

## Prussianization of the Arab Army, the Arab Revolt of 1916-1918, and the Cult of Nationalization of Arabs in the Levant after World War I:

# History of the Syrian Arab Army

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER YOUSSEF ABOUL-ENEIN, USN

At the request of the late President Hafiz Al-Asad in 1986, the first of three volumes on the history of the Syrian Army was published in 2000 titled *History of the Syrian Arab Army/Al-Tareekh Al-Jaish Al-Arabi Al-Soori* and edited by General Mustafa Tlas. *Volume 1: 1901-1948* was produced by the Center for Military Studies in Damascus, Syria. The first volume is 568 pages and covers the Arab Revolt, short-lived monarchy under King Feisal bin Hussein, the French Mandate, the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and finally Syrian independence in 1949. Volume 2 will detail the army's history from 1949 to 1970, and include chapters on the 1958 union with Egypt and the 1970 coup that brought Hafez al-Asad to power. The contents of the second volume are expected to be politically charged as Baathist, Nasserist, and Socialist officers vied for control of Syria in 1960s. The third volume covers the period from 1973 to 2000, and will include the Syrian army's role in the 1973 Yom-Kippur War and its intervention in Lebanon. No mention is made of Syria's role in Operation Desert Storm. Thus far only the first volume had been available in the United States, and it is not clear whether the two other volumes have been published.

This essay focuses primarily on the prussianization and nationalization of Arab officers during the late Ottoman period, the Arab Revolt (1916-1918), the five-month period in which Syria was under Arab rule in 1920, and finally the Battle of Maysalun that enforced the French mandate on Syria in 1920 and is considered by Syrian military decision-makers as their Alamo. This is a major work of modern Arab military history. Little is known about the Syrian armed forces, and this volume demonstrates aspects of its history that are important to the Syrian military leadership. This review translates and analyzes excerpts of the first volume and represents the view of history from the Syrian military perspective. To get a fuller view of the Arab Revolt, readers should explore British, French, and Arabic accounts. Perhaps one of the best articles in English detailing the Arab Revolt was written by Major Maxwell Orme Johnson entitled, "The Arab Bureau and the Arab Revolt: Yanbu to Aqaba," which was

published in the December 1982 edition of *Military Affairs* (Volume 26, Issue 4, pp 194-201).

### The Ottoman Period (1901-1918)

Upon the accession of Sultan Abdul-Hamid II in 1876, the Sultan at first accepted the constitution promulgated by Midhat Pasha that same year. (Pasha is an honorific title from the Ottoman period; it was a title earned for meritorious service and later became a purchased title.) Although this constitution was later suspended by the Sultan, who then had Midhat Pasha executed, it is significant because it allowed Arab subjects to enter Turkish military academies and schools. This produced an entire generation of Arab officers who would play key roles in the Arab Revolt and the independence movements of Syria and Iraq. These Arab officers were trained by German military instructors and came to realize they could take advantage of a weakened Ottoman Empire to press for Arab nationalist causes. Among the officers named in the book:

- Sami Pasha Al-Farooki: Commanded irregular Arab forces at Jebel Arab in the Levant.
- Jameel Al-Midfaee: Studied military engineering in World War I and fought against Allenby's forces in Palestine, before switching sides and joining the Arab Revolt and organizing Prince Feisal's artillery regiments.
- Aziz Al-Masry: Organized the first cells of Arab officers within the Ottoman Army, became commander in chief of Prince Feisal's army, and was an important Arab nationalist figure.
- Zaki Al-Halaby: Rose from cadet to Bikbaasi (Lieutenant Colonel), became Ottoman military governor in Yemen and in 1914 commander of Arab-Ottoman forces in Syria.
- Yasin Al-Hashimi: Rose to become chief of staff of the 12th Ottoman Division along the Qifqaas Front.
- Ali Rida Pasha Al-Rikabi: Commanded an Ottoman brigade in World War I and received the surrender of the city of Damascus from its last Ottoman governor Mohammed Djemal Pasha Al-Saagheer in 1918.
- Ghalib Al-Shaalan: Attained the rank of general and

commanded the Bir Darweesh Defenses near Medina. Became chief of staff to the 48th Ottoman Brigade in World War I.

