daujan, the slave governor, one of the most attractive personalities I have ever met with in Arab lands. Deeply religious with a tendency towards the Wahhabi tenets, honest in the service of the Sha'lan family, and easy-going with the people committed to his charge, he was extraordinarily outspoken in his criticism of the foolish policy which was rapidly carrying the Sha'lan to their political doom, and he amazed me in two ways : he is one of the very few Arabs of my acquaintance who could not be persuaded to accept a present of cash in return for his hospitality, but on the night preceding our departure for Sakaka he came to me to make inquiries regarding the potency of the arsenical powder which he had previously seen me use for the preservation of birds. How much would be sufficient to kill a man ? I answered his question as best I could, but I had to refuse point blank to give him any of the stuff, wondering on whom he would have used it had I been more accommodating.

Our stay at Jauf lasted three days, during which we had sufficient opportunities of seeing all that there was to see, but this locality has been so fully dealt with by previous travellers—Palgrave, the Blunts, Guarmani, Aylmer, and Butler and Shakespear, to name only some of them—that no detailed description need be attempted by me. A few photographs of the oasis and its contents will suffice, and I need only mention the great mediæval (Arab) fortress of Qasr Marid built on a commanding eminence with recently constructed mud towers replacing their stone predecessors ; the copious well-springs, which provide slender running streams for the irrigation of the oasis ; the ruins of the central hamlets of Suq and Suq al Hattab, which would seem to be of the same period as Marid itself, the houses being built of uncemented stone slabs ; and the species of red marble abundant in the neighbourhood, out of which they make



QASR MARID, JAUF AL AMIR



QASR MARID, JAUF, FROM NEIGHBOURING HAMLET



STREET AND MOSQUE IN JAUF AL AMIR



SAFAITIC INSCRIPTIONS AT HARRAT

coffee-mortars. There is no town properly so called, but a population of about 5000 souls is distributed over some dozen hamlets. The old fort at the eastern end of the oasis, built and inhabited by the Rashid's governors, exists only in its tumbled ruins, and the general aspect of the whole place is one of decay.

On our arrival at Jauf we received an invitation from Sultan to visit him at Sakaka, and thought that our troubles and difficulties were over, but Faraj had still to be reckoned with. Throughout the journey he had not scrupled to beg of us and to encourage his small following to do the same—without success; but now he began to press his suit more vigorously. We were anxious to visit Sakaka, and, knowing that we should not be allowed to return home by way of the Sirhan depression owing to dangers real or imaginary, had begun to consider the alternative of returning via 'Iraq—a roundabout route which appeared to have the double advantage of being safer and enabling Major Holt to complete his railway reconnaissance. Faraj held out hopes of assisting us in this project for a consideration and, to cut a long story short, he asked me point blank what I would give him. I replied point blank, "£100 on arrival at Najaf or Karbala." He held out for more and I refused. Daujan however insisted on our being allowed to visit Sultan at Sakaka, and on the morning of May 23 we set out under the most unfavourable auspices, Faraj and his companions following rather than accompanying us breathing out threats of vengeance. "Go on to Baghdad," he hissed, "alone and at your peril, but whoso goes without my permission I will set all the Ruwalla on to him; I am commissioned by Mujhim to let you see Jauf and to bring you straight back, so you shall have a day at Sakaka and back you will come, the whole lot of you, with me." His venomous attitude could be met only with bluff. I chid him with the Sha'lan's scurvy treatment of their guests and declared that we should be relieved to place ourselves in the hands of Sultan from the moment of our reaching Sakaka, when we should no longer require Faraj's services.

Our march lay along the flank of a sandstone ridge with billows of sand to our right until we reached the oasis of Qara, after passing through a tract of heavily weathered and blackened sandstone rocks. Qara is a long oasis lying in a mud flat, over which we marched well away from the settlement, of whose temper we were doubtful. When we were almost past it we were startled by a rifle-shot across us, but, having no cover of any kind, pushed on. The shot was not repeated, and we duly reached the billowy sand-dunes lying between Qara and Sakaka. Our normal route would have been along the flat to the small oasis of Tuwair and thence to the western extremity of Sakaka, but the rebel holdings lay in this part of the oasis, and we preferred to steer straight for the eastern end across the sand hills.

