

Palestine in World War One and the Arab Kingdom of Syria¹

World War One began on July 28, 1914. In December of that year, the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers, with disastrous implications for the inhabitants of Palestine.

Skyrocketing prices, political persecution, acute famine, and mandatory conscription all rocked the local population under the cruel reign of the Ottoman governor Jamal Pasha.² Forced-labor squadrons, operating in inhumane conditions, cut down entire forests to aid the Turkish war effort. Much of Palestine was barren and many farms were destitute in the aftermath of the war.³

With similar suffering going on across the Arab world, the son of the Sharif of Mecca, Prince Faisal, traveled to Damascus to meet Arab nationalist leaders from the prominent secret society Al-Fatat.⁴ As the son of one of the most powerful figures of the Arab world, Faisal was able to channel the energy of burgeoning Arab nationalism into productive action. The men gathered there drafted the Damascus Protocol, declaring support for a revolt against the Ottoman Empire under the leadership of Faisal's father, Sharif Hussein of Mecca.⁵ In 1915, on the basis of this support, Hussein reached out to the British to discuss the terms of an Anglo-Arab alliance against the Ottomans. The letters that would be exchanged between Hussein and the British

¹ Much of this section will not deal directly with the history of Palestine, and will instead cover events unfolding in the surrounding region of Greater Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*). The reason for this coverage is that the brief Arab Kingdom of Syria had huge potential to seriously transform the political landscape of the Middle East; it is essential to understand past possibilities and alternate timelines if we are to make serious recommendations for the future. This potential and its relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict will be analyzed in a later section.

² Pappé, Ilan. *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*. 2nd ed. pp. 62-64

³ Ibid.

⁴ Thompson, Elizabeth F. *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance*.

⁵ Ibid.

diplomat Henry McMahon over the course of the coming year would come to be known as the McMahon-Hussein correspondence.⁶

Britain was primarily interested in the symbolic value of an Islamic leader lending them support, for they feared a Muslim revolt might break out in their various colonial holdings. Of secondary importance was the military support that Hussein could offer. Hussein wanted the British to guarantee the independence of a post-war Arab caliphate, with himself as the caliph. The language that characterized these letters was intentionally vague on the part of McMahon; despite this, the two came to an understanding that, in exchange for support against the Ottomans, Britain would recognize Arab independence across (vaguely defined) areas of the Middle East. To quote McMahon,

*“The two districts of Mersina and Alexandretta and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo cannot be said to be purely Arab, and should be excluded from the limits demanded...Subject to the above modifications, Great Britain is prepared to recognize and support the independence of the Arabs in all the regions within the limits demanded by the Sherif of Mecca”.*⁷

Whether Palestine was included in the “portions of Syria” referenced in the correspondence would become a bitter point of contention in the aftermath of the war. Despite the unsettled question of the exact boundaries of this hypothetical state, Hussein initiated the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans in June 1916.

Unbeknownst to Hussein, the powers of Europe had been colluding in secret for years.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 effectively carved up the Levant between Britain and

⁶ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 143

⁷ “The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence.” *Jewish Virtual Library*, www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-hussein-mcmahon-correspondence-july-1915-august-1916. Accessed 1 June 2022.

France for the purposes of colonial administration, with little regard for Arab independence. The British had several reasons to desire direct influence in this region, mostly related to oil and other economic factors.⁸ Britain also desired that France's new territories form a buffer zone between British holdings and Russia, a role which had previously been played by the Ottoman Empire.⁹ The Sykes-Picot Agreement gave France much of the Syrian-Lebanese coast and parts of southern Turkey, while Britain received much of modern day Iraq and Jordan. In this agreement, Palestine was accorded a special international legal status, with the ports of Haifa and Acre being reserved for the British, while a nominally "independent" Arab state was to exist divided between the spheres of influence of Britain and France. Britain knew that the Sykes-Picot Agreement directly contradicted the promises made in the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence. To quote McMahon himself, in a letter to a fellow British statesman,

*"I do not for one moment go to the length of imagining that the present negotiations will go far to shape the future form of Arabia or to either establish our rights or to bind our hands in that country. The situation and its elements are much too nebulous for that. What we have to arrive at now is to tempt the Arab people into the right path, detach them from the enemy and bring them on to our side."*¹⁰

In a word, Britain lied to the Arabs. An independent Arab polity was not something they were actually willing to support. The Arabs did not know this, and so the Arab Revolt came to pass.

