

# BASIS OF THE SYRIAN CLAIMS

## Friend of Prince Feisal, Son of the King of Hedjaz, Just Elected to the Throne, Tells of Hopes of the Arab Nationalists

The writer of this article was born in the Near East, and speaks Arabic. He has talked with Prince Feisal in his native tongue in Damascus and London. He was summoned from Beirut to Damascus by the Arab Government to confer with the Crane-King Commission; and he has discussed the Syrian problem with the late Sir Mark Sykes, who negotiated the Sykes-Picot Treaty of 1916.

By FREDERICK JONES BLISS,

Late Field Officer of the Palestine Exploration Fund.

THE events of the last five years appear to have led up almost inevitably to the nationalistic coup in Syria, which was expected to culminate on March 20 with the crowning of the Emir Feisal as King of Syria. According to late dispatches, Mr. Lloyd George has stated in Parliament that the British and French Governments cannot recognize as valid Feisal's recent election by the All-Syrian Congress at Damascus.

Let me say at once that Feisal has always been, and still desires to be, a loyal ally of England. Any straining of that loyalty is due to the results of British war diplomacy, which, perhaps necessarily, suffered from a lack of coordination among the agents of the Foreign Office. To hold that diplomacy during the time of war may be judged by the lofty ethical standards imperative in a time of peace, is to indulge in a dream of the reign of "a counsel of perfection," and is to forget the sudden and unforeseen exigencies of military necessity.

The above remark is offered not by way of excuse, but in explanation of the mutually excluding arrangements entered into by Great Britain with the French, the Arabs and the Zionists. These arrangements were made by different agents at different times, quite possibly unaware of the details of each other's negotiations. The Prime Minister, under whose final authority they were undertaken, was succeeded, before they could be carried into effect, by a man whose power lies rather in the "will-to-win" than in a knowledge of history, geography, and the whole art of foreign affairs, and who possesses a defective political memory.

### For an Arab Empire.

As I have heard Feisal state, his chief aim has looked to an undivided Arab Empire including Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia. Such was his understanding of the arrangement made in 1915 between Colonel Lawrence and his own father, Huessein, the Grand Sherif of Mecca and now King of the Hedjaz: The unity of Arabic-speaking lands was thus Feisal's main purpose. He accepted the principle of mandates, recognizing the need of his people for tuition in the art of government as well as in matters financial and economic, but he felt most strongly that the application of this mandatory principle should in no wise prejudice the all-controlling demand for unity.

The temporary division, pending the final settlements of the Peace Conference (made at the time of the occupation of Syria), into three zones, the British remaining in Palestine, the French in civil control of the Syrian littoral (with the Lebanon) and the Arabs, under himself, directing the internal administration of the hinterland from Damascus as a centre, but all three zones under British military control—this partition he took at its face value as a necessary and proper division of labor among the Allies associated in the conquest. When it was announced by the Supreme Council in September, 1919, that there would shortly go into effect a readjustment of the status quo by which the British military control of Syria proper should be replaced by French, his already awakened suspicions that the alleged temporary arrangements foreshadowed a predetermined crystallization were immensely strengthened. This news reached him on his arrival in Marseilles from Syria early in September. That the permanency of such a division would put an end to his hopes for an undivided Arab



Prince Feisal of Hedjaz, Recently Elected King of Syria.

Empire from the Egyptian border to Persia was painfully plain. He saw that this partition would arouse the antagonism of the Nationalists—Moslem, Christian and Druse alike—whose program was clearly stated by the All-Arab Congress that met in Damascus in June, 1919.

### Single Mandate Preferred.

Whatever difference of opinion there may have been as to the desirability of inviting this or that mandatory power, the conviction that there should be but one mandate was almost universal. The exception, of course, was in the "Ulster" of Syria, namely, the Lebanon, three-quarters of whose inhabitants are Maronite Roman Catholics, and who, at least in the early period of the armistice, would have welcomed a French mandate confined to the greater Lebanon. This party had thousands of adherents in Beirut and other coast towns. They probably do not include more than one-seventh of the entire population of Syria and Palestine.

I saw Feisal soon after his arrival in London, and he solemnly declared that the proposed change would result in a general uprising. His month's stay in England was spent in an attempt to convince the Foreign Office of the serious

aspects of the case. Toward the end of his sojourn he told me that he had emphasized the conditions to various members of the British Cabinet, naming them one after another. His proposition to refer a reconsideration of the proposed change to a council of four—one British representative, one French, one American and himself—fell through. Clemenceau, however, consented to discuss the matter personally with him in Paris. These conversations were apparently unsatisfactory to the Prince, although it appears some sort of modus vivendi was agreed upon. The British withdrew from Syria in December. Feisal's landing at Beirut in January, 1920, was hailed with great acclaim by the Nationalists, whose bold proclamations of independence were not interfered with by the French, who, however, detailed a band of French soldiers to escort the procession with fixed bayonets. Feisal almost at once proceeded to Damascus.

Since then events have matured rapidly. The French set-back in Marash has doubtless had an influence in their determination. As to Feisal's attitude toward the Turkish nationalists, certain dispatches declare that he forbade the Arabs to co-operate with them, while others indicate that he has countenanced

the threats of such co-operation, in case the unity of Syria is prejudiced by the decision of the powers. But no reliance can be placed on these reports in any way.