The book highlights that Arab officers served not only in the Middle East theater but in the Balkan Wars (1912-1914) and throughout the eastern front against Russia in World War I (1914-1918).

### Secret Arab Societies Within the Ottoman Ranks

As U.S. forces are involved in the reconstruction of the Iraqi Army, it is vital that we draw lessons from the past. What made so many Ottoman officers of Arab origin join the Arab Revolt, led by Sherief Hussein, was their aspirations for Arab independence from Turkey and their organization of cells within the Ottoman ranks. The book reveals two major groups under which many Arab officers and noncommissioned officers joined; they were:

**Jamiat Al-Arabiyah Al-Fatat** (The Arab Youth Group) — Formed by Iraqis and Syrians studying in Paris in 1909, this group aspired to Arab statehood in Mesopotamia and the Levant. When World War I broke out, they moved to Beirut and then Damascus, where they began recruiting like-minded Arab officers within the Ottoman Army. The group's military leader was Ali Rida Al-Rikaabi.

**Jamiah Al-Qahtaniyah** (The Qahtan Group) — This was formed in 1910 by Minister of Religious Affairs (Awqaf) Khaleel Pasha Hamadah in Constantinople. The organization included a civil-leader, Abdul-Hamid Zabarawi, and military leader, Aziz Al-Masry. This group organized cells among Arab civil and military leaders in Beirut, Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. The Qahtaniyah Group swore to destroy those who kill Arabs and organized fedayeen tactical cells. In 1914, the Ottomans rounded up 315 officers belonging to this group and implicated Aziz Al-Masry in an embezzlement scandal that drove him toward the Arab Revolt. In 1915, Djemal Pasha, the Syrian Ottoman governor, publicly executed 32 Arab officers in Beirut and three in Damascus belonging to this group.

### The Arab Revolt (1916-1918)

The Arab Revolt began at dawn June 10,

**(Arab-Ottoman officers)  
were driven by a dream of  
having a unified Arab  
nation encompassing what  
they called Al-Sham, which  
was made up of Hejaz,  
Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq.**

1916, when Sherief Hussein, a descendant of the prophet who was stripped of his title (Sherief [Religious Head] of Mecca) by the Ottomans, led 5,000 tribesmen against the Ottoman garrison in Mecca. All Turkish outposts along the Hejaz (Arabian Red Sea Coast) fell except for Medina, which remained under Ottoman control until after World War I.

The book delves into the role of the Arab-Ottoman officers fighting in the Arab Revolt. They were driven by a dream of having a unified Arab nation encompassing what they called Al-Sham, which was made up of Hejaz, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Officers like Nuri-al-Said brought with them the techniques of modern armies learned in Ottoman academies and German tutors. They were akin to Von Steuben teaching Revolutionary American colonials, but in this case they were trying to instill discipline into the Bedouin tribesmen. Al-Said served as chief of staff to Sherief Hussein Bin Ali, who succeeded in taking Mecca from the Ottomans with 5,000 Bedouin irregulars and now had to contend with Medina (The Prophet Muhammad's City), 25,000 Ottoman troops, and the Turkish military governor General Fakhri Pasha.

Nuri Al-Said first set about creating military training camps in Mecca under the direction of Aziz Al-Masry. Using a mix of Bedouin volunteers, Arab officers and Arab Ottoman deserters who wanted to join the Arab Revolt, Al-Masry created three infantry brigades, a mounted brigade, engineering unit, and three different artillery groups made up of a patchwork of varying cannon and heavy caliber machine guns. Out of his total force of 6,000, Al-Masry proposed that they be divided into three armies:

**The Eastern Army** under the command of Prince Abdullah bin Hussein would be in

charge of surrounding Medina from the east.