Beyond the sand strip we emerged on to a great flat plain, having

the whole length of the oasis in view before us, and as we advanced we became aware of a party of horsemen galloping towards us. The order was given to load rifles, and we advanced until the horsemen, reaching us, curveted round and through our ranks, firing a salute of welcome, to which our party replied in the same fashion. In half an hour we entered the eastern extremity of Sakaka and couched our camels before the door of an ordinary dwelling-house, in which Sultan and his immediate following had taken up their residence for the siege of the rebels, the fortress at the end of the oasis being held by a garrison of slaves.

Entering the coffee parlour we made the acquaintance of Sultan, a mere boy of perhaps fourteen years, good looking though of somewhat effeminate type, but obviously accustomed to his rôle of governor and commander-in-chief. He and his cousin, Bandar, both impressed us much more favourably than had done any of the other members of the Sha'lan family we had already met, but the conduct of the siege was a piteous farce. The besieged numbered some seventy-five souls all told, while the total population of Sakaka must have been close on eight thousand, but Sultan could only count fully on his small garrison of slaves in the fort and a few mercenaries, while the rest of the population was a source of constant anxiety and would have changed their nominal loyalty for active rebellion at the slightest indication of help coming to the rebels from Ibn Sa'ud. Pending the receipt of definite news from Nejd, however, they maintained a semblance of loyalty and enthusiasm, in return for which Sultan, playing with fire, issued to them rifles and ammunition, which might at any moment be turned on himself. It was still Ramdhan, and by a sort of tacit understanding all active warfare was confined to the night period, when friend and foe could not see each other. Casualties did occur in spite of this, though very occasionally, perhaps two or three in all during the whole of our sojourn—all among the besieged. On each such occasion the loyalist army of some 200 or 300 men would parade in front of Sultan's dwelling to cheer him up with a war dance to the martial strains of several drums. Round and round the dancers footed it, brandishing loaded rifles, revolvers, swords and what not, firing as they went without thought of direction or economy. Many a day and night of our visit was made hideous by these exhibitions, at which the banners of Sakaka and the Wahhabis were paraded with delightful impartiality, and we were expected to attend them and enjoy the din. They would have been amusing enough had blank ammunition been used, but the indiscriminate firing of ball ammunition often at a distance of a few feet from the spectators made these spectacles positively dangerous, and it is a marvel to me that no accidents ever occurred.

We had seen and had enough of Sakaka after a day or two, but Faraj was an obstacle to progress eastward towards Mesopotamia, on which we had now decided to insist at all costs. Sultan was willing enough to accommodate us, but Faraj told him that Nuri had expressly forbidden

such a venture, and Sultan was not strong enough to take matters into his own hands. On the third night of our stay a compromise was arrived at, namely to refer the matter for the orders of Nuri himself, then camped at a distance of at least six days' journey. Faraj however undertook to carry the message himself and be back in eight days, till when we should wait on the understanding that we should be free to start without further ado should Faraj not return with Nuri's reply by then.

We had to content ourselves with this arrangement, and, right glad to be rid of Faraj, made the most of our opportunities of seeing the oasis and its immediate surroundings, hoping all the time that Ibn Sa'ud's reinforcements for the rebels would not arrive before our time was up, as we were convinced—correctly as it turned out—that Faraj could not return in time and probably had no intention of doing so.

Sakaka, like Jauf, has no town but consists of a considerable area of palm groves dotted here and there with pretty hamlets, each peopled by one of the many units which compose the population of some eight thousand souls. It has practically supplanted Jauf as the political and commercial capital of the Juba district, and it appears to be in frequent trade communication with Mesopotamia, whence it draws the bulk of its supplies of foreign commodities—piece-goods, rice, coffee, tea, and sugar being the chief articles of import. The oasis is picturesquely situated within a semicircle of fantastic sandstone hills, on one of which, close to the oasis and detached from the main range, stands the old castle of Za'bal, reminding one of the mediæval fortresses perched on eminences along the Rhine. We were however unable to visit the castle or approach near to it, as its inhabitants were suspected of doubtful loyalty, and on one occasion, while we were wandering about on a ridge commanded by the fort, a couple of rifle-shots warned us not to tempt Providence too long.