The Arab Revolt would take place in the Levant and Hejaz from 1916 to 1918, with the assistance of British officers such as the famed T.E. Lawrence. In addition to Lawrence, all four of Hussein's sons served as leaders in the revolt; out of all of them, Faisal proved to be

⁸ Gibson, Martin. *British strategy and oil, 1914-1923*. 2012. U of Glasgow, PhD thesis.

⁹ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 147

¹⁰ Kedourie, Elie. *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: The McMahon-Husayn Correspondence and Its Interpretations 1914-1939*. 2nd ed.

the most militarily capable. His notable contributions include working with Lawrence to disable the crucial Hejaz Railway and communications hub at Deraa.¹¹ Edmund Allenby, the leader of the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force, sent Faisal a personal note thanking him for his important contributions to the war effort.¹² Through a combination of Arab and British effort, the Levantine theater of World War One came to an end with the Armistice of Mudros on October 30, 1918. Conditions across the Levant were extremely dire for the local population by the end of the war.

However, before the war had ended, another document was published that touched the future of Palestine. The 1917 Balfour Declaration announced Britain's express support for the Zionist movement and for the "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people". It was published in the form of a letter from the British foreign minister, Arthur Balfour, to a leading Zionist, Lionel Rothschild. The declaration is as follows:

*"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."*¹³

In a word, Britain endorsed the Zionist cause and pledged to support it. The Zionist lobby in Britain (consisting of both Jews and gentiles) played a significant role in getting the Balfour Declaration published; a new British government had taken power in 1916 under the leadership of prime minister David Lloyd George, who had connections to the prominent Zionist Chaim

¹¹ Thompson, Elizabeth F. *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance.*

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Palestine Royal Commission Report.* His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1937.

Weizmann.¹⁴ Even so, outside of the lobby, there existed several factors that would have pushed Britain to make such a move anyway. Several members of the new cabinet considered the Zionist cause as a convenient excuse to further their colonial ambitions in the region, especially to circumvent the international administration they had agreed to in Sykes-Picot.¹⁵ Many other influential Britons coveted a “restoration” of the Jews to the Holy Land for the biblical significance thereof.¹⁶ Furthermore, it was (falsely) believed that Russian Jews were particularly influential in the tsar’s court; the British government considered Russia essential for their plan of attack against Germany. By issuing a declaration of support for Zionism, it was hoped these Russian Jews would push the tsar to commit fully to Britain’s war plans, or alternatively that the Jews present in the emerging Bolshevik movement would view Britain in a favorable light.¹⁷ A similar line of reasoning was applied to American Jewry.

Nevertheless, several prominent British statesmen and Jews were against publishing the declaration. Many feared that the assimilation of Jews into European countries would be hindered by a national movement in Palestine.¹⁸ Indeed, many antisemites at that time pushed baseless conspiracy theories claiming that Jews constituted their own nation and therefore could not integrate into European society.¹⁹ Despite this opposition, the Balfour Declaration succeeded in being published, with great (although not immediate) consequences for the future of Palestine.²⁰

¹⁴ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 148

¹⁵ Ibid. 149

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Pappé, Ilan. *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*. 2nd ed. pp. 67; Ibid.

¹⁸ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 149

¹⁹ Laqueur, Walter Zeev. *A History of Zionism*. 2003.

²⁰ Further significance of the Balfour Declaration and its relation to the theory and practice of Zionism will follow in a later section.

With the Ottoman Empire fallen and the end of the war at hand, a new chapter would open in the Holy Land, a chapter fundamentally different from anything else that had come before.