**The Southern Army**, commanded by Prince Ali bin Hussein, would ensure a cordon was formed around Medina from the south.

**The Northern Army**, commanded by Prince Feisal bin Hussein, would form a cordon around Medina from the north.

These armies had a mixture of British and French officers attached to them who provided technical military advice. One of these officers was T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia). Lawrence remains an enigma, but by his own admission in a never-published version of the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, he wrote, "it was an Arab war waged and led by Arabs for an Arab aim in Arabia." This adds credence to the Syrian version of the Arab Revolt that credits Aziz Al-Masry and other Arab officers from the Ottoman army with organizing the troops of Sherief Hussein and his sons.

### The Campaigns of the Northern Army

Aziz Al-Masry had a falling out with Prince Feisal and was replaced by Nuri Al-Said, who became the chief of staff. As Nuri served Prince Feisal's father in Mecca, his placement represents the importance of the Northern Army. In this sector of the Arab Revolt, the Syrian Army historians explain that the bulk of Arab deserters from the Ottoman army joined Prince Feisal and his northern command. After the failure of taking on Medina and its 25,000 Ottoman troops head on, Prince Feisal and Nuri Al-Said decided on a new strategy. They would fight the Ottomans for lines of communication at Wejeh, Al-Ulaa, Yanbu, and Tabuk. These were instrumental lines of communication to Turkish forces garrisoned in Medina.

To secure the port city of Wejeh, Prince Feisal began cultivating alliances with the northern tribes in the Sham Valley and Jebel (*Mount*) Arab. This not only provided him with volunteers but also secured his northern flank from attack by marauding tribesmen who were being paid by the Ottomans to stay loyal. Feisal had identified three areas of Ottoman troop concentrations in Northern Arabia and what is now Jordan:

(1) Area of Al-Ulaa under the command of General Basry Pasha.

(2) Area of Tabuk under Qaimuqam (Colonel) Atif Bey.

(3) Area around Ma'an under the command of General Mohammed Djemal Pasha Al-Sagheer. He was charged with guarding the rail lines from Ma'an to Der'aa.

The Northern Arab Army had occupied Yanbu first and from there marshaled forces for an attack on the port city of Wejh, 180 miles north of Yanbu. Finding only 200 Ottoman troops in Wejh, they took the city in mid-January 1917 with little difficulty. This led Ottoman military planners to bolster forces in Tabuk to 500 troops, and Ma'an would be increased to four brigades, due to its importance as a central rail connection along the Medina to Damascus line. Prince Feisal shifted his headquarters from Tabuk to Wejh, leaving his son Zaid to defend Tabuk. At Wejh, Feisal began laying plans to capture the port city of Aqaba and began leveraging his success in Wejh and Tabuk to convince tribal leaders located north of Aqaba in Jebel Al-Arab and Sham Valley to support his campaign on Aqaba.

In April 1917, Anglo-Egyptian forces repulsed a major Turkish offensive against the Sinai and the Suez Canal. The Ottomans attempted to use the spring weather to move forces from Medina to reinforce the Ottoman 4th Army in Palestine. It became tactically clear to the British that under no circumstances could Ottoman garrisons in Arabia be allowed to augment the Ottoman 4th Army, particularly as the British 7th Army planned to campaign and capture Jerusalem proceeding north to Haifa and on to Damascus. It was during this time the British Arab Bureau under Colonel Calyton asked Major T. E. Lawrence to convince Prince Feisal to conduct hit and run sabotage strikes against rail lines to isolate the Ottoman troops in Medina. Lawrence trained members of the Northern Arab Army on demolition and sabotage. Among those trained were two Syrian clans — the Al-Uzm and Al-Asalee, who participated in destroying rail links between Tabuk in the south to Madain Saaleh in the north.

