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Abstract: On 24 July 1920 the first and only king in the modern history of Syria, Faysal I, was dethroned and exiled by the invading army of colonial France. Although later rewarded with the job of king of Iraq, Faysal I never lost his appetite for the crown of Damascus, and nor did any of his brothers, nephews, and other royals from the Hashemite family. Much has been written about Faysal's era in Syria, which began in October 1918 and lasted until July 1920. Few historians, however, have paid attention to the monarchial current that emerged thereafter in Syria, as ambitious politicians and retired officers tried to restore the Hashemite Crown both during the years of the French Mandate (1920-1946) and well into the independence of Syria. They went for the ballots and, when that failed, they tried to stage a coup that would restore the royalists to power, often with material support from one of Faysal's many relatives. This paper looks at the post-Faysal monarchial project in Syria, which triggered the emergence of two political parties, and at least two coup attempts during the years 1946-1958. None succeeded, and the monarchial dream was abandoned in July 1958 with the toppling of the monarchy in neighboring Iraq, ruled at the time by Faysal's grandson, King Faysal II.

Key Words: Royalism in the Arab world, caliphate, King Faysal I, Syria, Damascus, Iraq, Baghdad

Plenty of literature has been written on Syrian politics during the post-colonial era, covering coups, minorities, Ba'athism, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The short-lived monarchy of Syria (March-July 1920) has received its fair share of study, although little has been said as to how it influenced Syrian politics in the four decades that followed. Monarchial rule, albeit brief, triggered a vibrant royalist movement in the country that lasted from July 1920, the date of the overthrow of the Syrian monarchy, until July 1958, when monarchial rule was overthrown in neighboring Iraq. Both regimes had been established by the same person: Emir Faysal Ibn al-Ḥusayn, also known as King Faysal I.

It was around this man and his family that the monarchial project revolved in Syria. His era has been studied meticulously by various Arab scholars, most recently ʿAli ʿAllawi, author of *Faisal of Iraq*.[1] There are other books in English on Faysal, but most focus on his diplomatic struggles during the Paris Peace Conference, with the notable exception of the little-known yet highly informative book, *The First Modern Arab State: Syria under Faysal I* by Malcolm B. Russel.[2] There is a plethora of Faysal biographies in Arabic, published in both Damascus and Baghdad, but all of them are non-academic and were penned during his lifetime or upon his death in 1933, containing nothing but praise and homage. Some Arabic books do go deeper into analyzing Faysal's government, notably Khayriyyah Qasmiyyah's *Al-Ḥukuma al-ʿArabiyya fi Dimaš̆q*, which is taught at Damascus University, and ʿAli Sultanʹs *Tareekh Souriyya: Ḥukum Faysal Ibn al-Ḥusayn*.[3] We also have the rich multitude of memoirs written by members of Faysal's team, such as the Finance Minister Fares al-Khoury, Transportation Minister Yusuf al-Ḥakim, Education Minister Sati al-Ḥusari, and Faysal's adviser, Rustom Ḥaydar. More recently, a new book was re-added to this collection, originally penned in the 1950s by one of Faysal's Lebanese advisers, As'ad Dagher, and re-published in Doha in 2020. All these works cover the monarchial project from its inception until its abrupt end with Faysal's exile in 1920, revealing nothing about what happened later to Syrian royalists and their ambitions.

That part is the subject of this paper, researched through government archives, first-hand sources, and interviews with figures active in Syrian politics in the 1930s and 1940s. Among the notable interviews is one with Munir al-ʿAjlani, a cabinet minister and parliamentarian who was twice accused of trying to topple Syria's republican government and replace it with a monarchy, first in 1950 and then again in 1956. We also have ʿAbdul Wahab Homad, one of the co-founders of the People's Party, which strove for Syrian-Iraqi unity under the Hashemite crown in 1948-1958. Notable among the works that touch upon post-Faysal royalist currents in Syria are Philip S. Khoury's *Syria and the French Mandate*, Patrick Seale's *The Struggle for Syria*, and Andrew Rathmell's *Secret War in the Middle East: The Covert Struggle for Syria*.[4]

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[1] ʿAli ʿ Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

[2] Malcolm B. Russel, *The First Modern Arab State: Syria under Faysal I* (Beirut: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1987).

[3] Khayriyyah Qasmiyyah, *Al-Ḥukuma al-ʿArabiyya fi Dimaš̆q 1918-1920* (Beirut: Al-Muassa al-Arabiyya lil Dirasat wa al-Nashr, 1982) and ʿAli Sultan, *Tareekh Souriyya 1918-1920: Ḥukum Faysal Ibn al-Ḥusayn* (Damascus: Dar Tlass, 1996).

[4] Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987); Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-war Arab Politics 1945-1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966);

At first glance these books seem outdated and cliché, but a deeper look shows that nothing substantial has been written about the subject since then. The more recent literature is thematic, relying on these works as a backbone while adding nothing new to the subject of royalism in Syria. The National Archives at Kew contained valuable reports about how Syrian monarchists tried to rebound in the early 1930s; in Syria itself there is no national archive, as most documents related to the country's modern history have been destroyed or lost by the consecutive coups and countercoups of the 1950s and 1960s. What does exist at the Museum of Historical Documents in Damascus is futile, adding no value to the subject of the present article. This explains why such a study is important in shedding light on Syrian monarchism after Faysal I, a subject that historians of Syria have generally mentioned either in passim or simply as a footnote.

Faysal I: Sultan, King, or Caliph?

Faysal Ibn al-Ḥusayn established himself as prince of Syria in October 1918, immediately after the collapse of Ottoman rule. His era lasted for a total of twenty-one months, until his dethronement in July 1920. He was exiled to Palestine, then Europe, by the invading French Army, with orders not to return to Syria. He never did, but persistently continued to harbor an ambition of restoring his Syrian crown until his death in 1933. Upon his triumphant entry into Damascus, at the heels of the Ottoman withdrawal back on 3 October 1918, thousands took to the streets to welcome him, hailing Faysal as a hero and liberator. Women threw rice and rosewater from balconies and young men danced on the sidewalks. Children waved for the young Emir, carrying flags of the Arab Revolt, which his father Šharif Ḥusayn had launched against the Ottomans Turks in 1916.[5]

The thirty-five-year-old Hashemite Prince headed first to the Grand Umayyad Mosque within the walls of the Old City, accompanied by its mufti, Abu al-Kheir ʿAbidin, and its leading Islamic scholar, Bader al-Din al-Ḥasani. Damascus was a city of conservatives, and if Faysal wanted to secure a hereditary throne for himself in Syria he would need to earn the support of its clergy. Faysal started out by distributing favors to the ulema (Islamic scholars), such as evacuating troops from the Danqiz Mosque in central Damascus, which had been used as a military barrack during the Great War, and appointing

Andrew Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East: The Covert Struggle for Syria 1949-1961* (London: IB Tauris, 2013).

[5] For a further description of events in Damascus on the day of liberation from Ottoman rule, see TE Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (London: J Cape, 1935), 684.

Bader al-Din al-Ḥasani's son, Sheikh Taj al-Din, a cleric, as secretary-general of the freshly established royal palace perched on the slopes of Mount Qasioun.[6] Faysal appointed Muḥib al-Din al-Khatib, a Salafi cleric, as editor-in-chief of the government mouthpiece, *al-ʿAsima* newspaper.[7] A third cleric, Sheikh Rašhid Rida, was installed as speaker of the Syrian parliament in May 1920 (then called the Syrian National Congress).

Faysal promised his subjects that he would abide by the rules of Islam, making the Quran his unofficial constitution and the actions of the Prophet, his benchmark.[8] In return, these clerics offered him the *ba'yah*, an oath of allegiance made by Muslims to their sovereign, before knowing exactly what kind of government he was planning to establish in Damascus. Was he going to be proclaimed sultan, as the Ottomans had been, or caliph, as was mandatory in Islam? The notion of a president, let alone a republic, did not cross his mind or that of his subjects. Republicanism was alien to the entire Arab world and never had Muslims experienced it throughout their long history.

Faysal was young and impassioned, with plenty of war medals pinned to his uniform, awarded both by his father and the British for his military prowess during the Great Arab Revolt.[9] He also had religious legitimacy, essential for becoming king in any Muslim country, given that his family traced its lineage back to the family of Muḥammad, the prophet of Islam, through his daughter Fatima al-Zahraa and her husband, Imam ʿAli Ibn Abi Talib. Religious lineage was no simple matter in Muslim society. It could make or break any person's bid for power; in Faysal's case, it was a cornerstone on which he based his claim to the throne of Syria.

Sunni Muslims were looking for a caliph to rule them now that the Ottoman Sultan—who had claimed to be the legitimate successor of the prophet—was officially no longer the sovereign of their country. They were uncertain of what to make of Faysal, however, worried by his connections to the British, who had toppled the Ottoman Empire. It was an open secret in Damascus that Faysal admired European ways of life and was rumored to lead a secular lifestyle within his own household, teaching his children, for example, how to sing and play the piano. Faysal was a newcomer to the city, having only visited twice,

[6] ʿAbdul Ghani ʿOtari, *Alam wa Mubdioun* (Damascus: Dar al-Bashair, 1999), 26.

[7] ʿAbdul Ghani ʿOtari, *Hadeeth al-Abqariyat* (Damascus: Dar al-Bashair, 2000), 257.

[8] In Arabic, the prophet's behavior is referred to as "*Sunnat Rasoul Allah*."

[9] The Great Arab Revolt was a military uprising staged against the Ottomans by Šharif Ḥusayn, the emir of Mecca, which lasted from June 1916 to October 1918, accumulating with the liberation of Damascus on 26 September. It aimed to put an end to Ottoman rule in the Arab world and was backed both politically and militarily by Great Britain.

once in March 1915 and again in mid-1916. He did not know its people and spoke with a heavy Bedouin accent, which made him seem alien to many of the city's traditional notables. Given that he had obtained the blessing of the clerics, however, few voiced any serious objection to his rule. In private they grumbled, describing him as an imported king.

Who can be king, or caliph?

The term "caliph" literarily means successor to Prophet Muḥammad. In the Quran, the word "caliph" appears three times, first in *Suret al-Baqara* (verse 30) where God identifies Adam as his *khalifa* on earth. The second is in *Suret Sad* (verse 26) where God addresses King David as his *khalifa* on earth, and the third in *Suret al-Noor* (verse 55). Sunni Muslims believed that the caliph must be able to trace his lineage directly to the powerful Quraysh tribe of Mecca, the birthplace of Islam. The Prophet himself came from the Banu Hashem subtribe of Quraysh, to which Faysal proudly belonged. Shiite Muslims went a step further in their conditions for the caliphate, saying that any candidate had to hail strictly from *Ahl al-Bayt* (family of the Prophet). Faysal happened to fulfill both requirements; he was both a *Qurašhi* and a direct descendant of the Prophet.

The cornerstone of Islamic jurisprudence is the Prophet's *hadith*, a meticulous compilation of Muḥammad's words and actions, which comes second in importance to all Muslims after the Holy Quran. The respected *hadith* compiler Imam Muslim in his Salih Muslim quotes the Prophet's companion, Abu Huraira, saying that there will be no prophets after Mohammad, but many caliphs. With a mandate to lead—ostensibly from the prophet himself—Faysal began to organize his new kingdom in Syria.