Our enforced sojourn at Sakaka lasted from May 23 till June 2, and the loyalist exchequer soon displayed its inability to maintain us in a manner suitable to guests of honour. For two or three days we were entertained in a normal manner. Then several meals in succession consisted of no more than a dish of plain rice. On the third or fourth occasion I refused to dine. This produced some commotion, and late that night a goat was brought in bleating to our quarters and a portion of it served at a late hour. The season was approaching midsummer, but that goat lasted us five days, and, as luck would have it, Daujan, having come to Sakaka on a visit from Jauf, sat at meat with us on the fifth day. Unsuspecting, he complained of the absence of gravy, and it was whispered to him that the gravy had not been served as it was a bit smelly. "You will find," I said aloud, "that the meat stinks too—we killed this animal five days ago." He was genuinely horrified and expressed his opinion of the matter to Sultan, but we were due to leave Sakaka the next day and cared for nothing.

One last difficulty had to be surmounted. Haditha and Mithqal had long ago deserted us with their followings at Kaf, and now the bulk of our reduced party, fully primed with tales of the danger of the way to 'Iraq, showed signs of not wanting to go further. Ghalib Pasha, our gallant general, went in such daily terror of the arrival of the Wahhabis that he actually took lessons in the way to pray and spent all his time reading the 'Traditions of the Prophet,' the Quran, etc.; naturally enough he led the revolt against the idea of going to 'Iraq, and I summoned a full meeting of our company to separate the goats from the sheep. The goats should not of course participate in any distribution of bounty, but of the twenty-one persons forming our party nine, including all the leaders, proved to be goats, and we decided to carry on with the remaining twelve, reinforced with four mercenaries recruited from Sakaka and subsequently by five Sulubi hunters, whom we recruited at our first night's camp at the wells of Suwair at the eastern extremity of the Juba depression.

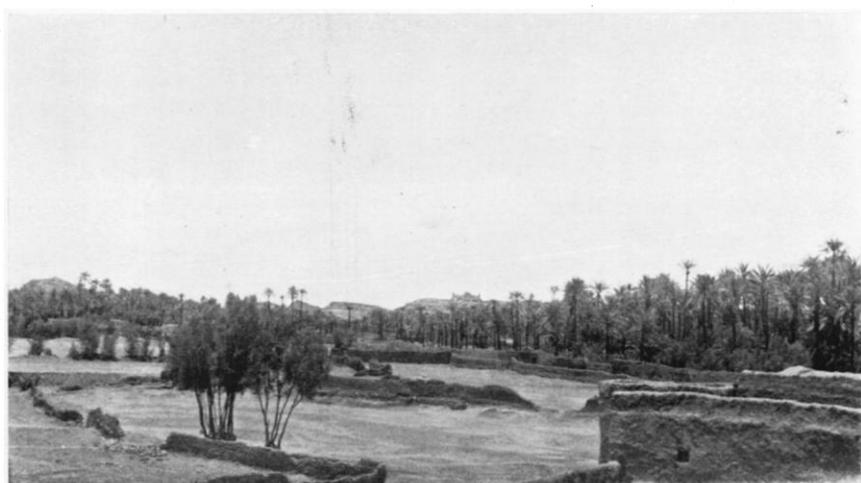
We were now by our line of march about 308 miles from Amman and 203 miles from Kaf, while it was approximately 300 miles from here to Karbala by the route we followed when we left our hosts, without regret, on the afternoon of June 2. The march of 13 miles to the Suwair wells was uneventful mainly over Nafud sand-billows, and that night we camped at a considerable encampment of Suluba. We were now at the edge of the Juba depression, but the steep cliff of the Suwair ridge, which skirts it, offered no suitable path for our camels, and next day, our start being delayed by our new Sulubi recruits going off in search of their camels, we had to follow the cliff northward for about 8 miles to a moderately easy passage out of the depression on to the limestone desert beyond.