A political benefit to Sherief Hussein's revolt and siding with the allies is that it neutralized the Ottoman Sultan's call for a jihad, since Sherief Hussein was a legitimate descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Through Hussein, it was hoped that regional war could be turned into a war against the Turks for Arab nationalism.

### **Efforts at Wadi Sarhan**

Western accounts of the attack on Aqaba leads one to believe that T. E. Lawrence took 50 of Prince Feisal's men, attracted Bedouin tribes along the way, and then attacked Aqaba. Syrian military accounts reveal a painstaking process of cultivating alliances before attacking Aqaba. This included spending weeks in Wadi Sarhan assuring the support of the Howeitat tribe, led by Auda Abu Tayi. The Howeitat consisted of many subclans and it was up to Sheikh Nasir of Medina, Auda Abu Tayi of the Howeitat, Lawrence, Naseeb Al-Bakry, Zaki Al-Durubi and Subhi Al-Amree (last four representing Prince Feisal) to ensure that all clans of the Howeitat contributed men to the campaign against Aqaba. Aside from the Howeitat they had to secure the support of Nuri Ashaalan of the Anayzah Tribal Confederacy. In about three weeks the group was able to muster a force of 500 Bedouin tribesmen willing to march on Aqaba under the banner of Prince Feisal bin

Hussein. This was achieved through a mixture of bribes and promises of a share of the plunder.

### **The Attack on Aqaba**

One cannot understand the context and significance of the capture of Aqaba by forces loyal to Prince Feisal without following the British 7th Army. In July 1917, British forces had crossed the Sinai and were pushing back Ottoman forces from Gaza. Taking Aqaba would secure their right flank since the city contained 1,500 Ottoman troops who were waiting for combined British-Arab assault from the sea. The Turks did not tactically consider the Arab whirlwind from the desert that would envelope Aqaba and force the Turks to redirect their guns landward. The success at Aqaba led to a reorganization of the Arab Northern Army into two sections, with each section having two infantry brigades for a total of four infantry brigades: The Hashemite, 1st Aqaba, 4th Aqaba, Al-Kuweira, as well as an artillery unit and transportation company. Each infantry battalion would have a machine gun company. An operations command headquarters was also established. Both Nuri Al-Said and Jafaar Al-Askary, with help from British and French advisors, would transform the Northern Army into a more organized military unit.

### **The Battle of Wadi Musa**

The Ottoman governor of the Levant General Djemal (Pasha) issued a military edict ordering the Hejaz railway be secured by any and all means. It was left to the Ottoman garrison in Ma'an to send forces to deal with the Arab Northern Army that were encamped at Wadi Musa. The book does not detail the size of the Ottoman force, except to say that it was a massive infantry formation supported by three biplanes. Before the Ottoman unit reached Wadi Musa, they were intercepted by 700 Arab troops under the command of Maulood Mukhlis. Four hundred Ottomans were killed and 300 were captured on 23 October 1917. Mukhlis used the escarpments and hills to wedge the Ottomans in valleys, slowly wearing down the force, and avoiding the Turkish biplanes.

### **The Battle of Al-Samna**

The Northern Army had advanced towards the rocky hills of Al-Samna, overlooking the town and rail center of Ma'an, one of three major Ottoman troop concentrations. A battalion from the Arab North Army attempted to take the train station of the village of Al-Samna but was repulsed by the reinforced Ottoman forces under Colonel Mohammed Djemal Al-Sagheer. The Northern Army battalion lost 250 killed and 200 wounded, leading to the withdrawal of the Arabs from taking the commanding positions of Al-Samna. This battle, which took place on 25-26 April 1918, represents the first major defeat of the Arab North Army in 21 months of campaigning.