Apart from lineage, conditions for becoming a caliph were straightforward. The caliph, or king, must be a Muslim male who is just and knowledgeable in issues of Islamic jurisprudence. He must also be physically fit and capable of protecting the *Ummah* against its enemies. Both Sunnis and Shiites agreed that a caliph was a temporal ruler, expected to rule "by justice" within the boundaries of Islamic Sharia. He passes laws penned on his behalf by an Islamic jurist which citizens must obey. The caliph, however, is never above laws of the Quran. If he breaks Quranic teachings he can be impeached by a Shura Council, a small group of learned men mandated to debate affairs of state and take decisions on behalf of the nation.

The impeachment of the caliph is justified if, for example, he does not call Muslims to prayer, explaining why Faysal's first action in Damascus was heading to the Umayyad Mosque to lead Syrians in prayer. Faysal also made it a habit to walk down to the Umayyad

Mosque for Friday prayers, always leading the masses in a festive procession, accompanied by schoolchildren, university students, and the city's top clergy. Sheikh Ḥusayn Faqfaq, a celebrated scholar from Mecca, was brought with him from the Arabian Desert and appointed as the emir's *imam* (guide) during his tenure in Syria.[10] Although inspired by Europe and its habits, Faysal insisted on not serving alcohol at his dinner table, so as not to offend pious Muslims.[11] His wife, Ḥuzayma Bint Nasser, was kept away from any official functions, and when appearing in public in Damascus, she always wore a conservative headscarf.[12] She only took it off and assumed the title of queen after her husband became king of Iraq in 1921, but she never enjoyed that title during his brief stint in Syria.

When choosing a new flag for his country Faysal used that of his father in the Arab Revolt, because of its connection to his family history and its deeply rooted symbolism in Islam. The flag contained three horizontal stripes of green, white, and black, representing the Rašhidun, Umayyad, and Abbasid caliphates of Islam.[13] The history of those dynasties was something that Faysal knew by heart. Under the first three caliphs the capital of Islam was Medina, where Faysal had been raised as a child and which housed the prophet's gravesite at the Masjid al-Nabawi (Prophet's Mosque). Medina was also the place where the final chronological verses of the Quran were revealed to Muḥammad. During the short tenure of the prophet's son-in-law ʿAli, the fourth Caliph (556-661), the Muslim capital was moved to al-Kufa in present-day Iraq, before reaching Damascus under Ali's successor, Muawiya Ibn Abi Sufyan, founder of the Umayyad state.

The Sunni Umayyads were Islam's first dynasty, creating an empire that grew rapidly in territory, incorporating the Caucasus, Sindh, the Maghreb, and the Iberian Peninsula, known as al-Andalus. At its peak the Umayyad Caliphate covered 13.4 million square kilometers. Faysal saw himself as a natural continuation of the Umayyads, symbolically ruling none other than their ancient capital, Damascus.

The Crowning of Faysal I: 8 March 1920

From all over the Arab world, men flocked to Syria to have their share of spoils in the new Arab government. High-ranking military posts went to Iraqis, while cabinet offices were occupied by Lebanese and Palestinian notables. Faysal insisted on giving his government a

[10] ʿAli al-Tintawi, *Dhikrayat* (Riyadh: Dar al-Manara, 1985), 1:80.

[11] Allawi, *Faisal I*, 175.

[12] Allawi, *Faisal I*, 20.

[13] Khayriyya Qasmiyyah, *Al-Ḥukuma al-Arabiyya Fi Dimashq*, 48.

pan-Arab character, appointing Said al-Ḥusseini, a notable from Jerusalem, as his first foreign minister and Yassin al-Hašhemi, a decorated Iraqi general, as his chief-of-staff. Syria's new parliament, known as the Syrian National Congress, was elected in 1919. It immediately set out to receive an American fact-finding mission known as the King-Crane Commission, sent to the region by US President Woodrow Wilson to inquire whether Syrians wanted to come under the control of colonial France or remain independent under Faysal.[14] Syria was, after all, France's share of the region, according to a wartime deal between Paris and London known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement.[15]

The King-Crane Commission toured villages and towns, and everywhere its two members went they heard the same universal demands: unity of Syrian lands, loyalty to Faysal, and refusal to come under the control of France. Both Faysal and his subjects believed, very erroneously, that they were backed by Great Britain in these demands, according to the *Declaration of the Seven*, a document penned by Sir Mark Sykes back in June 1918. That declaration came in response to a memorandum issued by Syrian notables in Cairo, requesting full independence under the Hashemite crown. The *Declaration of the Seven* noted that the future of all Arab territory liberated from the Ottomans ought to be based "upon the principles of the consent of the governed." It championed self-determination, a catchy phrase that was making the rounds throughout the Third World after being pronounced by President Wilson in his 14-Point Declaration of January 1918. Faysal and his team raised Wilsonian principles sky-high, using them to justify empowerment of his regime in Damascus, as a reflection of the will of the Syrian people.

Faysal was officially proclaimed king of Syria on 8 March 1920, installed as sovereign by the Syrian Parliament. The ceremony was presided over by the speaker of parliament Hašhem al-Atasi, an Ottoman-trained civil servant, who also pledged the *bay'a* to Faysal.[16] But Syria was not prepared for royalty, certainly not in terms of grandeur and festivity.

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[14] The King-Crane Commission was the brainchild of US President Woodrow Wilson, devised during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. It was originally intended to be a multi-national commission of inquiry, but only the United States ended up sending delegates to the Middle East.

[15] Signed between Great Britain and France in May 1916, the agreement was named after its two signatories, Mark Sykes and George Picot, and defined the spheres of influence in the Middle East and partition of the Ottoman Empire.

[16] Hašhem al-Atasi (1874-1960), a veteran Syrian statesman educated at the Muluki School in Istanbul. He held high government office under the Ottoman Empire before becoming speaker of Parliament under Faysal, then prime minister. During the post-Faysal era, he became president of Syria in 1936-1939, 1949-1951, and finally in 1954-1955. On all three occasions, he continued to support return of the Hashemite crown to Syria, if it led to broader Arab unity.

Organizers frantically searched the city for a suitable throne for their new king but were unable to find something that matched the occasion. They eventually had to borrow a Mosaic-inlaid chair from a member of the Damascus Municipality, settling for a simple and brief ceremony—with no crown. The "throne" was polished especially for the event, with its green upholstery changed into crimson, before being returned to its original owner when Faysal was done with it.[17]

Faysal's hasty inauguration raised the ire of France, which had had troops stationed on the Syrian coast since November 1918, preparing to march on Damascus. The French would never tolerate a British-backed sovereign on the seat of power in Syria. Faysal justified his crowning by referring to Wilson's Fourteen Points and to a wartime agreement between his father and Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner to Egypt.[18] It stipulated that Šharif Ḥusayn and his male children would be given a hereditary throne in Arab territory liberated from the Ottoman Empire, as reward for their support in bringing down that Empire. Ḥusayn would become king of the Ḥejaz, while his sons, ʿAbdullah and Faysal, would be enthroned in Iraq and Syria.[19]

Part of that agreement was fulfilled with Ḥusayn's crowning in Mecca as king of the Ḥejaz and the enthronement of Faysal as king of Syria. Since the future of Iraq was still uncertain due to a brewing Shiite rebellion against the British, Iraq's fate was postponed until a later and unspecified date, leaving its supposed sovereign, Emir ʿAbdullah, with the job of foreign minister in the kingdom of the Ḥejaz. The French Army marched on the Syrian capital on 24 July 1920, colliding with Faysal's forces at the Battle of Maysaloun near Damascus, killing his war minister Yusuf al-ʿAzma and bringing down his short-lived kingdom. Faysal was dethroned and sent into exile, with orders never to return. That battle, and the massacre of Syrian troops that came with it, sealed Faysal's fate in Syria and created a permanent scar in the psyche of the Syrian nation, which continued to haunt Faysal for years. On 1 August 1920 he headed to British-controlled Haifa in Palestine and then to Italy, where he stayed for months before being received by King George V in London that November.[20] From there the ex-king headed to Baghdad where he was crowned as monarch on 23 August 1921. Many regarded the crowning of Faysal in Iraq as a

[17] Khaled al-ʿAzm, *Muthakkarat*, volume I (Beirut: Al-Dar al-Mutahida, 1973), 107.

[18] Sir Henry McMahon, *Correspondences with the Šharif of Mecca: June 1915-March 1916* (London: His Royal Majesty's Stationary Office, 1939).

[19] Alec Kirkibride, *A Crackle of Thorns: Experiences in the Middle East* (London: John Murray, 1956), 18.

[20] Sami Moubayed, *Bayn al-Qasrayn: Faysal al-Awal ma bayn Tammuz 1920 wa Nisan 1921* (Al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi Magazine, Issue 507, May 2021).

reward by Great Britain, a compensation for losing his crown in Syria and being ejected from the country with little respect or ceremony. The British eventually lived up to their promise of making Faysal king and keeping him at his position, but it was in Iraq, not Syria. Too much was at stake in their relationship with Great Britain to push for keeping Faysal's throne in Damascus. When forced to choose between him and the French, unsurprisingly the British chose France.

Faysal never abandoned his ambition of returning to Damascus, however, and nor did his brothers and nephews, who considered themselves as the legitimate and only royal family in Syria. Before leaving the country Faysal met with Rašhid Rida, who by then had been elected speaker of Parliament. They discussed the country's new constitution, which never saw light, and Faysal objected to a clause giving the legislative branch the right to choose its new king.[21] He did not appreciate the trappings of democracy that came with the new charter, also rejecting a clause that forced him to obtain parliamentary approval for his decrees. "Who are you? I am the one who created Syria," he aggressively asked Rašhid Rida.[22] This was just days before the Battle of Maysaloun. Faysal was more worried about what a constitution would do to his reign than whether or not that kingdom would survive the upcoming days and weeks.

When leaving Damascus by train on 25 July Faysal took few of his personal belongings, nursing an illusion that he would strike a deal with the French that would allow him to return to the city he now considered home.[23] He even left behind his trusted aid, Nuri al-Said, to negotiate a comeback with the French High Commissioner Henri Gouraud.[24] In her memoirs Faysal's niece, Princess Badi'a Bint ʿAli, wrote of Faysal's Syria obsession, saying: "My uncle continued to think fondly of Syria until the end. Within the family, we used to say that he continued to covet the throne in Damascus, perhaps because its people showed greater obedience to his rule, far more than the Iraqis."[25]

[21] Syria's monarchial constitution was penned by Hašhem al-Atasi and a small group of lawmakers in the summer of 1920. Although voted upon in parliament, it never saw the light because of the Battle of Maysaloun on 24 July 1920.

[22] Qasmiyyah, *Al-Ḥukuma al-ʿArabiyya, 202*.

[23] Moubayed, *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (Al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi Magazine, Issue 507, May 2021).

[24] ʿAllawi, *Faisal I*, 296.

[25] Fayek al-Sheikh ʿAli. *Muthakkarat warithat al-ʿUrush* (London: Dar al-Hikma, 2002), 221.