The remainder of that afternoon, the whole of the next day when we did a forced march of about 45 miles, and a short early morning march the following day, a total distance of about 55 miles, brought us again to water in a muddy pool called Ghadir Turaifawi, surviving from past rains and teeming with wriggling creatures resembling shrimps. However we were too thirsty to mind that. Another 12 miles brought us at midday to the wells of Abal Dufuf in the trough of the broad shallow depression of Wadi 'Ar'ar, which we had now been following for the best part of 60 miles from its watershed in the uplands east of the Juba depression. The whole march had been uneventful, we had seen no human being, gazelles had been seen in thousands, and our Suluba had procured some for our larder. The Abal Dufuf water was plentiful and good after that of Turaifawi.

From here the 'Ar'ar depression makes a wide sweep to the northward, and we cut straight across the uplands to the south, camping therein for the night in Sha'ib Ruthiya after a march of 14 miles and re-entering the 'Ar'ar 6 miles further on on the morning of June 6. The 'Ar'ar had



MINWA FROM THE SOUTH



SAKAKA, WITH FORT ZABAL IN DISTANCE



APPROACHING SUWAIR OVER THE EDGE OF THE NAFUD

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NORTH DOOR OF UKHAIDIR FROM WITHIN



AMMAN FROM SOUTH-EAST OF THE AMPHITHEATRE

now developed a well-marked storm channel meandering from side to side of the depression in a deep sandy bed exhibiting a rich green vegetation. We hoped to find water in the water-holes of Qata'iya 9 miles down from this point, but on arrival there found that the last flood had filled in all the holes with sand, and hastened on to make the well-known watering of Judaidat al 'Ar'ar by midday. As we marched we spotted the very fresh tracks of some camels which had recently passed in the same direction. Our water-supply was so low that it was imperative to get to the wells, but we marched cautiously lest an enemy might already be in occupation.

Our scouts were out well ahead as we marched over the dreary wilderness of the 'Ar'ar between its low barren flanks, beyond which we could not see. After some 4 miles of this our scouts checked and we hastened to join them behind a low eminence, from whose summit they were watching the movements of our predecessors at the watering. All that could be seen through the glasses was a group of three camels and two men, the latter moving about fetching water. We could not tell whether a larger party was concealed in the torrent-bed, and everybody volunteered a different opinion of what should be done. The "enemy," all unconscious of our near presence, were soon observed to settle down apparently for a long siesta, and we decided to send a small party to take them in the rear and drive them up the valley, while the rest of us remained where we were in ambush. Four of the best camels were selected and four volunteers started off through the uplands, while we waited breathlessly to see them reappear behind the quarry. In fact they misjudged the distance, and it was from a point abreast of instead of behind the wells that they appeared, charging down the hillside. The enemy (two men only) were up in a trice and off on their camels like a flash—a very pretty sight it was—pursued by our four men; but our camels were thirsty, and three of them sat down suddenly on reaching the wells. Nothing could make them budge, so only one of our four men was left to continue the pursuit up the left bank of the depression and out of sight.

We hastened to the wells and found the booty left by the fugitives—two camels obviously stolen by them in the Ruwalla country, a waterskin, a metal bowl, a bag of butter, a bag of rice, and a bag of salt. This last was diagnosed as coming from the salt-pans of Hazil, where the Wahhabis were known to have a camp, so there is little doubt that the two men were of that persuasion. They made good their escape, and it would be interesting to know if they ever succeeded in reaching their camp, which was not less than 100 miles distant, without water, for we had their skin and they could have had no means of carrying any water, while there are no wells between this point and Hazil.

By our track we had now followed the 'Ar'ar depression for well over 100 miles, and here we finally left it to strike north-north-east over a

dreary upland wilderness, ever growing hotter as we descended towards the confines of 'Iraq. A march of about 14 miles that afternoon and on the morning of June 7 brought us to water at the scanty wells of Judaidat al Hamir in Sha'ib Hamir, a depression trending north-east or east-north-east parallel to the 'Ar'ar. Here we saw a large wolf slink away on our flank, and hence we struck out over a vast featureless waste, camping for the night about 30 miles further on. Throughout our progress from Kaf to Jauf and onwards from Sakaka to Karbala we moved in constant anxiety of meeting possible enemies, with the result that we never dared to have a camp fire or lamp by night, while during the hot hours of the usual midday siesta we had no tent and had to make shift with a small carpet, which we extended over our heads on rifles set on end. It was a comfortless and harassing journey, but, apart from the slight adventures I have referred to, we encountered no human beings throughout our course, and it was not till we reached the confines of the Karbala tract that we again saw signs of human life.

