

Kingship, Caliphate or Sultanate: Why Syria Chose Kingship in 1920?

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Introduction:

Kingship is the oldest institution of government in the Middle East. The title malik has similar variations in the Semitic languages. It was used in the Judeo-Christian traditions to refer to a ruler. Given its long history, kingship went through several phases of acceptance and rejection. It was associated with the Divine and the mundane and had been claimed by petty and strong secular rulers, and even by powerful women rulers.

The Arabs used the title malik as early as 328 A.D. in a funeral inscription at Namara that referred to the Arab poet Imru'al-Qays as King of the Arabs. Imru'al-Qays was the author of one of the seven *qasidas*/odes, the *mu'allaqat*, that were hanging in the Ka'ba in Mecca. His tribe Kinda established a short-lived kingdom. But kingship never took deep roots among the tribes in Arabia.

Islam reserved the title of king to God and condemned those who called themselves kings as tyrannical. Arab Muslims used the title of king to non-Muslim rulers, and when they used it to Arab Muslim rulers it was to ridicule them and to detract from their Islamism. Non-Arab Muslim rulers, and even a few Arab Muslim rulers, used the title of king to indicate their power and to assert their authority vis-à-vis weak caliphs¹.

Muslims later on used the title malik for powerful Muslim rulers, both Arab and non-Arab. The Syrian chroniclers and biographers during the Mamluk and the Ottoman periods, for example, used the title malik, either separately or in combination with the title sultan or shah, to refer to Muslim rulers. Thus, the Ottoman Sultan was referred to as malik al-Rum, Rum meaning Greek was the term the Muslim Arabs had earlier used for the Byzantines and now by extension for the Ottomans who replaced the Byzantines. Likewise, the Mamluk Sultan was referred to as al-sultan al-malik or al-malik al-sultan, and the Safavid Shah as malik shah². Those rulers did not use the title malik for themselves, but its application to them by the local authors demonstrates respect rather than a title of office. The term malik, however, lingered on until it assumed official status in the Arab countries in the early 20th

century.

The title of caliph, on the other hand, had an Islamic connotation since its inception. It was used at first to refer to the successor (khalifa) to the Prophet Muhammad who was also known as the Head of the Muslim community (amir al-mu'minin). The caliph acted in this capacity as the imam (leader in prayer) of the Muslims, and his role was to spread Islam and implement its regulations. Elected at first, during the rule of the Rashidun Caliphs (the rightly-guided ones), between 632 and 661 A.D., by the elders of the Muslim community, the caliph and indeed the institution of the caliphate soon became associated with ruling dynasties, such as the Umayyads, the Abbasids, the Fatimids and for a short period the Ottomans. The Arab caliphate officially came to an end with the overthrow of the Abbasid Caliphate by the Mongols in 1258. The Abbasid caliph then sought refuge in Mamluk Cairo where he lived devoid of any political power until the last member of the Abbasid dynasty, the fifty-fifth caliph al-Mutawwakil 'ala Allah Muhammad Ya'qub passed away on 12 Sha'ban 957/26 August 1550³.

During the Ottoman conquest of Cairo in 1517, the Abbasid caliph is reported to have sided with Sultan Selim I against the Mamluk Sultan Qayitbay⁴. A tradition from the eighteenth century states that "the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil officially transferred to Sultan Selim and to his heirs all rights to the caliphate, at a ceremony held in the Mosque of Aya Sofya in Istanbul." The tradition, according to Khalil Inalcik, is not supported by any contemporary record⁵. The question, however, arose in the reign of Sultan Sulayman the Magnificent (1520-1566) as to whether the Ottoman sultan, who is not descended from the Prophet's tribe of Quraysh, is qualified to carry the titles of imam and of caliph. Inalcik states that as possessor of *de facto* sovereignty in the Muslim world, the sultan could call himself caliph⁶. In fact, the Hanafi school of law which the Ottomans adopted as the official school of the state does not require that the caliph should be descended from Quraysh.

When the authority of the Ottomans declined in the eighteenth century, Inalcik mentions that the sultans turned to the theoretical conception of the caliphate that was developed under the Abbasids to boost their authority as happened in the treaty with the Safavids in 1727 and the treaty of Kuchuk Kaynarja with Russia in 1774⁷. Sultan Abdul-Hamid II (1876-1909) was the first Ottoman sultan to officially and actively declare himself caliph and call for Pan-Islamism to combat Muslim liberals and threaten the European states that ruled over Muslims.