Kings-in-waiting

Once certain that Faysal had left the country for good, France divided Syria into ministates, with a governor appointed in each to report directly to the High Commissioner's office in Beirut. When that experiment failed to yield positive results the mandate regime briefly introduced a federal government between the states of Damascus, Aleppo, and the Alawite Mountain, ruled by two parliaments, one provincial and one central. That system lasted for just eighteen months and was eventually replaced by the unified State of Syria, which was declared on 1 January 1925, yet it excluded the autonomous Druze and Alawite mountains, inhabited by religious minorities.

The throne issue remained dormant until being revisited by France's new high commissioner, Henri Ponsot, in the early summer of 1928. This came just months after the French suppressed a local uprising against the mandate regime, known as the Great Syrian Revolt, which began in 1925 and died out gradually by late 1927. A career diplomat who had served in Berlin and Canada before handling French colonial affairs in North Africa, Ponsot came to Syria with an elaborate plan—to single out moderates with whom France could do business, and to forever quarantine leaders of the Syrian Revolt. Before assuming office, Ponsot traveled throughout Syria to hear what people really thought of the Mandate. Everywhere he went, the people echoed universal demands; a general amnesty, unification of Syrian lands, compensation for property damaged or lost during the revolt, a constitution, and admittance to the League of Nations.[26] Restoration of the monarchy was not on the list. Although members of the political elite still craved Faysal's comeback, grassroots Syrians seemed to have overcome the Faysal interlude and were more interested in improving their day-to-day lives than restoring the Hashemite crown to Damascus. Faysal and his family were now demodé, considered a thing of the past, especially after he seemed to have comfortably settled on his new throne in Baghdad.

The signs of destruction still dotted the landscape of the Damascus countryside. Entire villages had been reduced to dust during the Great Revolt and Damascus itself was bombed from the skies, its ancient bazaars set ablaze.[27] Erasing those images from the minds of Syrians would not be easy for the new French Commissioner. The revolt leaders had all been sent into exile, banished for their maximal policies towards the mandate after

[26] Record of the Foreign Office (FO) at The National Archives: 371/6755 vol 11508 – Hole (Damascus) to Chamberlain (25 November 1926).

[27] The bombing of Damascus took place on 18 October 1925, at the orders of French High Commissioner Maurice Serail.

refusing to negotiate anything less than immediate and unconditional French withdrawal from Syria. High on the list of hardliners was ʿAbdul Rahman Šhahbandar, an American University of Beirut (AUB)-trained medical doctor and pro-Hashemite statesman, who had briefly served as Faysal's last foreign minister between May-July 1920. From his exile in Egypt, Šhahbandar continued to lobby for restoration of monarchial rule to Syria.

Colonial France began grooming a handful of Francophiles to run the country during the immediate post-revolt era, like the Damascene cleric-turned-politician Taj al-Din al-Ḥasani, Faysal's ex-palace director, who was considered a political moderate. Unlike his father, who was a respected scholar throughout the Muslim World, the young Ḥasani lacked grassroots support with ordinary Syrians, who considered him pro-French. Ponsot knew of Ḥasani's shortcomings, however, and that may explain why he began toying with the idea of restoring the monarchy, wanting to find a sovereign who was popular with ordinary Syrians but who owed his very existence to the French. He seemed to believe that Syrian politicians were unable to piece the country back together after the Great Revolt, hoping that a king hand-picked by the French might be able to do that. To Hashemite loyalists, it was a dream come true. To republicans, however, inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution, it was a nightmare.

Ever since Faysal had been dethroned eight years ago, every now and then a rumor surfaced that a certain Arab monarch was being groomed for the throne in Syria. Sometimes this was the doing of an imaginative journalist or a hopeful candidate, but often it was purposely injected into Syrian society by French intelligence trying to discover what kind of government best fit Syria.[28] Ponsot wrote a letter to French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand erroneously saying that the vast majority of Syrians still favored a throne, claiming that it "assured stability, protected national traditions, and safeguarded prestige of the country."[29] Part of that logic was based on what he heard from Faysal's loyalists, such as the Druze statesman Emir ʿAdel Arslan. When asked about the throne question, Arslan replied: "A republic is incompatible with Syria, and if a popular referendum were conducted, monarchism would win."[30]

Since there was no royal blood in Syria, Ponsot drew up a list of potential candidates—all being non-Syrian—whom he deemed suitable for the job of king. The list included wild suggestions such as Aḥmad Nami, a fifty-year-old Circassian aristocrat and former husband

[28] Sami Moubayed, *Tareekh Dimashq al-Mansi 1916-1936* (Beirut: Dar Riad El Rayyes, 2015), 235.

[29] Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 337.

[30] Emir ʿAdel Arslan, *Muthakkarat al-Amir ʿAdel Arslan* (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafa, 1973), 1:1.

to the daughter of the ex-Ottoman Sultan ʿAbdulḥamid II. He had briefly served as Syrian head of state in 1926-1928 despite carrying no Syrian passport, and had never hidden his ambition of becoming king, expressing this desire openly to French officials.[31] When measured by a nationalist yardstick, however, he lacked support from both the country's political elite and its religious scholars. He was also neither a Qurashi nor a descendant of the Prophet, automatically disqualifying him from becoming either king or caliph.

Another suggestion was Emir Said El Djezairi, a Damascus-born Algerian notable who had led the country during the interim period between evacuation of the Ottomans and entry of Faysal's army in 1918. He was toppled and then arrested briefly by Colonel T.E. Lawrence (aka Lawrence of Arabia), who claimed that he had no mandate to rule, neither from Šharif Ḥusayn nor from the Allies of the First World War.[32] His name had originally cropped up in July 1920, on the eve of Faysal's abdication, when it was rumored that he was earmarked to become king given that, like Faysal, he too hailed from Quraysh.[33] He badly wanted to become king, establishing a Caliphate Society in Syria to find a suitable caliph after Turkey's abolition of the title of caliph in March 1924. He did not hide his ambition of being that chosen caliphate, suitable and capable of assuming the throne of Syria.[34]

A third candidate was ʿAbbas Ḥilmi II, the Switzerland-based ex-khedive of Egypt, who had never visited Syria and was more interested in a political comeback to his throne in Cairo, from where he had been evicted by the British in December 1914.[35] ʿAbbas Ḥilmi promised the Syrians that if he became king he would not claim a salary from the state, but few had heard of his name.[36] Another setback for ʿAbbas Ḥilmi was his son, who was politically incapable of ruling; thus, if appointed in Syria, the ex-Khadive would not have an heir to the throne.[37] The list of kings-in-waiting went on and on, including the name of another Egyptian Prince Yusuf Kamal, an eccentric art lover and collector who was a cousin of Egypt's present king, Fouad I. The French went as far as to nominate King Zogou of Albania, a tyrannical despot who neither spoke nor understood Arabic. A remarkable figure in his country's history, he had assumed the premiership of Albania before becoming

[31] Yusuf *al-*Ḥakim, *Souriya wa al-Intidab al-Faransi* (Beirut: Dar Annahar, 1983), 202.

[32] Moubayed, *Tareekh Dimashq al-Mansi*, 57–58.

[33] ʿAllawi, *Faisal I*, 296.

[34] Emir Said El Djezairi, *Muthakkarati an al-Qadaya al-ʿArabiyya wa al-ʿAlam al-Islami* (Algeria, 1968), 233–234.

[35] FO 371/441, volume 14557, CO to FO (23 January 1930).

[36] Arslan, *Muthakkarat al-Amir ʿAdel Arslan*, 1:1.

[37] Arslan, *Muthakkarat al-Amir ʿAdel Arslan*, 1:1.

president of a republic, then switching to a monarchy and proclaiming himself king in 1928.

The more serious candidates were men like Emir Zayd, the younger half-brother of King Faysal, who had worked with him in Syria before joining him in Baghdad where he had served as Iraq's ambassador to Turkey.[38] Zayd, born in 1898, was an Oxford-educated veteran of the Great Revolt who had been earmarked to become Crown Prince of Syria. A second serious candidate was Faysal's older brother King ʿAli (born in 1879), who had been dethroned from the family kingdom in the Ḥejaz by Sultan ʿAbdul-ʿAziz Ibn Saud of Nejd back in 1925. Fifth was Šharif ʿAli Ḥaydar, a Ḥejaz notable who had contested with Faysal's father for the emirate of Mecca back in 1908. When he died before the throne question was settled, his son ʿAbdulmajid was also mentioned as a possible candidate. Zayd, ʿAli, Šharif ʿAli Ḥaydar, and his son were all members of the Hashemite dynasty who commanded respect among Sunni Muslims due to their family lineage to the Prophet.[39]

Support of the Syrian Clergy

The issue of restoring the monarchy was immediately picked up by the mass circulation Damascus daily *Alef Ba'e*, run by Palestinian journalist Yusuf ʿIssa, who was still vehemently pro-Faysal.[40] A return to royalism was lobbied for by the Syrian clergy, who were still struggling to restore the caliphate system that had been abolished by Turkish President Kemal Ataturk on 3 March 1924. Part of the caliph's duties, some of his functions, and what remained of his funds were all transferred to the Turkish Parliament. Religious scholars in Damascus argued that Islam knew no other form of government, however, saying that all institutions introduced by Ataturk to Turkey or colonial France to Syria were alien to the Muslim world and thus very unwelcome. This applied to parliamentary elections, constitutionalism, and republicanism in its essence. They also felt that the return of a monarch—especially a Hashemite one—would restore their social prestige, which had slowly been eroded by a fiery brand of secularism that the French had introduced to Syria since 1920. A monarchy, or a caliphate, was the only institution that could provide the Muslim community with unity and power, they argued. Other scholars, meanwhile, like the Cairo-based Syrian cleric Sheikh Rašhid Rida (ex-parliament speaker under Faysal) claimed that the king's return was unwise and should be prevented at any cost, arguing

[38] Moubayed, *Tareekh Dimashq al-Mansi*, 236.

[39] FO 683/111/98. Smart (Damascus) to FO (15 March 1924).

[40] Ḥakim, *Souriya wa al-Intidab al-Faransi*, 59.

that the Hashemite royals were intellectually unqualified to deal with issues of Islamic jurisprudence, in addition to being unapologetically pro-British.[41]

The Ottoman caliphate that ended in 1924 was a symbol of Islamic unity and power. During World War I it had dwarfed into a lightweight religious authority. By the early 1920s gone was the pomp and power vested in the person of the Ottoman Caliph, the last of whom was Abdülmecid II. His army was crushed and his empire lay in ruins. His capital was occupied by Western powers after the Great War. Once commanding wide respect reaching as far as Muslim Spain and India, the defeated caliph was now forced to obey the dictates of Great Britain and France. He had to give up parts of Anatolia, relinquish all of Syria and Iraq, and unconditionally release Allied prisoners. The caliph also had to surrender control of the famed Ottoman railway and telegraph routes of communication. In 1924 the last Ottoman Caliph left his throne in Istanbul and was exiled to Switzerland, with orders not to return. He never did, and nor did the caliphate of Islam as the world knew it.