A march of 17 miles during the morning of June 8 brought us to the line of Sha'ib Ubaiyidh, which, rising in the watershed 100 miles or more behind us, flows on from here past the mediæval Arab castle of Ukhaidhar on the borders of Mesopotamia into the great lake of Abu Dibis. In its bed near our point of entry we reached water at the numerous wells of Nukhaib, where, in spite of the great heat, I had a pleasant half-hour's shooting of sand-grouse, which wheeled about the water regardless of all danger, so utterly exhausted they seemed to be. The great herds of gazelle we passed during the afternoon seemed to be similarly affected, and our hunters brought down a number of them, while one animal stood stock still at a distance of 300 yards while one of our Arabs had ten shots at him, at the end of which exhibition of bad shooting he trotted off quietly with a snort of disgust.

We did not follow the winding line of Sha'ib Ubaiyidh, but struck across into a hilly tract called 'Aiyarat, in which we camped about 13 miles distant from the Nukhaib wells. Next day we marched over 40 miles across country of the same general monotony as before, though abounding with gazelle and nesting sand-grouse, to camp on high ground, while a march of 26 miles brought us at midday on June 10 to the magnificent ruins of Ukhaidhar, one of the finest specimens of Arab hunting-palaces in existence, on the banks of Sha'ib Ubaiyidh, where there is abundant water.

We camped that night some 9 miles further on towards Abu Dibis and the following morning we were gladdened by the sight of the minarets and domes of the martyred Husain, son of the founder of the Shia' faction of Islam. The Arab governor of Karbala, to whom we had sent on word of our coming, sent out an escort to welcome us and entertained us most hospitably. Our journey thus accomplished, we proceeded to Ramadi, whence on June 17 Major Holt and I returned to Amman

by air, leaving the companions of our travel to return straight across the desert by camel.

Early in July, as I have already indicated, Ibn Sa'ud took possession of Jauf, and our friends the Sha'lan left it, I hope for ever. Mujhim, Farhan, Faraj, and Daujan shortly afterwards honoured us with a long sojourn at Amman, where they were at any rate treated more hospitably than they had treated us, though they were but homeless fugitives, while Nuri and Sultan repaired to Syria, where the Ruwalla will now probably take up their quarters permanently. The occupation of Jauf by the Wahhabis caused much excitement in Trans-Jordan, which believed itself to be directly threatened, and for a couple of weeks the Bani Sakhr lined the heights of Muwaqqar with their weather eye wide open for the storm from the east. But it came not, and by the beginning of August the countryside had again settled down to its customary calm and carelessness. At dawn on August 15 the blow fell as a bolt from the blue. The little village of Tunaib, situated to the west of the railway line and only 12 miles from Amman, was attacked unawares and its inhabitants, man, woman, and child, butchered in their sleep—some thirty-five or forty victims in all. A chance aeroplane passing over the scene frightened the Wahhabi invaders, who were now attacked by the Bani Sakhr and fled pell mell. For many miles towards Kharana the line of their retreat was littered with the corpses of men, horses, and camels, and it is almost certain that the majority of those daring Wahhabis, who had travelled 1000 miles from the neighbourhood of Shaqra, lost their way in the desert and perished of thirst and exhaustion. A watchful look-out was now kept for a repetition of the attack, and I had an opportunity of accompanying several aerial reconnaissances down Wadi Sirhan to Kaf and beyond, while in September 'Abdullah's forces, assisted by the armoured cars, occupied Kaf. What the future has in store for us on the borders of Trans-Jordan remains to be seen, but Ibn Sa'ud is not likely to slacken his grip on Jauf or abandon his claim to Wadi Sirhan and the Quraiyat settlements.