### **The Advance on Al-Azraq**

The defeat at Al-Samna and the inability to threaten Ma'an led the Northern Arab Army to reevaluate its tactics. It focused on sabotaging rail lines and harassing distant station stops between Ma'an and Der'aa. As more Syrians defected into the ranks of the Arab Northern Army, they demanded Prince Feisal bypass the

garrison at Ma'an, cutting off all communication lines (telegraph and rail) as was done to the Ottoman garrison in Medina, and advance towards Damascus via the town of Der'aa. Feisal knew he needed to consult General Allenby before taking on Damascus, who was advancing towards Damascus through Palestine. Prince Feisal, unable to consult the British commander, resorted to authorizing irregular forces made of the Bani Sakhr and Bani Aqeel tribes and supported by Syrian and Arab officers to take the outpost of Al-Azraq, a key strategic location. Al-Azraq is a mandatory stop for all traffic going from the Red Sea coastal towns and villages through Jordan and onto Damascus. Using irregular forces of tribesmen gave Feisal plausible deniability with General Allenby and satisfied the Syrian officers who wanted to advance north. Allenby was successful against the Ottomans in Nablus and authorized Feisal to advance on Al-Azraq and Der'aa in August 1918.

### The Taking of Der'aa

Prince Feisal used 1,400 troops, his 65mm French cannon, a French engineering company made up of 140 Moroccans, Algerians, and Tunisians, 32 Egyptian motorized drivers, and 30 Indian Auxillary troops commanded by T. E. Lawrence to capture Al-Azraq and move towards Der'aa. This force was commanded by Nuri Al-Said with the remainder of the Arab North Army remaining in Abi Al-Lissen under the command of Prince Feisal in reserve. Upon reaching Al-Azraq in September 1918, more Syrians joined the Arab North Army, and Allenby's 7th Army was engaged in the area of Al-Salt. Allenby sent word to Feisal that he needed the Arab North Army to harass the Ottoman 4th Army from the southwest as he pressed the Ottomans from the southeast. The Arab North Army and British 7th Army would then meet at Der'aa. The British troops were bogged down in Haifa, according to Syrian accounts, and the Arab North Army succeeded in capturing both Al-Azraq and Der'aa.

The book's only tactical discussion involves the preinvasion of Der'aa which included mounted reconnaissance, and the destruction of rail and telegraph lines linking Der'aa to Damascus, Haifa, and Ma'an. The Arab North Army marshalled its forces at Shiekh Miskeen on June 26, 1918, before being given the go-ahead by the British to assault Der'aa on June 28. The army then captured the town and garrison on June 29. Ottoman forces were too drained to face the Arab Northern Army and focused on retreat and the British 7th Army.

### Damascus: The Final Prize and Ottoman Surrender

One major criticism of this book is that it does not go deep into the tactics by which the Arab Northern Army captured major towns and their final push towards Damascus. The section on the capture of Damascus begins by stating that on October 1, 1918, elements of the Arab Northern Army entered Damascus on Al-Qadam Road and via Allah's Gate (Buwaba Allah). They were followed hours later by Australian mounted cavalry that traveled through Beirut Road and entered via Jacob's Daughter Road (Banat Yacoob). The



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faisal\\_I\\_of\\_Iraq](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faisal_I_of_Iraq)

*This photo was taken during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. At center is Prince Feisal. Behind him to the right is T.E. Lawrence.*

Arab army stayed only 10 days before resuming their campaign to secure the major Syrian towns of Homs and Hama. The final battle with the Ottoman 4th Army occurred in the outskirts of Aleppo in what the Syrians would call the Battle of Khan Al-Sabeel. The combined British and Arab forces pushed the Ottomans to Al-Musalimiyah Station in Northern Aleppo. Here, Mustafa Kemal Pasha (who later became the infamous Attaturk), along with remnants of the 4th, 6th, 7th and 8th Ottoman Armies, made a last defense at Aleppo. This allowed the Arab elements of his Army to be repatriated to their respective homelands and many joined the Arab Northern Army. The majority of Ottoman Turkish units departed for Anatolia on October 26, 1918, according to the book. However, history shows that Mustafa Kemal held out in Aleppo until Armistice Day, November 11, 1918. The British put a stop to Arab plans to pursue the Turks fleeing towards Anatolia. This ended 600 years of Ottoman dominion of the Middle East. The modern Middle East's problems had only begun.