Faysal's father had announced his bid for the vacant caliphate on 11 March 1924, just two weeks after it was abolished in Turkey.[42] One year later his kingdom in the Ḥejaz was overrun by ʿAbdul-ʿAziz Ibn Saud and he was banished to Cyprus, before his death in 1931. His claims to the caliphate vanished with his political demise. On 25 March 1924 the sultan of Egypt, Fouad I, called for a pan-Islamic conference to discuss the future of the caliphate, a post that he also coveted. The aim was to unite all Muslims under the authority of the Egyptian caliph-in-waiting and it was endorsed by al-Azhar, the highest religious authority in Egypt. Yet, both initiatives failed.[43]

Some of Ataturk's aides had advised against abolishing the caliphate, claiming that it could be separated from the sultanate and thus maintained. Doing away with the sultan's divine authority was one thing, but abolishing a title once held by Muḥammad's companions was an action entirely different. They declared that keeping the caliphate would serve the interests of the new Turkish Republic, uniting the world's 15 million Muslims behind its authority. It would be similar to the Vatican's hold over Catholicism, they argued. The staunchly republican and secular Ataturk, however, had different plans for Turkey, saying that a caliphate strongly contradicted republicanism. The Muslims of Syria were furious with Ataturk's decision. In Damascus they supported the Caliphate

[41] Rašhid Rida, *Al-Khalifa* (Cairo, 1341/1922-1923), 73.

[42] Sean Oliver-Dee, *The Caliphate Question: The British Government and Islamic Governance* (Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2009), 146.

[43] FO 684/111/98, Smart (Damascus) to FO (15 March 1923) and FO 371/4141 vol. 10164 (Damascus Consul to FO on 28 April 1924).

Movement that had been established by Emir Said El Djezairi, but it too died out by the late 1920s. Djezairi's lobbying on behalf of the caliphate explains why Henri Ponsot placed him atop the list of kings-in-waiting for Syria in 1928.

Also supporting the notion of a Syrian throne was the Syrian officer class, whose members, now retired, had served either in the Ottoman Army or in Faysal's short-lived Arab Army. These men looked towards their fellow officers serving under the Hashemite crowns in both Baghdad and Amman. They were well-fed, well-paid, and consulted on all affairs of state by King Faysal and his brother, King ʿAbdullah. A handful of them had even found employment either with Faysal or ʿAbdullah; Subhi al-ʿOmari, for example, went on to co-establish the armies of Jordan and Iraq.[44] In Syria, however, the officer class had been sidelined and crushed by the French occupation of 1920, left jobless, powerless, and, in many cases, penniless. Faysal's first war minister ʿAbdul Ḥamid Pasha al-Qaltaqji had set up a supermarket in Damascus in order to make a decent living, despite being a decorated World War I officer.[45] Those who had fought with Faysal against the invading French Army had either been arrested or sent into exile. They all hoped that if Faysal returned to Syria, then that would spell a reversal of fortune for them as a retired community of veterans.

King ʿAli in Damascus

Ponsot asked his superiors at the Quai d'Orsay to give the matter serious consideration, assuming that, if a pro-French figure was installed as king of Syria, then this would give France a permanent threshold in the country. No person was more offended by the suggestion than Faysal himself, who was furious at being left out of Ponsot's list of kings-in-waiting.[46] He was the legitimate king of Syria, after all, and if anybody was entitled for the job, then it was he alone and not any of his brothers. That summer, he sent two envoys to meet with Ponsot in Beirut, and one to Damascus to see whether there was still an appetite for restoring the monarchy. His envoy to Syria was Rustom Ḥaydar, a Shiite notable from Baalbak in southern Lebanon, who had served as Faysal's private envoy to Europe after the First World War.[47]

After spending one night in Damascus, Ḥaydar went to Beirut. Awaiting him were two Iraqi representatives of the king, Nuri Pasha al-Said and Yassin Pasha al-Hašhemi, both of

[44] Saad Fansa, *Subhi al-ʿOmari 1898-1973: Al-Awraq al-Majhula* (Washington DC, 2018), 111–112.
[45] Naziha al-Ḥomsi, *Al-Janna al-Da'ia* (Damascus 2003), 18.
[46] Moubayed, *Tareekh Dimashq al-Mansi*, 237.
[47] Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 338–339.

whom had served with Faysal in Syria and knew the country inside out. Said had been military adviser to the king while Hashemi had been chief-of-staff of the now dismantled Syrian Army. They were received by Ponsot who listened to them carefully, taking notes as they lobbied passionately on behalf of their king, arguing that he was the only person capable of restoring law and order to Syria.[48]

Apart from triggering Hashemite ambitions, however, nothing came of the meeting and the throne question took a backseat again until January 1931, when Faysal's brother King ʿAli showed up in Syria, also marketing himself as a king-in-waiting.[49] At fifty-three, ʿAli was both the oldest and unluckiest of Šharif Ḥusayn's children. Educated at a prestigious military school in Istanbul, he had helped his father during the Arab revolt and served as heir to Šharif Ḥusayn when the latter declared himself king of the Ḥejaz. Ḥusayn abdicated in favor of his son in October 1924, but ʿAli was forced to flee to Iraq less than a year later when his family kingdom was overrun by Ibn Saud. He still craved a real kingdom, and, with his two brothers perched atop their thrones in Baghdad and Amman, his only remaining hope was Damascus. Although the French records in Paris and Nantes feature no minutes of Ali's talks in Beirut, the British refer to them without revealing details of the discussion.[50]

We do know, though, that ʿAli's stopover in Damascus was low-key and rather unsuccessful. He had last visited the Syrian capital during the brief reign of his brother in 1919. Not much had changed in terms of landscape and infrastructure, apart from a few European-style French buildings. The large crowds that called out his father and brother's name thirteen years ago, however, were nowhere to be found. Prime Minister Taj al-Din al-Ḥasani, fearful of Hashemite ambitions, forbade any government official from meeting King ʿAli at his Damascus hotel. Protocol dictated that, as a former monarch, he ought to have been received by either the premier or at least a senior government official. The National Bloc, a prime rival to Taj al-Din al-Ḥasani, also failed to send anyone to meet ʿAli, although its president, Hašhem al-Atasi, had been the person to crown Faysal as king in 1920.

Only two prominent nationalists showed up at his suite at the Orient Palace Hotel, courting ʿAli as a king-in-waiting. One was Rida Pasha al-Rikabi, a staunch Hashemite loyalist who had served as prime minister under both Faysal and ʿAbdullah, first in

[48] Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 338–339.

[49] FO 371/356, volume 15365, Hole to Henderson (14 January 1931).

[50] FO 371/206 vol. 15304, Cox (Amman) to High Commission (1 December 1931).

Damascus and then in Amman. Rikabi, scion of a large Damascene family, had recently established *Hizb al-Umma al-Malaki* (Monarchical Party), whose sole purpose was reviving Hashemite loyalty in Syria and preparing ground for the Syrian throne.[51] With him was ʿAref Pasha al-Idilbi, an Ottoman-trained officer who had fought the French in the Dardanelles and worked with Faysal during the Arab Revolt.

Feeling dressed down by the Syrians, ʿAli bitterly remarked: "The Damascenes have a reputation for hospitality. I see none of it around me!"[52] Not a single banquet was held in Ali's honor.[53] The cold reception no doubt helped convince him that if he were to become king of Syria, he would be an unpopular one. He refused to spend more than a night in the Syrian capital and promptly left in the same manner that he had entered, utterly unnoticed. Part of the coldness was due to the rumors circulating in Europe about the scandalous life of Faysal's daughter, Princess Azza. Born in 1905, she had spent part of her early teens in Damascus before eloping from her father's palace in Baghdad, after his death in 1933, to marry an Italian waiter in Rhodes.[54] Another scandal revolved around Princess Fawqiyya, the daughter of King Fouad of Egypt, who was leading a European lifestyle in Paris and rumored to be having an affair with a Frenchman, despite being married to the Egyptian ambassador to France, Mohammad Fakhri Pasha.[55] For a conservative society like Damascus, such stories only added to people's dismay towards a monarchy, especially one backed by the West. Emir Adel Arslan, a former adviser to Faysal, remarked in his memoirs: "Princess Fawqiya, daughter of Fouad ... Princess Azza, daughter of Faysal. What a pity."[56]

Faysal Steps In

The Hashemite show reached its climax when King Faysal himself landed in Paris in September 1931 and met with the Director-General of the Quai d'Orsay, Philippe Berthelot.[57] Although in poor health (Faysal died exactly two years later), he made the difficult journey to France to discuss the throne question. The former king of Syria had

[51] Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 353.

[52] Author interview with Munir al-ʿAjlani, Syrian parliamentarian and minister in the 1940s and 1950s (Beirut, 5 September 1999).

[53] ʿAjlani (5 September 1999).

[54] Al-Sheikh ʿAli, *Muthakkarat warithat al-ʿUrush*, 228.

[55] Arslan, *Muthakkarat al-Amir ʿAdel Arslan*, 188.

[56] Arslan, *Muthakkarat al-Amir ʿAdel Arslan*, 188.

[57] Itamar Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus: State, Political Community and Foreign Relations in Twentieth-Century Syria* (England: Valentine Mitchell, 2008), 56.

already raised the subject with Berthelot at least once before in November 1925.[58] By now, Faysal was no longer the Bedouin prince that Syrians had known in 1918. Urbanization had been good to him. He wore custom-made suits designed exclusively by the best tailors of London, and he dabbled in English, speaking with the wisdom of a sovereign who had been in power for almost fifteen years. Faysal told the French official: "I know the people of Syria well. They love me and would accept nobody else as king."[59]

Faysal suggested merging Syria and Iraq under his crown and that he rotate between Damascus and Baghdad, spending six months in each capital. The premiership would go to a Syrian figure, he suggested, while army command would be held by an Iraqi officer. The prime minister would get two Iraqi deputies, and the speaker of parliament would be an Iraqi. Remaining government jobs would be neatly halved between Syria and Iraq, while the two armies would merge into one.[60]

Faysal's overture enraged his older brother, Emir ʿAbdullah, who sent Faysal a strongly worded letter reminding him of wartime agreements within the Hashemite family.[61] Upon hearing news of his brother's dethronement in 1920, ʿAbdullah had raised an army of Arab tribesmen in Ma'an (present-day Jordan), heading to Syria to topple the French. He was asked to hold ground in Amman and was given the small and ungratifying emirate of Transjordan, which was no match for his political ambition, on the condition that he relinquished his claim to Syria and accepted validity of the French Mandate.[62]

Faysal had great respect for his older brother and, in 1921, warned the British that he would only assume the throne of Iraq if ʿAbdullah relinquished his claim to it, or if he was compensated with a proper throne elsewhere, whether in Jordan or in Syria.[63] ʿAbdullah launched a counter-campaign, writing to British Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill to remind him of the 1921 promise of a throne in Syria.[64]

Faysal's talks in Paris raised the fears of the Syrian nationalists. This was the most dangerous overture from the Hashemite family to date. The King's Syrian allies, Rikabi and Idilbi, even began spreading word that Faysal had finalized his agreement with the French and was preparing to re-assume the throne from which he had been illegally ejected in

[58] FO 371/5485, vol. 15364 (3 November 1931).