Interregnum: The Syrian Option

The fate of the Middle East was very much up in the air at the end of the war; despite the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence, both Britain and the Arabs eyed each other with suspicion and raced to liberate as much territory from the Ottomans for themselves as they could.²¹ Faisal's Northern Arab Army entered many major cities of the Levant and set up a provisional government. On October 5th, 1918, Faisal issued a public statement proclaiming that "an absolutely independent, constitutional Arab government has been established in Syria in the name of our lord King Husein that shall include all Syria."²² In those days, "Syria" referred to *Bilad al-Sham* (literally "the left-hand region", deriving from the perspective of Western Arabia), which encompassed all of modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. This territory had been culturally-uniform for centuries; nearly all of the inhabitants spoke the dialect of Levantine Arabic, and were linked by well-established trade-routes reaching to the Mediterranean. Although the burgeoning Arab proto-state claimed all of *Bilad al-Sham*, in actuality Britain enforced a military occupation of Palestine to the exclusion of Faisal.

This Arab proto-state was intended to be an inclusive and constitutionally-regulated kingdom spanning all of the Arab Levant. In the same edict, Faisal proclaimed,

²¹ Thompson, Elizabeth F. *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance.*

²² Al-Hursi, Sati. *The Day of Maysalun.* The Middle East Institute, 1966. p. 101.

*“Everyone should know that our Arab government has been established on the principles of justice and equality. It will treat alike all those who speak Arabic regardless of sect or religion, and not discriminate in its laws between Moslem, Christian, and Jew.”*²³

Such a principle was absolutely essential to both the ideology of the Arab nationalists and the survival of the Arab Kingdom of Syria (as it would come to be called). Constitutionalism and democratic rule had been espoused by Al-Fatat and other Arab nationalist societies for years, ever since the 1908 Young Turk Revolution. Indeed, the protection of the rights of minorities was an essential for the oncoming peace negotiations; European powers could easily use accusations of despotism and persecution to delegitimize the Arab Kingdom. As such, Faisal and other Arab nationalists campaigned long and hard to make their intentions known. Actions that they took included sending subsidies to Christian leaders and donating supplies to Armenian refugee rescue squads, in the wake of the Armenian genocide.²⁴

Across wide swaths of the Levant, the Arab administration (staffed with civil servants from all over the Levant, including many from Palestine) worked to restore electricity, to provide food to impoverished communities, and to revive the dying economy; such efforts were relatively successful when compared to those of other countries in the wake of WW1.²⁵ Nonetheless, the Levant was in critical condition for several months. The French refusal to share the customs duties on the Syrian coast that they controlled, and the British reluctance to offer aid to Arab populations not directly under their control, only impeded the recovery effort.²⁶

The fate of this Greater Syrian administration, and the question of whether it would expand to include Palestine, would effectively be decided at the Paris Peace Conference. The

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Thompson, Elizabeth F. *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance.*

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Arab delegation arrived in France on November 6, 1918, where they would find themselves faced with many obstacles. For one, the issue of racism was pronounced; European ethnic groups, faring no better in the aftermath of WW1 than the Arabs, were unhesitantly proclaimed “civilized” and ready for self-government, whereas Arabs and other ethnic groups were subject to much harsher treatment. The French press in particular, under the influence of the colonial lobby, was virulently racist; Arabs, and Muslims generally, were commonly demeaned and dehumanized.²⁷

The colonial ambitions of Britain and France proved unshakeable. Before the conference had even begun, the British and French prime ministers, David Lloyd George and George Clemenceau, had met in person to reaffirm the commitment to the earlier framework of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. This meeting modified the agreement to allow Britain direct military control of Palestine in order to stay true to the Balfour Declaration.²⁸ At the end of the conference, the Allied powers agreed to a system of “mandates” to be governed by the newly founded League of Nations. Mandates were colonies with asterisks; pressured by Wilsonian idealists, European statesmen moved to reformulate the language they used in colonization. At the time of the peace conference, however, the question of what a mandate would be was still very much in the air. In Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, it was written,

*“Certain communities formerly belonging to the Turkish Empire have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized **subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone.** The wishes of these communities must be a principal consideration in the selection of the Mandatory.”*

²⁷ Allawi, Ali A. *Faisal I of Iraq*. p. 208

²⁸ Thompson, Elizabeth F. *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance*.