THE FUTURE OF THE NORTH ARABIAN DESERT

Major A. L. Holt, M.B.E., M.C.

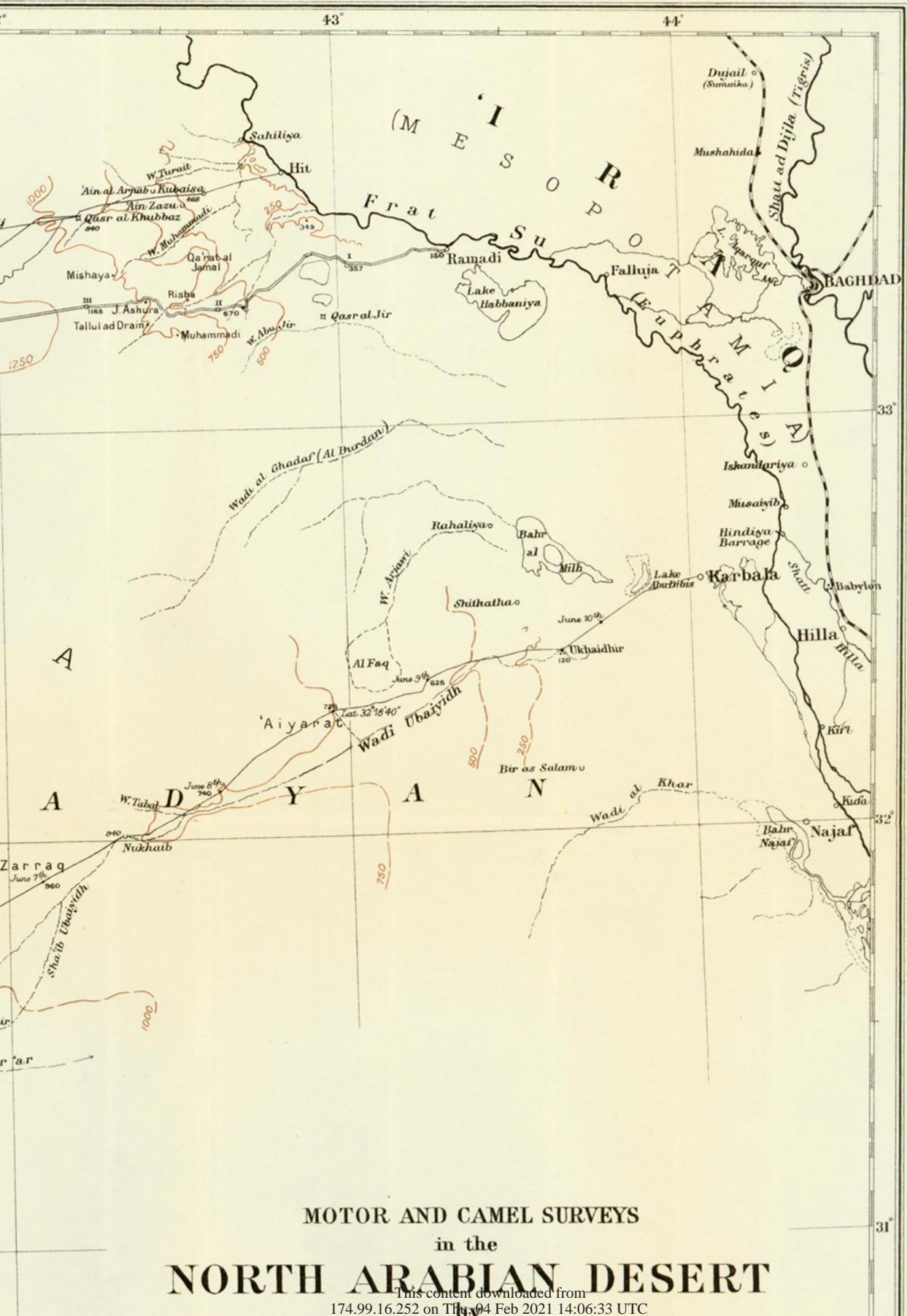
*Read with the preceding paper at the Meeting of the Society,
12 February 1923. Map follows page 320.*