### The Armistice in the Middle East

The world's attention focused on the Paris Peace Conference and the capitulation of Germany, but no attention was paid to nationalist aspirations of the likes of Ho Chi Minh and Prince Feisal who sought self-determination for their people. It is ironic that President Woodrow Wilson coined the term self-determination, which was so beloved by revolutionaries during the Paris Peace Treaty. The book offers valuable lessons into how the Ottoman territories of the Levant were partitioned by France and Britain as well as how these Great Powers saw the Arab Revolt after their victory against German, Austria-Hungarian and the Ottoman Empires.

On November 23, 1918, a military edict was issued dividing Ottoman territories into occupied enemy territories (OET). The Middle East would be divided into three OETs:

\* **OET-South:** This territory extended from the Egyptian border of Sinai into Palestine and Lebanon as far north as Acka and Nablus and as far east as the River Jordan. A temporary British military governor would administer this sector.

\* **OET-West:** This territory included Lebanon north into Beirut, Mount Lebanon, the present-day Syrian coastline including the port cities of Tripoli and Latakia, and as far north as Alexandretta. A temporary French military governor would administer this sector.

\* **OET-East:** This territory included the internal hinterlands of Syria, and encompassed the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs. This sector would be administered for Prince Feisal by General Ali Rida Al-Rikabi.

Arabs would control OET-East from November 23, 1918, until July 24, 1920. Prince Feisal would be King Of Syria only five months, March 8 to July 24, 1920, before being forced out by the French after the Battle of Maysalun. Prince Feisal attended the Paris Peace Conference, but it became clear when he was not received as a representative of a head of state or even the son of a head of state that his status was that of military commander and that his pleas for Arab self-rule would fall on deaf ears. Feisal gave a speech asking for Arab self-determination on February 6, 1919, but by April 25, 1920, at a conference of allied powers in San Remo, the French would be awarded OET-East and administer Syria as a mandatory power.

### Military Manpower of the New Syrian Kingdom

Away from the negotiations of Mudros, Paris, and San Remo that formally ended World War I, General Al-Rikabi set about creating a modern army in OET-East. He inherited an initial 9,000 troops and 700 officers. His staff identified officers with formal military training in German and Ottoman academies. They began assigning ranks from second lieutenant to field marshal and designated 600 enlisted personnel as NCOs.

The shortage of troops became apparent in keeping order in Syria's major cities, for both a volunteer system and mandatory conscription was instituted. The book discusses how 17 recruitment offices throughout Syrian territory were established and helped add 8,000 troops to the ranks by 1920. The early Syrian Army only conducted two live-fire exercises in the 21 months the Arabs administered OET-East. One of those exercises involved a pass and review of troops conducted before King Feisal on April 25, 1920. Feisal gave a speech about the new battle colors of the Royal Syrian Army in which he hoped the colors never become stained by the smoke of battle and blood of men, as long as the honor of this new nation is not threatened. Through the seeds of the new army, Feisal hoped to create a nation, and only two classes of recruits graduated in 1919 and 1920. Military logistics of the new Arab kingdom consisted of 868 employees, of which 338 were women and had only 94 motorized vehicles and 114 beasts of burden.

### Equipping the New Syrian Military

Arming Feisal's new army would be a constant challenge. After the Arab Revolt, they possessed only 15,600 rifles and pistols of varying calibers and models. During the 21 months of Arab rule, they secured an additional 3,000 rifles and pistols. Feisal petitioned General Allenby in Jerusalem for rifles but was ignored for fear of antagonizing the French. The Arab Army possessed only 200 machine guns with 10,000 rounds, 54 cannons with 50 shells

each of varying calibers.