This provision insinuated that Palestine and the rest of the Levant would be placed under the domain of some European power or another; Faisal's goal became to limit that influence as much as possible (ideally to the point of practical independence) and to choose an influencer that would be sympathetic to their cause.

A history of Palestine would not be complete without addressing the infamous Faisal-Weizmann Agreement that was signed during Faisal's time in Europe with Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann. This document was a rare instance of Arab-Zionist communication that signaled a mutual support between the Arab nationalists and Zionists.²⁹ It read,

"The Arab State and Palestine in all their relations and undertakings shall be controlled by the most cordial goodwill and understanding...All necessary measures shall be taken to encourage and stimulate immigration of Jews into Palestine on a large scale...the Arab peasant and tenant farmers shall be protected in their rights."

The key addendum from Faisal to this agreement, originally written in Arabic, was as follows.

*"Provided the Arabs obtain their independence as demanded in my Memorandum dated the 4th of January 1919, to the Foreign Office of the Government of Great Britain, I shall concur in the above articles. But if the slightest modification or departure were to be made, I shall not then be bound by a single word of the present agreement which shall be deemed void and of no account or validity, and I shall not be answerable in any way whatsoever."*³⁰

Due to an erroneous translation error on the part of T.E. Lawrence and later omissions of this stipulation, several historians and eager Zionists have mistakenly claimed that Faisal renounced

²⁹ Allawi, Ali A. *Faisal I of Iraq*. p. 188

³⁰ Washington, D.C. *Jewish National Home in Palestine: Hearings before the United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Seventy-Eighth Congress, Second Session*. Testimony of Philip K. Hitti. 1944 Legislature.

the Arab claim to Palestine; this is false. Faisal's addendum clearly stipulates that the earlier memorandum, which calls for the Arab state to include Palestine, takes precedence over Faisal-Weizmann.³¹

The motivations for Faisal behind the Faisal-Weizmann Agreement included gaining the support of Zionists for the establishment of the Arab Kingdom of Syria and winning favor with the British. For the Zionists, it was a means of minimizing Arab resistance to their political ambitions, a problem which many Zionists were only beginning to realize.³²

Regardless of interpretation and later controversy, this agreement was interesting for its role in fostering goodwill between the Arabs and Zionists, one of the last such instances in modern times. It shows us an alternate timeline where the history of Palestine may have played out very differently. Furthermore, it is a key indication of the state of Arab-Zionist relations before the Mandatory period. Although Zionism was viewed with hostility by the Arab effendi, several influential Arab statesmen saw Zionism as compatible with Arab nationalism, given that the Jews create their "national home" (an ambiguous term that doesn't imply statehood) within an Arab state. As a testament to the relatively good feeling of this honeymoon period, Sharif Hussein published an article in his Mecca newspaper that declared he welcomed the return of the Jews and viewed their presence as beneficial for both parties.³³ This cooperative mood would not last long as the post-WWI situation deteriorated to old-fashioned colonialism.³⁴

³¹ The agreement does speak of a border between the Arab state and Palestine, which lends itself to a different interpretation than that of the addendum. This internal contradiction is most likely due to the original agreement being written in English, which would have hampered Faisal's understanding of the terms. See Allawi, Ali A. *Faisal I of Iraq*. pp. 186-189.

³² Laqueur, Walter Zeev. *A History of Zionism*. 2003.

³³ Perlmann, Moshe. "Chapters of Arab-Jewish Diplomacy, 1918-22." *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, Apr. 1944.

³⁴ An analysis of the greater significance of Faisal-Weizmann as it relates to the intentions of the Arab nationalist and Zionist movements will follow in a later section.