The Islamic title that the Ottomans held since their conquest of Syria was

that of *Khadim* or *Hami al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn* (servitor or protector of the Two Holy Sanctuaries) which the orator (*khatib*) had bestowed on Sultan Selim I in the Friday prayer in Aleppo on⁸ Sha'ban 922/3 September 1516. This honorable title required the sultan to protect and facilitate the pilgrimage to the Hijaz. The title in fact figures in the pre-ambles to the Ottoman legal edicts (*qanun-names*) 8. Ironically, despite the importance of this title that the Ottoman sultans had held, no Ottoman sultan ever went on the pilgrimage⁹.

The Ottoman rulers adopted all along the title of sultan. The Arabic term sultan means authority, and was first given by the Abbasid caliphs to the de facto rulers of Baghdad, the Seljuks (ca. 1050-1150). Some caliphs later on assumed the title of sultan to emphasize their authority and power. The title sultan was occasionally combined with that of *malik* and was used by Sunni and Shi'i rulers alike¹⁰.

The titles of rulers in the early 20th century:

When the Young Turks and their vanguard organization the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) overthrew Sultan Abdul-Hamid II in 1909, the Ottoman dynasty continued in power and the Ottoman sultan continued to assume the title of caliph alongside that of sultan. Sultan Abdul-Hamid II had already consolidated his role as caliph and servitor of the Two Holy Sanctuaries by building the Hijaz railway between Damascus and Medina (1901-1909). The declared aim of the railway was to facilitate the pilgrimage to the Hijaz but it also facilitated the transportation of Turkish and German troops to the Hijaz during the First World War where they threatened British interests in the Red Sea. The British reacted by persuading Sharif Husayn, King of Hijaz, to rise in revolt against the Ottomans and destroy the Hijaz railway.. They promised him to give independence to Syria, Iraq and Arabia and to make him the ruler of those countries with the title of Caliph. Sharif Husayn declared the revolt on 10 June 1916. With British help and advice from T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), Amir Faysal, Sharif Husayn's son, and his Bedouin troops destroyed the Hijaz railway. The Bedouin detested the railway because it was their rival in transporting the pilgrims to the Hijaz.

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, Ottoman officer Mustafa Kemal succeeded in negotiating treaties with the European powers which occupied Turkey. He abolished the Sultanate on 1 November 1922 and the Caliphate on 8 March 1924 and made Turkey a republic with himself as president. The Ottoman dynasty came to an end.

Sharif Husayn who had been promised by the British to be made caliph took

advantage of the abolition of the caliphate in Turkey and declared himself caliph. The move outraged his rival 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Sa'ud, the Sultan of Najd. Using his highly dedicated Ikhwan troops, Ibn Sa'ud occupied Hijaz in 1925 and ousted Sharif Husayn. Ibn Sa'ud thus became King of Hijaz in addition to being Sultan of Najd. He established the Kingdom of Sa'udi Arabia in 1932. To boost his religious prestige, the Sa'udi king later on added to his titles the title of Khadim al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn (Custodian of the Two Holy Sanctuaries).

The caliphate at the time was under close scrutiny. The Syrian scholar Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935), who had been based in Cairo and had become a prominent follower of the Egyptian mufti and rector of the Azhar Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), argued in his periodical *al-Manar* for Islamic modernism and reform. He advocated the restoration of the caliphate and a return to the purity of Islam as under the early ancestors, the salaf (hence the Salafi movement), which explains his praise of the Wahhabis, the Salafiyyun par excellence. Rida was also aware of the tension at the time between Arab nationalism and loyalty to the caliphate. He defended the Arabs against the Turks and called for the transfer of the caliphate to the Arabs in case the Ottomans lost power. He also tried to reconcile the Arabs and the Turks. He, however, disapproved of an Arab caliphate under European protection, and for this reason opposed Sharif Husayn's attempt to become caliph¹¹. 'Ali 'Abd al-Razeq (1888-1966), a follower of Muhammad 'Abduh, argued in his book, *al-Islam wa-Usul al-Hukm* (Islam and the Basis of Political Authority) that the caliphate was not of divine origin and should not be restored. This caused much controversy at the time¹².