[59] ʿAjlani (5 September 1999).

[60] ʿAjlani (5 September 1999).

[61] Colonial Office (CO) 732/89059-47, Kirkbride to High Commissioner.

[62] Moubayed, *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (Al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi Magazine, Issue 507, May 2021).

[63] ʿAllawi, *Faisal I*, 565.

[64] Mary Wilson, *King ʿAbdullah, the British, and the Making of Jordan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 136.

1920. Ponsot assured them that such an idea was "entirely fantasy," but the republicans remained unconvinced, trusting neither the British nor the French.[65] They dispatched Fares al-Khoury, Faysal's ex-finance minister, to meet him in Switzerland.[66]

Khoury was an AUB-trained lawyer, who had served as a Christian MP in the Ottoman Parliament and then as part of a four-man government that ruled during the transition period between the evacuation of the Ottomans and the entry of the Arab Army. He wrote back to the National Bloc's Permanent Office in Damascus, assuring his colleagues that all talk of Faysal's return was "pure fiction," adding that the British would never allow it. London, he explained, feared that if Faysal returned to Damascus, he would automatically be lured back into Syrian society, which he loved and which was more culturally, politically, and socially refined than that of Baghdad. He was "obsessed" with Syria, wrote Khoury, and had never developed a strong liking for Iraqi society, as his niece later admitted. With time, Iraq would surely sink to secondary standing in any union with Syria, which Great Britain would never allow.

Khoury's prediction proved correct. As Syrian parliamentary elections approached in 1932, the throne issue was simply muted by the French as swiftly as it had surfaced. Realizing that the project was too complicated at a regional and international level and lacked grassroots support within Syria, Ponsot had it shelved and focused his attention on bringing Francophiles into the new parliament to challenge the National Bloc, headed by Hašhem al-Atasi. Most of the Syrian political elite saw themselves as more worthy of rule than Faysal, who they considered no longer fit to rule their country. They looked back at his brief interlude in Syria and blamed him for abandoning them so quickly, and for accepting an alternate crown in Baghdad.

Prime among his opponents was Ibrahim Hananu, the leader of the Aleppo Revolt of 1919, and the Prime Minister Taj al-Din al-Ḥasani. Hananu was anti-French while Ḥasani was a Francophile, yet they both agreed on the need to block Hashemite rule in Syria. Also vocally critical of a Faysal comeback were staunch republicans like Šhukri al-Quwatli, who had by now established himself as one of Syria's rising political stars; he was certainly unwilling to relinquish that position to Faysal. Hašhem al-Atasi was more flexible, saying that he would accept the return of the monarchy if it led to unification of Syria and Iraq as part of a greater Arab kingdom. But he also feared that Faysal's return to Damascus might create a third force in the country, in addition to the nationalists and the Francophiles,

[65] FO 371/5484 vol. 15364, FO to Clerk (3 November 1931).

[66] Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 358.

further dividing the political landscape. That was the case in Egypt, where there was a constant tug-of-war between King Fouad and the Wafd Party of Saad Zaghloul, both competing against a common British enemy.[67]

Two factions at that point emerged in Syria. The first, that of the monarchists, was divided into two sub-categories, one loyal to King Faysal and the other to his brother ʿAbdullah. The second camp was republican, and it also had two subgroups. The first was headed by the National Bloc and the second was that of pro-French politicians like Taj al-Din al-Ḥasani. The entire fortune of both depended on the sustainability of the republic.

The throne question collapsed during the summer of 1932, when Faysal's trusted ally Rida al-Rikabi failed to secure a seat for himself or his party in Parliament. That was how the Syrians voted for the royalist movement in Damascus, by crushing the ambitions of Faysal's former premier and president of the Monarchial Party. The ballots proved that the republicans were far more organized—and popular—than the monarchists in Syria. Rikabi withdrew from public life, admitting defeat, and died at his home in Damascus in 1943, ill, paralyzed, and forgotten. The short-lived Monarchial Party soon voted itself out of existence.

Faysal had died at a hospital in Switzerland on 8 September 1933, further orphaning the Syrian monarchists. His son and successor, King Ghazi (1912-1939), had no ambition of regaining his father's lost throne in Syria. When Ghazi died in a car accident in April 1939, his son, King Faysal II, also made no claim to the Syrian throne. The project remained on-hold until King ʿAbdullah re-emerged to lead the battle for the throne, but only after the French had evacuated Syria in April 1946. During the years 1933-1946 Syrian republicans swept the political landscape, overtaking every parliament and bringing four presidents to the seat of power in Damascus, starting with Muḥammad ʿAli al-ʿAbed (1932-1936) and leading onto Hašhem al-Atasi (1936-1939), Taj al-Din al-Ḥasani (1941-1943), and finally Šhukri al-Quwatli (1943-1949).

Abdullah's Syria Ambition

Even during his brother's lifetime, King ʿAbdullah had not abandoned his ambition of ruling Syria, never missing an opportunity to market himself as a king-in-waiting. In June 1939 he invited his brother's former foreign minister, ʿAbdul Rahman Šhahbandar, to Amman, weeks before the National Bloc government of President Atasi fell from grace in Damascus. Šhahbandar was a sworn enemy of the Bloc leadership and the republicanism

[67] FO 684/4/2 C.H.F. Fox (Transjordan) to High Commissioner (22 January 1921).

that they represented, aggressively supporting the restoration of monarchial rule to Syria. From Jordan, Šhahbandar gave a speech in the presence of King ʿAbdullah, saying: "A monarchy is better than a republic for Syria."[68] He then looked at the King of Jordan and added: "Centuries ago, your grandfather the Prophet united the Arabs. It's now your turn to unite them under your crown."[69] Weeks later Šhahbandar ordered his supporters to the streets of Damascus to welcome ʿAbdullah's nephew, King Faysal II of Iraq, who was traveling to Lebanon to spend the summer vacation with his family. Faysal II was a young child, aged four at the time, but he reminded Šhahbandar—and all remaining supporters of the crown project in Syria—of King Faysal I. The boy-king Faysal stopped briefly at the Abu al-Shamat mansion in Old Damascus to receive well-wishers, before the French politely asked him to proceed quickly to Beirut, given that his presence in the Syrian capital had raised unnecessary friction between royalists and supporters of republicanism.[70]

ʿAbdullah saw another window of opportunity with the French evacuation from Syria on 17 April 1946, making Greater Syria the cornerstone of Jordan's foreign policy, with the aim of uniting Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon under the Hashemite crown.[71] Speaking to the Egyptian daily *al-Ahram* in 1947, ʿAbdullah said: "My plan is clear: I want a state that includes Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon."[72]

Standoff with Syria's Shukri al-Quwatli

ʿAbdullah toured the region to promote his ambition, provoking Šhukri al-Quwatli, who by now had been voted president of Syria and who stood at opposite ends of the political spectrum from the entire Hashemite family. He thought lightly of Faysal and never got along with his brothers, accusing them of being vehicles for European influence in the Middle East.[73] King ʿAbdullah infuriated the Syrian president by spending a night in Antioch, a Syrian city that had been occupied by Turkey back in 1939—an occupation that Syrians never recognized. Syria at the time had no embassy in Amman and when the two leaders met occasionally at Arab summits, they exchanged icy greetings. The Jordanian

[68] Arslan, *Muthakkarat*, 1:267.

[69] Arslan, *Muthakkarat*, 1:267.

[70] Arslan, *Muthakkarat*, 1:275.

[71] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 11.

[72] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 13.

[73] Author interview with ʿAbdullah al-Khani, bureau chief to President Quwatli (Damascus, 1 December 2017).

King then went to Lebanon where he met the Maronite Patriarch Antune ʿArida, who agreed to endorse the Greater Syria plan if ʿAbdullah took the Muslim districts of Lebanon and incorporated them into Hashemite Syria, when/if it was created.[74] When heading back to Jordan, however, ʿAbdullah was forced to pass through Syrian territory. Quwatli gave clear instructions that, should the King of Jordan cross into Syria, he be arrested immediately.[75] He then replied to ʿAbdullah's ambition, saying: "Usually splinter states are the ones that unite with the motherland, and not the other way around. Syrians have made their choice: they want a republican democracy. Transjordan was once a part of Syria, and it is welcome to re-join Syria today."[76]

By the mid-1940s the only community still eager to see a Hashemite king were the Druze of Syria, who had fought with Faysal in 1916-1918 and received political support from his brother during their military uprising against the French in 1925-1927. Like ʿAbdullah, they too had a troubled relationship with the Syrian President and, in private, said that they would prefer to be ruled by King ʿAbdullah than Šhukri al-Quwatli. The king would state that he was willing to march on southern Syria to incorporate the Druze Mountain into Jordan, but Quwatli doubted whether he could put his threats into action, declaring that, apart from that of the Druze, ʿAbdullah had no support within Syria and lacked both the financial and military means to march on its southern border, or to threaten the capital Damascus with any military action. Jordan, he claimed, was an "artificial country" with no natural resources, and ʿAbdullah could barely provide for his own subjects.[77] Taking on 100,000 Druze would empty his already shaky treasury, given that Jordan had no oil, gas, or any natural resources.[78]

Quwatli's long-time friend, Emir ʿAdel Arslan, thought otherwise, telling the president that ʿAbdullah's army is the strongest in the Arab world and stands capable of overrunning Syria. ʿAbdullah tried to send his army to the Syrian-Jordanian border, warning Quwatli that he planned to invade the country and occupy it by force.[79] The plan was supervised by his army commander, Glubb Pasha, a British officer who had worked with the Hashemite royals since the First World War.[80] Quwatli dispatched armored tanks

[74] Khani (1 December 2017).

[75] Khani (1 December 2017).

[76] Sami Juma'a, *Awraq min Daftar al-Watan 1946-1961* (Damascus: Dar Tlass, 2000), 42.

[77] Author interview with Suhayl al-ʿAshi, military escort to President Quwatli (Damascus, 2 February 2001).

[78] ʿAshi (2 February 2001).

[79] ʿAshi (2 February 2001).

[80] FO 371/62169/E8282, Scrivener to Eastern Department (28 August 1947).

to seal off the main southern entrance of Damascus. More troops were stationed on the Jordanian border, with orders to shoot at any person on the slightest suspicion of working with the King of Jordan. Airplanes were kept on alert for the beginning of the military campaign.[81] The threat was a hoax: the Jordanians never moved.