**Diwan Al-Shura Al-Harby**  
 War Committee and General Staff  
 Intelligence — Recruitment —  
 Administration  
 Operations — Armaments —  
 Logistics

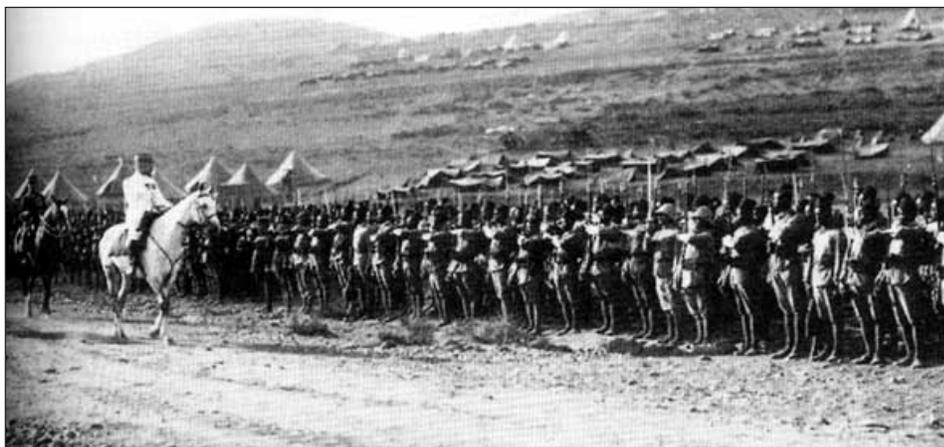
A rudimentary General Staff was created and evolved into a War Ministry in early 1920. This ministry created an engineering section that accomplished much to renovate the Arab sector of the Levant. This included fixing the Der'aa to Ma'an section of the Hejaz railway, establishing workshops to fix military and transportation vehicles, fixing telegraph poles that skirted along the rail lines, and developing defenses around major towns and cities. Major troop concentrations included:

- 1st Army Group in Damascus with 5,000 troops.
- 2nd Army Group in Der'aa with 3,000 troops.
- 3rd Army Group in Aleppo with 3,000 troops.

Each army group has three infantry brigades and three machine gun companies. The Damascus Army Group had an extra artillery company. In addition, the Damascus Army Group was also given its own cavalry regiment of 1,726 horses.

### THE BATTLE OF MAYSALUN

On July 14, 1920, France issued an ultimatum asserting its mandate over OEF-East and demanding the withdrawal of Arab forces from the territory. On July 21, the French sent a force of 9,000 troops from Beirut and OEF-West to occupy Damascus



*French General Henri Gouraud (on horseback) inspects French troops at Maysalun.*

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Maysalun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Maysalun)

and evict Arab forces and Feisal from Syria.

#### **French Order of Battle**

A unique feature of this battle is the use of planes and tanks to maneuver through the hilly and mountainous terrain between Beirut and the French objective of Damascus.

- 10th and 11th Senegalese Brigades
- 2nd and 415th Algerian
- Three batteries of artillery from the 5th African Auxillary
- Three batteries of artillery from the 3rd African Auxillary
- 6 ½ artillery batteries from the 354th Heavy Artillery Brigade (155mm guns)
- Mounted Moroccan Sipahi Company with mobile machine guns
- Tank Company from the 205th Tank Regiment
- Engineering Company
- Transportation Company
- Four aircraft wings made up of three attack (201st, 202nd and 203rd) and one reconnaissance wing

#### **The Arab Order of Battle**

The Arabs studied the topography and deduced that a single paved way existed for French tank and motorized forces to navigate the hilly escarpments, semi-desert and desert terrain leading to Damascus. The Arab order of battle is debatable as French and Arab accounts differ. A high estimate is 5,000 men. They are broken down as follows:

- Three infantry groups, each with three infantry battalions and a machine gun company.
- Artillery regiment composed of two artillery companies.
- Hashemite cavalry group.
- 500 volunteer (fedayeen-type) forces.