The title of sultan, claimed for centuries by the Ottoman rulers, was adopted in the early 20th century by Arab potentates, such as Ibn Sa'ud the Sultan of Najd and the Sultan of Oman. When the British abrogated Ottoman suzerainty over Egypt in 1914 and declared Egypt a British protectorate in retaliation against the Ottomans who sided with Germany, they changed the title of the ruler of Egypt from khedive (Persian for king), which the Ottoman sultan gave to Isma'il in 1867, to that of Sultan. In 1922, the British gave Egypt nominal independence through a treaty relationship, and accordingly changed the title of Egypt's ruler from Sultan to King.

Faysal declared King of Syria on 8 March 1920:

After the declaration of the Arab revolt on 10 June 1916 and the destruction of the Hijaz railway, Amir Faysal headed northwards towards Syria. He joined with the British army from Palestine under General Allenby and entered Damascus on 4

October 1918. The French at the time had occupied Beirut and were heading north along the Syrian coast in implementation of the Sykes-Picot agreement of 16 May 1916. An Arab government under Faysal, who represented his father Sharif Husayn, and a military governor, who represented the British, were established side by side in Damascus with authority over the Eastern Zone that included the interior of Syria as far north as Aleppo and Dayr al-Zur. The military governor chosen by the British was the Damascene notable Rida Pasha al-Rikabi.

The duality of authority between Faysal and al-Rikabi handicapped the Arab government in Damascus. On 15 September, Britain concluded an agreement with France according to which Britain was to withdraw from Syria and France will replace it there. The office of military governor representing the British was abolished. Faysal and the Arab government now had to face opposition by France and the pro-Ottoman notables inside Syria. The notables were composed of big landowners and religious scholars (the 'ulama) who were opposed to the nationalists.

An American Commission of enquiry, known as the King-Crane Commission, was sent to Syria in June-July 1919 at the initiative of President Woodrow Wilson who had declared war on Germany in April 1917 and participated in the Peace Conference in Paris. The Commission was to ascertain the desire of the Syrians for self-determination. Britain and France boycotted the Commission. The Commission found that Syrian unity was too manifest to justify partition. It also recommended the inclusion of Palestine in a united Syrian state and considered the Zionist program of Jewish immigration into Palestine a violation of self-determination. The commission's recommendations were disregarded by the British and the French and were shelved until published in 1922. The United States had by then withdrawn from the League of Nations.

Faced with Anglo-French complicity in the peace conference, the Syrian General Congress (al-Mu'tamar al-Suri al-'Am) whose members had been elected in 1919 met on 8 March 1920 and passed a resolution proclaiming the independence of Syria (including Lebanon and Palestine) under a constitutional monarchy and the choosing of Faysal as King of Syria. The Congress also called for an economic union between Syria and Iraq. The nationalists, composed of a majority of Muslim representatives, but also included Christian and Jewish members, had become more realistic by then and given up the Arab dream of creating an independent Arab state composed of Syria, Iraq and Hijaz. But why did the Congress opt for a kingship and not a caliphate or a sultanate?

Faysal initially wanted to establish an Arab Kingdom composed of Syria,

Iraq and Hijaz, with his father Sharif Husayn at its head and himself in charge of Syria. The records of the Commercial Tribunal in Damascus (al-Mahkama al-Tijariyya) indicate that an Arab state (al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya) was officially announced on 1 Muharram 1337(7 October 1918), three days after Faysal's arrival in Damascus¹³. The court then issued judgments in the name of the King of the Arabs Husayn I (Malik al-'Arab Husayn al-Awwal). The court also gave Husayn the title of King of the Arabs and Caliph of the Muslims or Sultan of the Arabs and Caliph of the Muslims¹⁴. The Damascus Islamic court (al-Mahkama al-Shar'iyya) referred to the citizens of Syria, regardless of their creed, as belonging to the Arab Syrian State (min tib'at al-Dawla al-'Arabiyya al-Suriyya). The court records also occasionally added the adjective al-'aliyya (the exalted), traditionally reserved for the Ottoman State, to the title of the Arab Syrian State¹⁵. The Damascus Islamic court started using Arabic in place of Turkish in the headings of the records and also began a new enumeration of cases on 19 Muharram 1337(25 October 1918) which continued until 30 December 1920. The French had by then occupied Damascus on 24 July 1920. On 3 January, 1921, the French introduced a new Arabic enumeration in the court records¹⁶.