Disenchantment towards their government had led some officers from the Syrian Army to turn to ʿAbdullah for salvation. If ʿAbdullah became king of Syria, these officers reasoned, then they would be placed on equal footing with their Jordanian counterparts, who were among the best trained and most highly respected men in uniform throughout the Middle East. Among those who secretly traveled to Amman to seek the king's assistance were Colonel Sami al- Ḥinnawi, an Anglophile from Aleppo, and ʿAlam al-Din al-Qawwas, an ambitious Druze officer who a few years later made history when he personally shot Syria's future dictator Ḥusni al-Za'im.[82] Syria's chief of intelligence Said Ḥubbi presented President Quwatli with a detailed report of the officers believed to be on ʿAbdullah's payroll. In addition to Ḥinnawi and Qawwas, it also included Ibrahim Qassab Ḥasan, the director of Aleppo police, and Amin Abu ʿAssaf, another Druze officer with an appetite for rebellion.[83]

Before firing any of these men, Quwatli wanted to make sure that they were indeed collaborating with the King of Jordan. He dispatched two of his trusted officers, Taleb al-Daghestani and Tawfiq Shatila, to Amman, pretending to have quarreled with the president and to be seeking ʿAbdullah's blessing to stage a coup in Damascus.[84] The king immediately granted them an audience. Daghestani was a prominent officer, having been Quwatli's military escort since 1943. Bringing him into the Hashemite orbit would be a political victory for ʿAbdullah and it would undoubtedly deal a deadly blow to Šhukri al-Quwatli. The two men returned to Damascus and reported to the president, presenting him with a photo they had taken with the King. ʿAbdullah had even given them a gold dagger with his name inscribed into its leather, in a token of friendship.[85] They reported to the president that a handful of Syrian officers were indeed working on ʿAbdullah's payroll, and planning for a putsch in Damascus.

King ʿAbdullah had also named ʿAbdul Wahab al-Ḥakim, future commander of the Syrian front in the Palestine War of 1948, and ʿAbdullah ʿAtfeh, Syria's chief-of-staff, as two

[81] ʿAshi (2 February 2001).

[82] FO 371/62497/E9137 "The Greater Syria Movement" (10 January 1948).

[83] FO 371/62497/E9137 "The Greater Syria Movement" (10 January 1948).

[84] ʿAzm, *Muthakkarat*, 2:190.

[85] ʿAzm, *Muthakkarat*, 2:190.

of his Syrian interlocutors with whom Daghestani could coordinate anti-Quwatli activity. According to Syrian intelligence, Ḥakim had received 250,000 pounds sterling from ʿAbdullah to stage a coup against Quwatli.[86] We cannot rule out the probability that ʿAbdullah threw out their names on purpose, fabricating the story of their collaboration to see whether that information would reach the Presidential Palace in Damascus. Writing about the incident in his memoirs, Prime Minister Khaled al-ʿAzm claims that ʿAbdullah was a simple and naïve man, though almost all contemporaries describe him as a cunning statesman and brilliant manipulator.

ʿAbdullah might have only wished to stir panic in Quwatli's palace, to create an impression that the Syrian leader was surrounded by men who were loyal to the King of Jordan. This also might explain why Quwatli took no disciplinary action against any of the men mentioned in Taleb al-Daghestani's report. Both Ḥakim and ʿAtfeh were kept at their posts and even tasked with extremely sensitive duties during the Palestine War of 1948.

The Attempted Coup of 1950

ʿAbdullah made one last effort at coming to power and restoring Hashemite rule to Syria in early 1950. It was as unsuccessful as all of his other attempts at assuming the Syrian crown. This time he singled out two additional pro-Hashemite figures in Syria, one being a civilian and the other an officer, bringing them secretly to Amman to discuss the possibility of staging a coup to install him as king. One was Munir al-ʿAjlani, a celebrated lawyer, parliamentarian, and cabinet minister, who was later to be involved in a far more elaborate plot with the Iraqi branch of the Hashemite family, which would cost him his entire political career. He was also the son-in-law of former President Taj al-Din al-Ḥasani. The other was Bahij al-Kallas, a Christian officer from Hama and former associate of Husni al-Za'im, architect of Syria's first coup of 1949. Both supported the restoration of the crown on the grounds of Arab unity. ʿAjlani met with ʿAbdullahʹs Education Minister Muḥammad Amin al-Šhanqiti in February 1950, while Kallas met with the king himself in May.[87] The coup was foiled by Syrian intelligence chief Ibrahim Ḥusayni, who had both men arrested, then acquitted on lack of proper evidence.[88]

[86] ʿAshi (2 February 2001).

[87] Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East*, 67–68.

[88] Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East*, 67–68.

Iraqi Attempts at Re-establishing the Syrian Throne

The ambitious ʿAbdullah died without realizing his Syria dream. He was gunned down at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem in July 1951 and his son and successor, King Talal, immediately announced that he had no ambition to rule outside the Jordanian kingdom, putting an end to ʿAbdullah's Greater Syria project. Talal quickly mended relations with Syria, visiting Damascus to inaugurate the Jordanian embassy, where he was received by then-head of state, Fawzi Selu.

With the Jordanian line of the Hashemite family withdrawing from the Syrian throne question, the only active participants thereafter were Faysal's descendants in Baghdad and their Iraqi allies. His grandson King Faysal II was still young and under total control of his uncle, the Regent ʿAbdul-Illah, the son of King ʿAli (older brother of King Faysal I). Like his uncles Faysal and ʿAbdullah, Prince ʿAbdul-Illah had an ambition to become king of Syria. Helping him materialize that ambition was Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, creator of the Fertile Crescent plan of 1941. Similar to ʿAbdullah's Greater Syria project, it aimed to forge a united Arab kingdom ruled by the Hashemite crown, encompassing Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq.[89]

The People's Party of Aleppo

ʿAbdul-Illah found an opportunity to extend himself into Syrian politics through the establishment of the People's Party in 1948, which was run by the Aleppo notability and strove for union with the royals of Baghdad, under the Hashemite crown. Its leaders, Nazem al-Qudsi and Rušhdi al-Kikhiya, were respected nationalists who had broken off from the National Bloc in the mid-1930s, accusing its leadership of advancing the interests of Damascus at the expense of Aleppo, among other things.[90] They created their party to promote the business interests of Aleppo, which for centuries had stood at the crossroads for international trade from Europe to Iran and India. Like Damascus, Aleppo had suffered tremendously by the borders that were imposed on the modern state of Syria, severing it from cities like Baghdad and Mosul. The new Syria was too small for the ambitions of Aleppo's merchants and business leaders. Four months after the People's Party formation,

[89] Nuri al-Said, *Istiqlal al-ʿArab wa Wihdatuhum* (Baghdad: Government Press 1943), 10.

[90] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 29.

its leaders had petitioned the Syrian government for an Arab union, which would start with the merger of Syria and Iraq under a Hashemite king.[91]

When Quwatli was overthrown by military coup on 29 March 1949, the People's Party refused to work with Syria's new ruler, Ḥusni al-Za'im, architect of the putsch.[92] King ʿAbdullah had tried to lure Za'im into his orbit, without luck. Za'im was looking for money and there were limits as to how much ʿAbdullah could offer, himself relying on the British for financial support. Two weeks into the coup Prime Minister Nuri al-Said arrived in Damascus on 26 April with the very same objective, asking him to merge with Iraq under the Hashemite Dynasty.[93] The People's Party tried talking Za'im into accepting a monarchy, but they were muzzled while Prime Minister Said returned to Baghdad empty-handed. Instead, Za'im threw himself into the arms of King Farouk of Egypt, distancing himself from the Hashemite family and threatening to bring King ʿAbdullah to Damascus, where he would be "hanged in Marjeh Square."[94]

Za'im's overthrow on 14 August 1949 led to new parliamentary elections, which were swept by the People's Party. The People's Party won fifty-one out of the 144 seats in Parliament and voted to make unity with Iraq an official foreign policy pillar for Syria. Although royalty was unpopular in Syria, its leaders were admired for being staunch democrats who shouldered none of the blame for the Palestine War or turbulence of the Za'im era. Za'im was arrested and executed, and a junta of Iraq-backed officers came to power, headed by Colonel Sami al-Hinnawi, a stern advocate of Syrian-Iraqi union. Working with him was Lieutenant Colonel ʿAlam al-Din al-Qawwas, a former associate of King ʿAbdullah; Captain Muḥammad Ma'arouf of Army Intelligence; and Air Force officer ʿIssam Muraywed, who had stationed a plane nearby to carry the coup leaders to Baghdad, in case of failure.[95] Nazem al-Qudsi of the People's Party became Minister of Foreign Affairs in the post-Za'im era, promising to deliver union between Syria and Iraq, while his colleague, Rušhdi al-Kikhiya, became minister of interior. After years in the opposition, they were now the elected leaders of Syria, much to the pleasure of Iraqi officialdom. Both

[91] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 29.

[92] Ḥusni al-Za'im (1897-1949), an officer from Aleppo, fought with the French-owned Army of the Levant, but was arrested during the Second World War and discharged from service on charges of financial misconduct. Za'im returned to uniform after the French evacuation in April 1946 and was one of the founders of the Syrian Army. President Quwatli appointed him Army Commander during the Palestine War, a position that enabled him to launch his coup against Quwatli on 29 March 1949.

[93] Nazir Fansa, *Ayyam Ḥusni al-Za'im: 137 Yawm hazat Souriyyya* (Damascus: Nouri Books, 1993), 48.

[94] Fansa, *Ayyam Ḥusni al-Za'im,* 65.

[95] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 73.

were good friends of Prince ʿAbdul-Illah and they tried, with the blessing of the new coup mastermind Sami al- Ḥinnawi, to engineer union with Iraq. This was the first serious approach in this direction since King Faysal's 1931 visit to France.

Syrian-Iraqi union suddenly became the talk of the town and even staunch republicans like Sabri al-ʿAsali, who headed the rival National Party in Damascus, presented the Iraqi Regent with a petition, supporting a merger under the Hashemite crown. This was ceremonially enacted during ʿAbdul-Illah's sudden appearance at Damascus Airport on 5 October 1949.[96] The life-long ambition of the Hashemites was suddenly back in full swing, and a federal union was in fact agreed upon between Syria's new leaders and Prince ʿAbdul-Illah. The monarchy would go to the Hashemites, the premiership to a Syrian, and the speakership of parliament to an Iraqi.[97] It was exactly what Faysal had tried to achieve seventeen years ago. The idea never got past the drawing board, however, given that, just days before the year 1949 came to an end, another coup rocked the Syrian capital, the third in less than twelve months. It was launched on the eve of Prime Minister Qudsi's planned state visit to Baghdad to sign off the union.[98] A young officer named Adib al-Šhišhakli orchestrated a surgical operation within the army, arresting Sami al-Ḥinnawi, the Hashemite-backed army general, and bringing the union project to a freeze yet again.[99]

The Shishakli Era

Šhišhakli, a native of Hama, was one of the founders of the Syrian Army. A staunch republican, the forty-year-old officer had nothing but scorn for the Hashemites, accusing them of being agents of the British. "I will never allow this country to be ruled from Baghdad," he would often say.[100] Šhišhakli, who had helped Za'im seize power in March, was an extremely intelligent, ambitious, and charismatic young man. By getting rid of

[96] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 77–78.

[97] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 80.

[98] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 83.

[99] Adib al- Šhišhakli (1909-1964), a Syrian officer from Hama, rose to fame during the Palestine War and helped Ḥusni al-Za'im come to power in March 1949. He then fell out with Za'im and helped Sami al-Ḥinnawi engineer his downfall in August 1949, only to topple Ḥinnawi that December. Šhišhakli ruled Syria by proxy until the summer of 1953, when he finally assumed the presidency. He was subsequently toppled in February 1954 and exiled, first to Lebanon, then to Europe, and finally to Brazil, where he was gunned down in September 1964.