King-Crane Commission

In order to ascertain the wishes of the local Syrian population, the Allies ordered a commission to investigate the social conditions present in Syria and to recommend a plan of action for the future.³⁵ Although it was originally intended to be an international project, Britain and France pulled their own delegates from the project for fear of contradicting their colonial interests; American delegates carried out the entire report, which would come to be known as the King-Crane Commission, over the course of several months. They interviewed Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike across a wide range of professional occupations and social stratas.³⁶

The commission published the following table to illustrate their estimate for the population demographics of Greater Syria.³⁷

	OETA South (Palestine)	OETA West	OETA East	Totals
Muslims	515,000	600,000	1,250,000	2,365,000
Christians	62,500	400,000	125,000	587,500
Druses	n/a	60,000	80,000	140,000
Jews	65,000	15,000	30,000	110,000

³⁵ King, Henry, and Charles Crane. *1919 Inter-Allied Commission on Mandates in Turkey*. 28 Aug. 1919.

³⁶ The opinions of Christians and Jews were overrepresented in the report relative to their demographics. Despite making up only 18% of the population of Greater Syria, Christian groups constituted around 56% of the delegations received by the commission. As for the Jews, despite making up only about 3% of the population of Greater Syria, Jewish delegations made up around 8% of those that the commission received.

³⁷ King, Henry, and Charles Crane. *1919 Inter-Allied Commission on Mandates in Turkey*. 28 Aug. 1919.

Others	5,000	20,000	20,000	45,000
Totals	647,500	1,095,000	1,505,000	
Grand Total				3,247,500

It will be noted that the population of Palestine in 1919 was approximately 80% Muslim, 10% Christian, and 10% Jewish. According to population estimates from 1880, the population of Palestine was previously 87% Muslim, 9.4% Christian, and 4% Jewish.³⁸ The 6% increase in the Jewish population over 40 years was likely due to the First and Second Aliyahs, made up of mostly Eastern European Zionists.³⁹

There were several notable facets of Syrian public opinion that the committee observed. Generally, the population under the Arab administration was approving of the efforts of Faisal and the Arab nationalists. Of all the 1,863 petitions that the commission collected, the following sentiments were prevalent.⁴⁰

- 80.4% desired one united Syria (including Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, etc.)
- 73.5% desired an independent Syria
- 72.3% were opposed to the Zionist program (a more widespread general opinion among both Moslems and Christians than any other)
 - Of petitions received from the inhabitants of Palestine, 85.3% were anti-Zionist

³⁸ McCarthy, Justin. *The Population of Palestine: Population History and Statistics of the Late Ottoman Period and the Mandate*. Columbia UP, 1990.

³⁹ A substantial number of Yemeni Jews also immigrated in the First Aliyah.

⁴⁰ King, Henry, and Charles Crane. *1919 Inter-Allied Commission on Mandates in Turkey*. 28 Aug. 1919.

- 60.5% desired the United States as a first-choice for a Mandatory power if independence could not be attained
- 59.3% desired a democratic kingdom, and 59% wanted Faisal to be the king
- 54.9% explicitly indicated they wished to preserve the rights of minorities

Based on these results and on their personal experiences, the final recommendation of the American delegates was to provide Syria with a limited and restricted mandate, preferably with the United States as the Mandatory, so as to assist the kingdom in establishing itself properly. They found significant evidence that the intentions of the Arab administration were in-line with inclusivity and the protection of minority rights; as for Faisal's kingship, the commission observed that "there seems to be no reason to doubt that the great majority of the population of Syria sincerely desire to have Emir Feisal as ruler."⁴¹

The commission also gave several recommendations as to the future of Zionism. The American delegation admitted that they "began their study of Zionism with minds predisposed in its favor" and that they "found much to approve in the aspirations and plans of the Zionists, and had warm appreciation for the devotion of many of the colonists and for their success, by modern methods, in overcoming natural obstacles."⁴² Yet, the final judgment they offered was overwhelmingly negative. The language of the report speaks best for itself:

"For 'a national home for the Jewish people' is not equivalent to making Palestine into a Jewish State; nor can the erection of such a Jewish State be accomplished without the gravest trespass upon the 'civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.' The fact came out repeatedly in the Commission's conference with Jewish

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² King, Henry, and Charles Crane. *1919 Inter-Allied Commission on Mandates in Turkey*. 28 Aug. 1919.

representatives, that the Zionists looked forward to a practically complete dispossession of the present non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine, by various forms of purchase.”⁴³

The commission went on to note that Zionist aims were entirely inconsistent with the democratic principles of self-determination and popular sovereignty. In their opinion, the actual inhabitants of Palestine were overwhelmingly united in their opposition to Zionism, and to forcibly enforce such a program unto them would be morally reprehensible and anti-democratic. Indeed, the commission found that “No British officer, consulted by the Commissioners, believed that the Zionist program could be carried out except by force of arm”, which the commission declared a strong sign of the injustice of the Zionist program. The final recommendation regarding Zionism was that “Jewish immigration should be definitely limited, and that the project for making Palestine distinctly a Jewish commonwealth should be given up.”⁴⁴

Ultimately, the report failed to be of any immediate significance to the Middle East because of the vagaries of American foreign policy. The United States State Department refused to allow for the publication of the report or for internal distribution, as “it would not be compatible with the public interest” - the publication of the report, clearly against Britain’s and France’s colonial ambitions, would have generated ill-feeling between the U.S. and her allies and thus would have impaired the effectiveness of the League of Nations.⁴⁵ The one person who might have stood up for the publication of the report and Greater Syria, Woodrow Wilson, had suffered a debilitating stroke and was in no state to make any judgments whatsoever.⁴⁶ It has

⁴³ These ‘forms of purchase’ would be pursued by the Zionists under the British Mandate and will be further examined in the relevant sections; Ibid.

⁴⁴ The relation of these findings in an objective history of Palestine is not to be taken as a sign of partiality on part of the author, but merely as the factual expression of what the report itself says.

⁴⁵ Fletcher, Henry. Letter to Leland Harrison. 7 Apr. 1922. General Records of the Department of State, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 59, 763.72119/7161, Microfilm Publication 367, Reel 439.

⁴⁶ Thompson, Elizabeth F. *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance.*

been speculated that the Zionist Organization, in league with the French government, may have lobbied the State Department to prevent the report from being published.⁴⁷ Regardless of the causes, the King-Crane Report was suppressed for several years until 1922, when it was already too late to be of any use. The Allied Powers went ahead and signed the Treaty of Versailles, with the League of Nations charter included.⁴⁸

The Syrian National Congress and the French Mandate

Catalyzed by the arrival of the King-Crane Commission, the Arab administration held hasty elections all over Greater Syria (including Palestine) in order to form a national congress.⁴⁹ Although Britain and France attempted to block elections and bar congressmen from traveling, most representatives secretly managed to reach Damascus anyway.⁵⁰ Under the urgent and dire circumstances, the Syrian National Congress quickly prepared the Damascus Program, a national agenda to be presented to the King-Crane Commission.⁵¹ The main points of it were as follows.⁵²

1. Independence for Greater Syria, stretching from Palestine to the Euphrates
2. "A democratic, civil, constitutional Monarchy on broad decentralization principles, safe-guarding the rights of minorities" with Faisal as the king.

⁴⁷ Howard, Harry. *The King-Crane Commission: An American Inquiry in the Middle East*. Khayats, 1963. pp. 259-260.

⁴⁸ Thompson, Elizabeth F. *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance*.

⁴⁹ Christians were appropriately represented in this Congress compared to the general population. Many Jews, preferring the Zionist movement, refused to take part in Syrian politics; as such, they were underrepresented. Only one Jewish delegate attended the congress, by the name of Yusuf Linado; Thompson, Elizabeth F. *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance*.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ The political situation was quite politically contentious; British agents halted the movement of food supplies in areas they controlled and quelled many political protests with gunfire; Ibid.