#### **Terrain and Deployment of Forces**

The Arabs divided their forces into army groups perching themselves in a defensive fortification approximately 1,200 meters in a semicircular formation. They positioned skirmishes and artillery in a narrow gap leading up to the 1,200-meter heights where the concentration of Arab forces were located. A singular road then forks past the Arab troop concentrations to the village of Khan Maysalun to the right and towards Damascus to the left. The French used

**In order to easily govern Syria, the French pitted minority groups against each other. It was the classic tactic of divide and conquer that made the development of Syria as a nation difficult ... There are lessons here in our efforts in Iraq. U.S. forces are on the right track by empowering all minorities and giving them a vested interest in rebuilding a nation torn by years of insane dictatorship.**

aerial reconnaissance to determine the locations of the Arabs and used a combined artillery and aerial barrage to subdue the skirmishers and fedayeen along the passes. The French found gaps around the passes that they exploited, and five French infantry formations came around the passes and worked on the center, left, and right Arab formations. A sixth infantry formation attacked the left Arab flank, exploiting a footpath from Al-Kineesah southeast of the Maysalun Heights. Further southeast the Moroccan cavalry group rode from Deir Al-Ashaeer northwest to envelope Khan Maysalun and harass the Arab force from the rear. The Arab plan would've stood a chance except for the introduction of the French tanks that rode through the Arab center and G-6 biplanes that provided valuable intelligence on enemy positions. It is important to realize that the Arabs did provide pockets of stubborn resistance, but the inability to match French firepower and comprehend the mobility of French forces from the air and ground caused a collapse of the center lines and retreat of the flanks. It was estimated that there were 1,200 Arabs dead and 400 wounded. Among the dead was the Syrian War Minister Youssef Al-Uzmah who died from artillery rounds in his command headquarters in Khan Maysalun. The French lost 42 dead and 152 wounded. French forces entered Damascus on July 26, 1920, enforcing a mandate on Syria that lasted until 1946.

#### **Conclusion**

Although a French victory, the Battle of Maysalun would become a rallying cry for Syrian nationalism and set the stage for resistance movements against the French in Syria. On July 24, 1925 and 1927 (Maysalun Day), there would be violent revolts in major Syrian cities. In order to easily govern Syria, the French pitted minority groups against each other. It was the classic tactic of divide and conquer that made the development of Syria as a nation difficult. The Alawites, Sunni, Druze and other groups looked after their own interests instead of those of the overall Syrian nation. There are lessons here in our efforts in Iraq. U.S. forces are on the right track by empowering all minorities and giving them a vested interest in rebuilding a nation torn by years of insane dictatorship.

The Arab officers of the 1916-1918 Arab Revolt played pivotal roles that remain undiscovered in western military journals. If properly motivated by the fervor of self-determination and a better quality of life, Arabs show a propensity to contribute to allied causes against tyranny, even if this tyranny comes from an Islamic source as demonstrated by their fight against the Ottomans. *History of the Syrian Arab Army Volume One* is an important work of military history in Arabic and ought to be studied carefully as a means of understanding the military perceptions of present-day Syrian military leaders.

---

**Lieutenant Commander Youssef Aboul-Enein**, USN, MSC, is a Middle East Country Director at the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He has been working for the past few years with military publications such as *Infantry Magazine* and *Military Review* to bring Arabic works of military interest to its pages. The translation of the Arabic material represents LCDR Aboul-Enein's understanding of the material and any errors are his own.

**Author's Note:** LCDR Aboul-Enein would like to thank Midshipman 2nd Class Samuel Boyd, a political science student at the U.S. Naval Academy, and Danielle Yaggi, a political science student at the College of William and Mary, for their assistance in researching aspects of the Arab Revolt and editing this work. This essay would not have been possible were it not for the Pentagon and University of Texas at Austin Librarians who made this work available.

---