[100] Author interview with ʿIssam al-Mahayri, co-founder and former secretary-general of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (Damascus 21 November 2010).

Ḥinnawi, Šišhakli was incapacitating the People's Party hold over Syria, and that of the Iraqi royal family. Without the support of the Syrian Army, they could never pull through with the union project, he reasoned. He left the veteran President Atasi at his post but set forth a strict condition: that Atasi appoint his right-hand-man, Fawzi Selu, as defense minister in any future government, with power to veto the union project if it were raised again by the People's Party. Meanwhile, Šišhakli ran state affairs from behind the scenes, satisfying himself with the low-profile post of deputy army commander.

In November 1951 Šišhakli decided to take his ambitions one step further. He staged a second coup, this time arresting the People's Party Prime Minister Ma'arouf al-Dawalibi and his entire cabinet. Dawalibi, a cunning French-trained politician from Aleppo, had refused to give Selu the Defense Ministry, as had been customarily done by all premiers since 1949. He too happened to be a Hashemite loyalist who strove for restoration of the Hashemite king to Syria. Dawalibi was sent to jail, while parliament and the constitution were suspended, prompting President Atasi to resign in protest. Martial law was imposed, and pro-Iraqi newspapers were shut down and their editors jailed. Any person writing or speaking in favor of monarchism was locked in chains and sent to the infamous Mezzeh Prison, at the orders of Šišhakli. It was the start of military rule all over again, which lasted until Šišhakli's downfall in February 1954.

Šišhakli ruled Syria via Fawzi Selu from 1951 to 1953, then assumed the presidency himself, from which he was toppled—by military coup—in February 1954. During his era he aggressively pushed Syria into the orbit of Saudi Arabia, severing relations with Iraq and refusing to discuss union with the Hashemite family. Many believed that the anti-Šišhakli coup had the fingerprints of Iraq and its Regent. That was due to the full-backing that the coup received from the People's Party, along with the fact that many of the officers who staged the coup were firm believers in Syrian-Iraqi unity.

The Final Years of Iraqi Interventionism in Syria

Parliamentary elections were held later that summer, in which the People's Party took an impressive thirty out of 142 seats, electing Nazem al-Qudsi as speaker of Parliament. But they faced the challenge of staunch republicans winning large shares in the chamber, such as the National Party, which got nineteen MPs, and the Ba'ath Party, which got an impressive seventeen. Both were on negative terms with Iraq and favored union with Egypt, ruled by the charismatic officer-turned politician Ğamal ʿAbdul Nasser, a sworn enemy of the Hashemite royals in Baghdad. Colonel Nasser quickly positioned himself as

champion of anti-imperialism and Arab unity, haranguing the leaders of Iraq, whom he accused of being on British payroll. In the summer of 1956 Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, ending British hegemony over Egypt, then successfully defended his country against the Triple Alliance, waged by Great Britain, France, and Israel, making him a household name not only in Syria but throughout the Arab world.

One of the few Arab leaders who remained totally unimpressed by Nasser's 1956 victory was Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Said. Nuri Pasha was an Ottoman-trained officer who knew Syria well. After a career with the Ottoman army in Libya, he defected to join the Arab Revolt in 1916, fighting alongside the Hashemite royals. He took part in the liberation of Damascus two years later and served as King Faysal's adviser in 1918-1920. He then fled Syria after the French occupation, later joining him in Baghdad where he became deputy commander of the Iraqi army before Faysal appointed him Prime Minister. Since 1930, Nuri Pasha had headed seven powerful cabinets in Iraq. During his first term he signed the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, which granted Britain the unlimited right to station its armed forces and transit military units in Iraq. It also gave legitimacy to Great Britain's control over the country's oil industry, explaining why President Nasser hated him so much. Ğamal ʿAbdul Nasser's rise in Arab politics threatened everything Nuri Pasha had worked for throughout his life, prime among which was the Hashemite project in Syria.

ʿAbdul Mutalib Amin, the Iraqi military attaché in Damascus, was providing Nuri al-Said with daily reports about the rise of Nasserist influence in Syria. Wherever he went, people were talking about Nasser; his photos filled the streets, while students raised posters of him at school rallies and anti-government demonstrations. Egyptian technicians and military advisors were arriving at the port city of Latakia, and Nasser had supported the return of Šhukri al-Quwatli to the presidency in September 1955, after six years of exile in Egypt. Quwatli was the same man who had obstructed Hashemite projects in Syria back in the 1940s and would undoubtedly do the same today, given his newfound friendship with Nasser. It was a dangerous moment for the royalist project in Syria. If Nuri al-Said did not act swiftly, then everything Faysal and his family had worked for since 1920 was in danger of being torn apart by Nasser.

The Iraqi Premier argued that Quwatli's return signaled Syria's shift towards the Eastern Bloc in the Cold War, pointing to the fact that a Communist MP, Khaled Bakdash, had just been elected to parliament in Syria, the first ever in the Arab world. The Iraqi Premiere agreed entirely with US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles that containing

communism in Syria should be a high priority for the international community. If that didn't happen, he warned, then Syria would soon become a Soviet satellite. Quwatli had neither forgotten nor forgiven Nuri al-Said for being the first to send envoys to Ḥusni al-Za'im, on the eve of the coup that toppled Quwatli and put him in jail at the notorious Mezzeh Prison. While the kings of Saudi Arabia and Egypt were lobbying for his release, Iraq was discussing ways to promote a Syrian-Iraqi merger with Colonel Za'im.

Nuri Pasha believed that Syria could only be saved from the clutches of Egypt if it merged with Iraq and restored fully into the Hashemite orbit. To do that, however, he would need to do away with anti-Hashemite Nasserists who were now in power, led by Quwatli. Former Iraqi Prime Minister, Fadil al-Jamali, was a strong advocate of union, while Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Mukhtar Baban wanted nothing to do with Syria, claiming that its politicians were always eager to milk Iraqi officials for money, but never willing to walk the extra mile to make union a reality.

As rumors of an Iraqi coup increased a strong anti-interventionist lobby emerged in Baghdad. When Deputy Iraqi Chief-of-Staff Major-General Ghazi al-Daghistani was brought to court after the Iraqi revolution of 1958, accused of meddling in Syrian domestics, he testified to members of the Supreme Military Court saying: "Iraqi governments have made it a principle to interfere in the internal affairs of Syria, from the time of Ḥusni al-Za'im, if not earlier."[101]

At one point, Colonel ʿAbdul Mutalib Amin drew up a plan with ambitious Syrian officers, code-named Operation X, which was submitted to Iraqi Chief-of-Staff Rafiq ʿArif. It called for concentrated air strikes against government posts in Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs, and aimed to topple Šhukri al-Quwatli and restore the monarchy by force. Deemed too risky and dangerous, it was flatly rejected by Prince ʿAbdul-Illah. Instead a new plan was devised, this time with the help of the United States and Great Britain, who were both distressed by the rise of Soviet influence in Syria. Šhukri al-Quwalti was becoming too close to Egypt and the USSR, famously visiting Moscow in October 1956 to seek arms for Nasser during the Suez War. He could no longer be accepted as a friend of the West or of Iraq.

[101] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 266.

Iraq Conspires against Quwatli

A secret meeting was held at the Royal Palace in Baghdad, chaired by the Regent. ʿAbdullah Bakr, President of the Royal Diwan, sat at the table next to King Faysal II, facing Foreign Minister Burhan al-Din Bašhayan, Chief-of-Staff Rafiq ʿArif, and his deputy, Ghazi al-Daghistani. The boy king chaired the meeting symbolically, having fully assumed his duties on 1 May 1953. He nevertheless had little say in state policy, especially in regard to operations of Iraqi intelligence, simply signing the decrees that were presented to him by his uncle, ʿAbdul-Illah.

A short-list of Syrian officers was put on the table, all willing to resort to force in order to restore the Hashemite crown to Damascus. Topping the list was ex-President Adib al- Šhišhakli, the same man who had aborted the Syrian-Iraqi union of 1949. At only forty-seven, Šhišhakli was still young, and desperate for a political comeback, having been forced to flee Syria in 1954. Syrian officers loved him, remembering only too well his leadership skills during the Palestine War of 1948. Additionally, he despised Šhukri al-Quwatli and his generation of Damascus notables, accusing them of poor statesmanship in Palestine. In 1949 he had played an instrumental role in bringing both Ḥusni al-Za'im and Sami al-Ḥinnawi to power. He had also helped bring down both men, running Syria through his loyal stooge, Fawzi Selu. For all practical purposes, he could topple Quwatli again in 1956.

An Iraqi delegation headed to Switzerland to meet ex-President Šhišhakli, who welcomed the idea and expressed an interest in carrying out a coup. Šhišhakli promised to sever Syria's relations with both Egypt and the USSR, and to then establish a government that was loyal to Iraq, without specifying whether it would be a republican or a monarchial one. The ex-president asked for 30,000 Iraqi dinars as a first instalment, to be paid in Beirut.[102] The Iraqis then decided to look for other ambitious officers who could potentially support Šhišhakli, like Muḥammad Safa, the Baghdad-based Syrian general. Safa had served as Šhišhakli's military attaché to Washington before the two men fell out and he fled to Iraq, working to topple the Šhišhakli regime. He was projected as a potential ally, to assist in bringing down Šhukri al-Quwatli. Another heavyweight was the Alawite officer Ghassan Jadid, who was now based in Beirut, accused of the 1954 murder of Syria's Assistant Chief-of-Staff 'Adnan al-Malki.

Within Syria their main contact was Mikhael Ilyan, a Christian notable from Aleppo and personal friend of the Iraqi Regent. He had co-founded the National Bloc in the 1930s and served as an MP and foreign minister in the 1940s, during Quwatli's first presidency.

[102] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 270–271.

Now in his early sixties, Ilyan was rich, powerful, and well-connected both regionally and internationally. People respected his vast knowledge of international affairs and his deep pockets. Ilyan wanted to see a Hashemite king in Damascus; he was also worried by the rise of Nasserist influence in Syria, especially after nationalization of the Suez Canal. If union could not be achieved through democratic means, Ilyan reasoned, then a military coup was needed to make it happen.