⁵² "Statement of Syrian Conference, Damascus, July 3, 1919." *King-Crane Commission Digital Collection*, Oberlin College, dcollections.oberlin.edu/digital/collection/kingcrane/id/2525.

3. If independence was unrealizable, then America was to be the Mandatory; if not, then Britain, provided that Britain respected the autonomy of the Arabs.

After presenting this program to the American commission in June 1919, a year's worth of congressional debate followed. In that time, the congress developed along liberal and democratic lines. Civil rights were guaranteed for all inhabitants of Greater Syria, and various systems of checks and balances were proposed in order to prevent tyranny.⁵³ The social status of women was greatly elevated in this time; women's suffrage was seriously debated in the congress, and found support among wide sections of the delegation. Perhaps most impressive about the Syrian National Congress was the high level of popular participation that it reached; popular rallies and public debates rocked Damascus for weeks as ordinary citizens made their voices heard.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, negotiations as to the implementation of Britain and France's colonial ambitions continued on in Europe. Faisal continued to try and secure an international agreement abroad.

On March 8th, 1920, the Syrian National Congress declared independence for the Arab Kingdom of Syria. They wrote,

"We have therefore unanimously proclaimed the full and absolute independence of our country Syria, including Palestine, within her natural boundaries, based on a civil, representative form of government, protection of the rights of minorities, and rejection of the claims of the Zionists to Palestine as a national homeland or place of immigration for the Jews."

Both Christian and Muslim leaders, as well as foreign diplomats from Spain, Persia, and Italy, attended the formal ceremony. Celebrations broke out all across Greater Syria. Two months later, on July 5, 1920, a draft constitution, influenced by the American federal system, was approved

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Thompson, Elizabeth F. *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance.*

by the congress. the constitution established “a civil, representative monarchy” with built-in civil liberties for all inhabitants of Greater Syria. The following are relevant quotations from this document.⁵⁵

- *“Syrians are equal before the law in rights and duties.”*
- *“It is forbidden to infringe upon the freedom of belief or religion or to ban religious ceremonies of any confession, unless they disturb the public order or offend other rites and religions.”*
- *“The property of individuals and legal personalities is protected by the law. The government cannot expropriate the property of an owner except in the public interest and after the payment of an indemnity in accordance with special regulations.”*
- *“Publication is free within the limits of the law and cannot be inspected or verified before publishing.”*
- *“No distinction shall be made between a minister and another citizen regarding ordinary crimes, private rights, or financial obligations.”*

The entire Syrian Constitution was based on sound democratic principles that aimed to establish the rule of law and to ensure the rights of minorities. The Kingdom would have had a prosperous future ahead of it, had it not been for the machinations of foreign powers.

The French premier Alexandre Millerand issued an ultimatum to Faisal on May 27, demanding that he submit to French forces. The French general Henri Gourand prepared an army to invade the Arab Kingdom, sparking mass civil unrest and riots in Damascus. The Syrian congress was in a frenzy; it was discovered that their army was woefully underprepared for any real military encounter. The war minister, Yusuf al-Azmah, had misrepresented the actual

⁵⁵ Ibid.

strength of the Syrian army, assuming the French would never attack while peace deliberations were still (nominally) ongoing. In his words, “I was bluffing. . . to fool the French”.⁵⁶

Faisal, knowing resistance was useless, accepted the terms of surrender. Azmah, leading a small contingency of the independence faction, resolved to fight the French near the region of Khan Maysalun.⁵⁷ The battle was over in a few hours; Azmah was killed. The French had destroyed the Arab Kingdom of Syria. Palestine had not left the hands of the British for a moment.

⁵⁶ Al-Hursi, Sati. *The Day of Maysalun*. The Middle East Institute, 1966. p. 63.

⁵⁷ Moubayed, Sami. *Steel & Silk: Men & Women Who Shaped Syria 1900-2000*. Cune Press. p. 45.

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