I BELIEVE the future of the North Arabian desert lies in its value as a potential line of communication. The future of any country is to be found in its latent possibilities, and before showing you the desert's importance as a trade route, I propose to refer to the causes which contribute to any country's importance. These are, firstly its



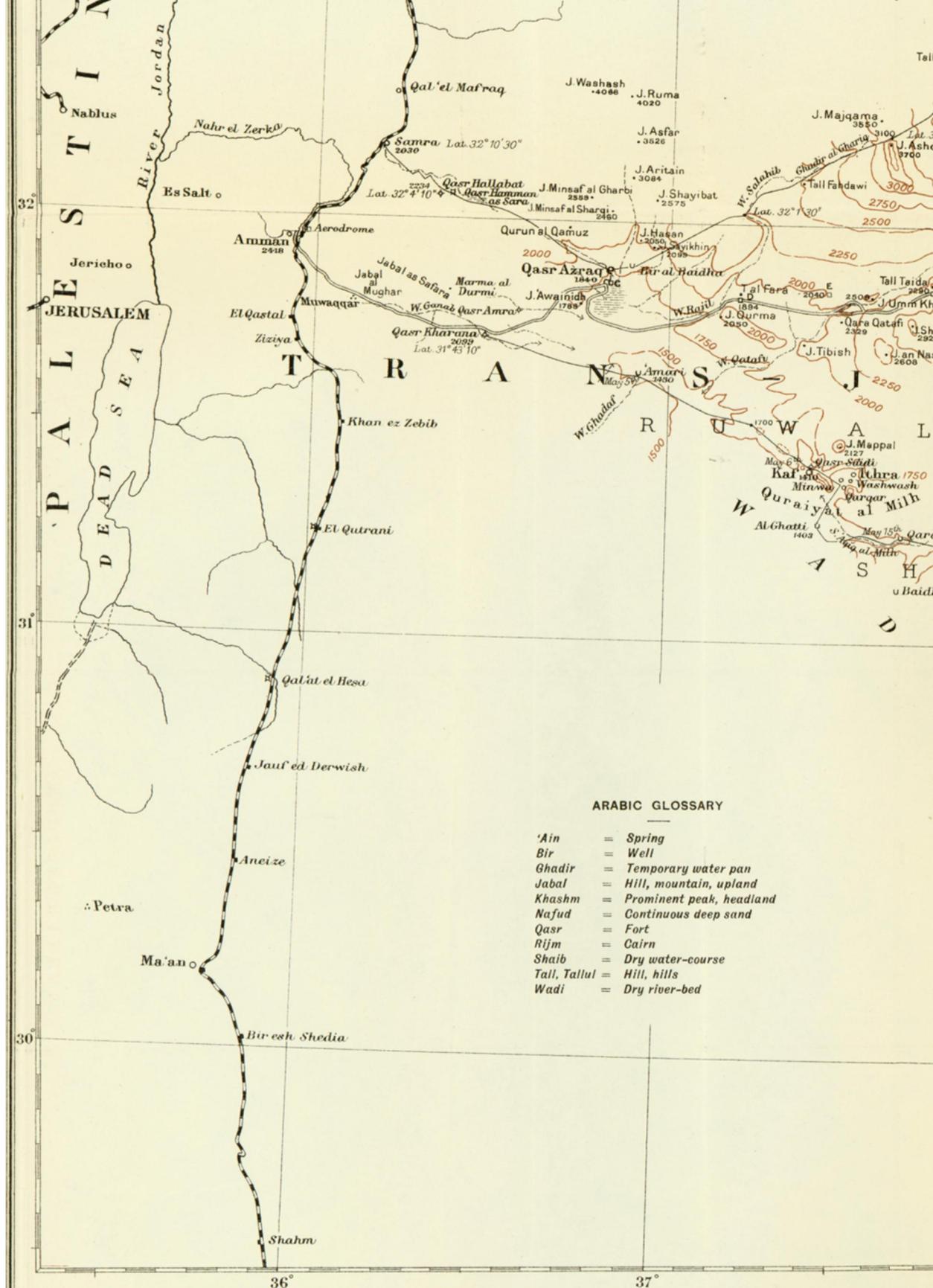






MOTOR AND CAMEL SURVEYS
in the
NORTH ARABIAN DESERT

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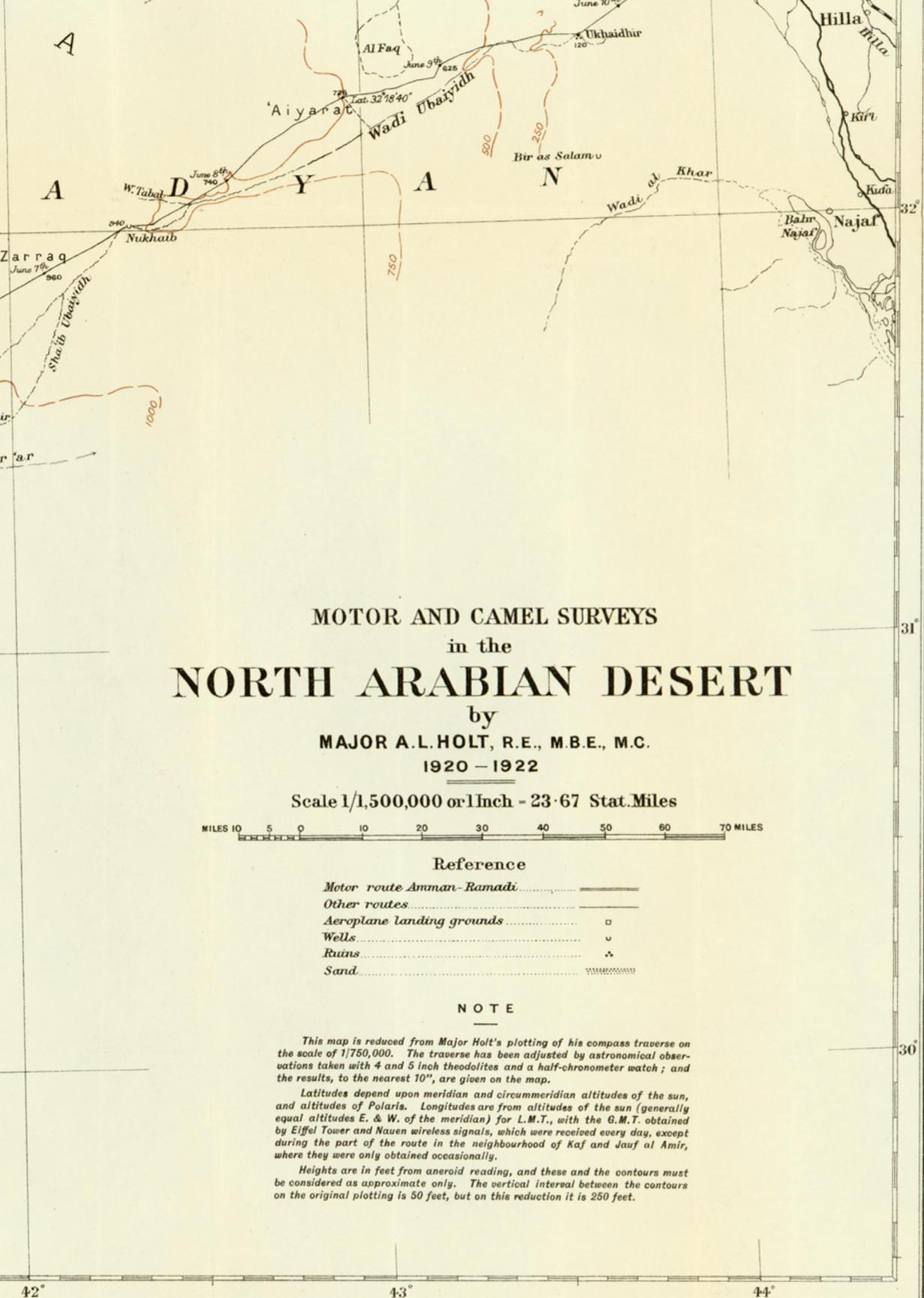


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NORTH ARABIAN DESERT.

Philby & Holt.