On 1 July 1956 Ilyan met with Archibald Roosevelt of the CIA and Wilbur Crane Eveland, the former staff member of the National Security Council, now working with the CIA. The meeting was arranged by the Iraqi Regent and held at the Bristol Hotel in Beirut.[103] Roosevelt asked Ilyan: "What would be needed to give the Syrian conservatives enough control to purge the communists and leftist sympathizers?" Ilyan began writing out a long list of potential targets that needed to be removed from top positions in Syria. Eveland asked, "Could these things be done with US money and assets alone?" Ilyan nodded, "without question!"[104] He then asked for a staggering sum of £500,000.[105] Two days later Eveland traveled to Damascus, carrying the money in a large briefcase. The money was given to Ilyan at the lobby of the Umayyad Hotel, a stone's throw from the Syrian Parliament.[106]

Šhišhakli arrived in Beirut as planned in 1956. The Iraqis provided him with bodyguards, a driver, and a number of different residences, to avoid being tracked by Lebanese intelligence. He summoned his former protégés from Syria, trying to test their pulse on the prospects of a coup. The coup leaders decided that Iraq would provide the Syrian rebels with technical and military training at Dhour Šhwayr village in Mount Lebanon. After six weeks of military training, they would cross the border into Syria, carrying out a series of assassinations targeting Akram Ḥawrani of the Ba'ath Party, Khaled Bakdash of the Communist Party, and ʿAbdul Ḥamid al-Sarraj, the young director of the hated Deuxième Bureau, who was a staunch Nasserist highly opposed to Hashemite ambitions in Syria. Once through with these eliminations, the coup leaders would present Quwatli with an ultimatum: either he would distance himself from Nasser and Moscow and work properly with Iraq, or he would step out of the way. Members of the People's Party

[103] Mohamed H. Haikal, *Cutting the Lion's Tale: Suez through Egyptian Eyes* (New York: Arbor House, 1987), 109.
[104] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 270.
[105] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 270.
[106] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 270.

would immediately begin talks with Iraq, aimed at creating an immediate union and restoring the Hashemite crown.[107]

After shaking on the deal, General Daghistani handed Šhišhakli a bank cheque for 10,000 Iraqi dinars. Šhišhakli took the money and then, to the absolute shock of the Iraqis, disappeared completely, heading for Brazil. The reasons for Šhišhakli's walkout remain unclear. Some claim that he did not trust the Iraqis, never forgiving them for bankrolling the coup that ejected him from power back in 1954. Others believe that the Syrian officers with whom Šhišhakli conferred in Beirut returned to Damascus and reported on their meeting to ʿAbdul Ḥamid al-Sarraj at Military Intelligence. Šhišhakli might have walked out on the plot, fearing retaliation against family members in Hama. A third argument postulates that far from being a gambler, Šhišhakli was a wise officer who would not carry out a military operation unless certain that the outcome would be in his favor. He therefore decided to back out, realizing that the time was simply not ripe for a coup in Syria.

An Anglo-American-Iraqi Intelligence Committee was then established. It decided to carry on with the coup, regardless of Šhišhakli, relying this time on other Syrian figures willing to engage in covert activity on the behalf of Iraq.[108] The list of new conspirators was long and impressive. In addition to Mikhail Ilyan, it included ʻAdnan al-Atasi, a ranking member of the People's Party who was the son of former President Hašhem al-Atasi. Another heavyweight, Munir al-ʿAjlani, was brought on board, himself having been accused of trying to stage a coup in favor of King ʿAbdullah, back in 1950. Other Syrians to join the Iraqi conspiracy were Sami Kabbara, editor of the anti-Quwatli daily *al-Nidal*, the Damascus MP Adel al-ʿAjlani, and Emir Hasan al-Atrašh, a veteran Druze leader. Because of their reputations and careers all of them were beyond suspicion in Syria, and could do the job without triggering the attention of Syrian intelligence. The rebels received 2,000 weapons and 100,000 dinars for the job, distributed down to the smallest detail, under the watchful eye of the Iraqi attaché, ʿAbdul Mutalib Amin.[109]

The coup was scheduled for 28 October 1956 but postponed at the last minute because of the near-outbreak of the Suez War. The conspirators did not want to be labeled as Israeli accomplices.[110] Ilyan came knocking on the door of the Regent, shouting: "Last night, the Israelis invaded Egypt and are right now heading for the Suez Canal. How could you have

[107] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 271.
[108] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 273.
[109] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 273.
[110] ʿAjlani (20 August 1999).

asked us to overthrow our government at the exact same moment when Israel started a war with an Arab state?"[111] The unexpected delay gave Syrian Military Intelligence ample time to investigate unconfirmed reports that arms were streaming through the border into Syria. When stockpiles of weapons were indeed uncovered in the Druze Mountain ʿAbdul Ḥamid al-Sarraj sent his men on a witch hunt, arresting any person with the slightest connection to Iraq. Instructions were sent to the Speaker of Parliament ordering that the immunity of deputies like Munir al-ʿAjlani and ʻAdnan al-Atasi be lifted immediately to facilitate their arrest. Atasi was clamped in chains, in complete disregard to his aging father, by now peacefully retired at his native Homs. Quwatli was shocked. He could not believe that his friends, men he had worked with for years, were conspiring to bring him down and have him replaced with a Hashemite king.

On 22 December 1956 the Bill of Indictment was released, revealing the names of forty-seven Syrians involved in what came to be known as the Iraqi Affair. They were accused of high treason, and of threatening the core values and foundations of the Syrian Republic. On 8 January 1957 the trial began in the main auditorium of Damascus University. It lasted for five weeks, with its proceedings broadcast live on air via Damascus Radio. The court was headed by General ʿAfif al-Bizreh, a decorated officer who was believed to have a strong communist background and who hated the Hashemite royals. Nineteen of the accused fled the country and those who stayed behind were jailed at the Mezzeh Prison, where, according to Munir al-ʿAjlani, they were tortured "and treated like animals."[112]

The long-awaited verdicts were finally released on 8 March 1957, sending shockwaves throughout Syria and the Arab world. High profile nationalists such as ʻAdnan al-Atasi, Munir al-ʿAjlani, and Adib al-Šhišhakli were sentenced to death. They were accused of conspiracy, espionage, and threatening foundations of the Syrian republic. Others received sentences of up to twenty-two years in prison. A troubled and embarrassed Iraqi government asked the US to interfere and convert the death sentences to life imprisonment, appealing to President Quwatli for clemency.[113] He tried to save his former friends, asking the court to commute the verdicts to life imprisonment, but the Nasserists refused to bend.[114]

[111] Author interview with ʿAbdul Wahab Ḥomad of the People's Party (Damascus, 6 February 2002).

[112] ʿAjlani (20 August 1999).

[113] ʿAzm, *Muthakkarat*, 2:495.

[114] ʿAzm, *Muthakkarat*, 2:495.

The arrested politicians remained in jail even after Syria and Egypt merged to form the United Arab Republic (UAR), five months before the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown by a group of army officers on 14 July 1958, led by ʿAbdul-Karim Qassem. The twenty-three-year-old King Faysal II was gunned down with his mother and all members of the royal family. ʿAbdul-Illah was shot then torn apart limb from limb, carried through the famous al-Rašhid Street before his corpse was set ablaze.[115] Nuri al-Said escaped in women's clothing but was apprehended the next day. Rebels mutilated his body then dragged it through the streets of Baghdad, before ordering municipality buses drive over it repeatedly until it was no longer recognizable. This was the end of Iraq as we knew it, and of all Hashemite ambitions in Syria.

In 1960 the royal family's Syrian allies were released from jail and placed under house arrest in Alexandria, eventually being brought back to Syria after downfall of the UAR in September 1961. By then, however, their reputations had been ruined, as had their lives and political careers. Any hope of restoring the Hashemite crown was now over, with the death of all its prime contenders. Adib al-Šhišhakli remained in Latin America until he was shot at his farm in Ceres, Brazil, in September 1964. ʻAdnan al-Atasi died in exile in Beirut five years later.[116] Munir al-ʿAjlani died at his Riyadh exile in 2004, aged ninety. Ghassan Jadid, a leading member of Iraqi conspiracy, was gunned down by an agent of Syrian intelligence on a busy street in Ras Beirut on 19 February 1957.

Those involved in the Iraqi conspiracy spent what remained of their lives defending themselves against charges of treason, claiming that no Iraqis had contracted them to bring down the regime in Damascus or to replace its president with a Hashemite king. The author was able to extract a confession out of Munir al-ʿAjlani forty years after Iraqi Conspiracy. When pressed about the topic in 1996, the aging ʿAjlani replied:

> We were young. Perhaps we overdid it. Yes, we were planning to launch a coup to change things in Syria. Looking back now, however, I tell you that we were wrong, because the so-called Iraqi conspiracy gave the leftists a pretext to strike at us, the moderates in Syria, with tremendous force. We were never able to rise after 1956.
> We were not trying to bring the Iraqis to Syria. We were only trying to prevent the Russians from coming to Syria. I am sure you realize the major difference between the two. Were the Americans involved with the Iraqi affair in 1956? To tell you the

[115] TIME (LXII, # 4, 28 July 1958).
[116] Author interview with Radwan al-Atasi, grandson of President Hašhem al-Atasi (Damascus, 25 January 2008).

> truth, I don't remember meeting any American official during the planning for the entire event. Some of my comrades, however, may have met with the Americans. We are not traitors. On the contrary, we were trying to achieve what was best for Syria. We thought this was the best way to prevent the country from becoming a Russian satellite.

Nazem al-Qudsi of the People's Party, who later became president in 1961-1963, had similar views. Speaking to British journalist Patrick Seale in the early 1960s, he said: "We stood for Arab unity, but we were not pro-Hashemite. We did not want an Iraqi king but were given the damning label of being pro-Hashemite."[117] Whether that was true or not is questionable, given that he was speaking at the apex of anti-Hashemite feeling throughout the Arab world. By the 1960s the entire saga had become history, and so had all its prime actors.

Today this monarchical history is made all the more important by the present war in Syria. For ten years Syrians have been fighting, by word and by sword, over the future of their country. All forms of government have been put on the table and debated to death, from parliamentary democracy to Islamic theocracy, and yet nobody has ever raised the issue of "monarchy." Perhaps this is due to lengthy and extensive criticism of the Faysal era, which historians from different sides of the academic spectrum have written off as a total failure.[118] In dramatically simple terms many accused him of being too defeatist for accepting an alternate throne in Baghdad, arguing that he ought to have fought and died for his crown in Syria. It must be mentioned that this criticism of Faysal began the moment he crossed the Syrian-Palestinian border in August 1920.

During the 1960s a paragraph was carefully introduced into Syrian history textbooks, effectively stating that republics were "good" and monarchies were "bad" and ought to be avoided. Defeat or conspiracy were always associated with monarchial regimes throughout modern history: Great Britain and the Balfour Declaration, King ʿAbdullah and Greater Syria, King Farouk and the Palestine War, the Peacock Throne and its ties to Israel, and so on. Syria at the time was under the commanding spell of Ğamal ʿAbdul Nasser, who took great pride at having toppled the monarchy in Egypt and replaced it with a republic. At an international level they were allied to the USSR, whose aging oligarchs still spoke fondly

[117] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 80.
[118] Among the works to conclude that the Faysal era in Syria failed at achieving its desired objectives are: Malcolm Russel, *The First Modern Arab State*; ʿAli Sultan, *Tareekh Souriya: Ḥukum Faysal Ibn al- Ḥusayn*; and As'ad Dagher, *Mudhakarati ʿAla Hamesh al-Qadiya al-Arabiyya*.

of how they had helped Lenin topple and kill Tzar Nicolas II. This explains why monarchy has dropped out of the collective psyche of the Syrian nation, after being belittled in educational texts and frowned upon politically, even though Syrians could see prosperous and stable Arab states run by long-established royal families, starting with neighboring Jordan and onto Saudi Arabia. This article hopes to provide a clear overview of the history of monarchy in early twentieth-century Syria in order to re-evaluate the situation of Faysal I, to contextualize later political events in Syria, and to rebalance the appraisal of monarchy itself as a viable political framework in the current era.