### Who the Arabs Are.

Current newspaper comment on the Syrian situation too often shows considerable confusion in the use of the word "Arab." It sometimes differentiates the Moslems from the Christians by referring to the Moslems as Arabs, with the implication that the Christians are something quite different. As a matter of fact, the only fairly pure Arab blood in Syria and Palestine is found among the Bedawin and in a few noble families, in one case, certainly, Christian. All Syrians are as apt to refer to themselves as "children of the Arabs" as to use the term Syrians. The entire population may be called Arabic in virtue of a common language. At the time of the Arab conquest, roughly speaking, one-half of the already mixed population became Moslems and half remained Christians. Infusion of Arab blood was due to intermarriage with the conquerors, presumably much more common with the converts to Islam than with those that kept the faith. Christian and Moslem elements of the settled population have far more in common with each other than they have with the Bedawin.

Feisal's position rests on grounds both solid and valid, always provided that he has the backing of the majority of the Syrian and Palestinian population, which by all the indications seems assured. (I cannot speak for Mesopotamia). The matter is one of great simplicity. The United States has joined the Entente in certain promises, and it is our job to see that these are carried out. Two official utterances of France and England, grant to the Syrians the right of self-determination and, ipso facto, render null and void the Sykes-Picot Treaty of 1916 (which, inter alia, recognized two special zones of influence, Palestine for the British and Syria for the French).

### One Official Declaration.

Here is a quotation from the "Text of declaration agreed to between the British and French Governments and communicated to the President of the United States of America": "The aim which France and Great Britain have in view in waging in the East the war let loose on the world by German ambition, is to insure the complete and final emancipation of all those peoples so long oppressed by the Turks, and to establish national governments and administrations which shall derive their authority from the initiative and free will of the people themselves."

This declaration was published on Nov. 14, 1918, in the Palestine News, the official organ of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force under General Allenby, and was reprinted (in translation) in the Arabic and French press. I questioned at the time my friend the late Sir Mark Sykes (who is said to have greatly regretted the treaty which he made with Picot) as to the authority of the above-quoted declaration, and he declared that every word thereof was carefully weighed, in repeated communications between Paris and London, and London and Paris. It is significant that so little has been heard since of this pronouncement.

Again, the Twenty-second Section (in part) of the League of Nations Covenant as adopted by the Peace Conference, April 28, 1919, declares: "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 power."

In addition there are two statements by President Wilson: one constituting the twelfth of the Fourteen Points; the other contained in his address at Mount Vernon, May 4, 1918. These, among other matters, recognize the right of

such nationalities as Syria to "an absolutely unwarranted opportunity of autonomous development" (twelfth point); and that their "political relationships" should rest "upon the basis of the free acceptance of that settlement by the people immediately concerned, and not upon the basis of the material interest or advantage of any other nation or people which may desire a different settlement for the sake of its exterior influence or mastery." (Mount Vernon address.)

### Despairs of Our Aid.

According to recent dispatches, Feisal's plan for the independent, undivided Arab Kingdom, including Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia, is not intended "to offset the present European administration," and would advocate "the assistance of British and French advisers." He has apparently lost hope of that American assistance which he so passionately desired. This almost universal Arab desire for American help (greatly stimulated by the hopes raised by the excellent, impartial work of the Crane-King Commission) was based on the belief that she alone of all the powers would disinterestedly treat the mandate as a mandate, educational, and therefore temporary.

The roots of the objection to the French, entertained for some time, but apparently at present modified, are not so easy to determine. The fear that she would come to stay might be equally entertained in regard to England. At any rate, the All-Syrian Congress of June, 1919, whose second choice was England, rejected the idea of French help. Possibly the preceding eight months of French administration in Beyrout had much to do with the matter. This administration was felt to lack in power, in efficiency, in impartiality and in tact. It grew less popular as time went on, even with the Maronites, who had so ardently welcomed it. As a matter of fact, the quite unseen success of the Allenby drive had suddenly thrown on the hands of the Allies a large territory, calling for administration. This fell to the French, who apparently had not the right men immediately available. Many of the officials have since been replaced by men of superior quality.

Feisal is apparently not averse to recognizing the autonomy of the Lebanon, under the suzerainty of the Arab Empire, analagous, mutatis mutandis, to its relation to the Turkish Empire.

Whether or not the proposed new Arab kingdom will be a success is a case of solvitur ambulando. One important element in that success, if it comes to pass, will be the character of Feisal. Looking back on my intimacy with him both in Damascus and in London, I can unhesitatingly register my conviction that there is a soul, democratic, liberal minded, strong, patriotic, not personally ambitious in any undesirable sense, of deliberate rather than of impulsive nature, eager for disinterested advice from any source, and by no means a religious fanatic. Among the most trusted and most devoted of his advisers are found Syrian Christians. He has said that one of his highest hopes is to see an American college at Jiddah, the port of Mecca. May it not be possibly significant that the day announced by the dispatches as the date of coronation was Saturday, and not the sacred Moslem Friday?

Feisal's charm of manner, in which reticence alternates with delightful frankness, is by no means his least asset. He is very adaptable. At the luncheon table of the Rochester Deanery, in old England, where we were together as guests, he might have passed for an Italian nobleman, in the most correct of European dress. Later the inevitable photograph was taken. The donning of the Arab head-dress and cloak instantly transformed him into a Prince of the Desert. His very walk was changed into the "stage-stride" of the Arab.

According to the best of my knowledge and belief, Feisal's personal character is beyond reproach. My opinion is shared by those closest to him. The surest hopes of the Arab Nationalists lie in the simple fact that their leader is a good man.