Aware of the need for establishing the infrastructure of an Arab nation state, Faysal constituted on 6 October 1918 a consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura) that was responsible for legislation. One third of the members of the Council were Christian which demonstrates Faysal's policy of tolerance and also the ability of Christians to undertake administrative responsibilities. Given the pluralistic nature of Syria's society, the growing role of Christians in the Arab national movement, (al-Nahda al-'Arabiyya), and the need to impress Europe by establishing a secular state, Faysal made religious tolerance the cornerstone of his policy. When Armenian refugees fleeing the massacres in Turkey were harassed in Aleppo by Muslims who considered them a threat to their economic interests, Faysal went to Aleppo and delivered a speech in the Arab Club (al-Nadi al-'Arabi) in June 1919 in which he called for tolerance. He declared "As for myself, I can say that we have no majority and no minority. Nothing divides us. We are a single body. The actions of the temporary government clearly show that there are no religions or sects, for we were Arabs before Moses, Muhammad, Jesus and Abraham. We Arabs are bound together in life, separated only in death. There is no division among us except when we are buried." ¹⁷

By emphasizing the common denominator of Arabism that binds all the people together regardless of their creed, Faysal laid out the ground for a secular state. This

policy earned Faysal the displeasure of the Muslim conservatives. But it won him the respect and support of the nationalists among whom figured many Christians. (Faysal adopted the same policy of tolerance towards the religious and ethnic minorities when he became king of Baghdad between 1921 and his death in 1933) Faysal, nevertheless, worked hard to win the support of the Muslim 'ulama in Syria by appointing them to high positions in the administration. He also issued economic regulations that benefited a large segment of the population. At Faysal's orders, the Consultative Council abolished on 3 November 1918 the law that imposed extra taxes for financing the army (Qanun Wirku al-Harb) and also the Ottoman law that sought remedy for the deficit in the budget of the year 1130(1911-1912) (Qanun Sadd 'Ajz Mizaniyyat 1330).

Faysal's increasing popularity in Syria is reflected by his election King of Syria. The members of the Syrian General Congress who elected Faysal first convened on 3 June 1919 under the headship of Muhammad Rashid Rida, who represented Tripoli, and chose Hashim Atassi, the deputy from Hims, as speaker of the Congress. Faysal's aim from convening the Congress in March 1920 was to legalize his position in Syria and prepare the way for his election as king. The prospects for a wider Arab unity did not seem possible at that time.

Two groupings emerged in the Congress: the nationalists, who supported Faysal, and the conservatives, who opposed him. The nationalists split between ultras and moderates. The ultras considered Faysal's espousal of Syrian unity and independence a radical departure from his declared policy favoring Arab unity. They also criticized him for paying much attention to minorities. The moderates, referred to as Neutralists (Hiyadiyun), approved Faysal's policies¹⁸. The conservatives, who opposed Faysal, were known as the Old Notables (al-Dhawat al-Qudama). They were made up of aristocrats who included the bourgeois-feudal families. They considered Faysal and the nationalists a threat that could destabilize the political situation in Syria by clashing with the French and endangering their interests. Some of them declared their preference for the French while others, who included 'ulama and heads of sufi orders (tariqas), expressed their readiness to accept French rule¹⁹.

Faysal's supporters formed a broad Popular Front (al-Jabha al-Sha'biyya) and dominated the Congress. They were enrolled in several societies and organizations chief among which were the Arab Club (al-Nadi al-'Arabi), the Progressive Party (Hizb al-Taquddum), and the Patriotic Syrian Party (al-Hizb al-Watani al-Suri). They considered Syrian unity a stepping stone towards a larger Arab unity²⁰.

Despite the polarization of the Congress members into moderates and

conservatives, the Congress unanimously declared Faysal king of Syria. Seven Christian bishops and the Jewish Chief Rabbi of Damascus who attended the Congress

declared in a written statement their pledge to support King Faysal because he committed himself to respect all religions, ensure equality and abide by the law. The statement/pledge was published in the Damascus official gazette *al-'Asima*²¹.

In Aleppo, the second largest city in Syria, the authorities distributed on the 8th of March 1920 hand-bills bearing the following declarations:

“In spite of himself, the Moslem is the brother of the Christian and the Jew.”

“The Arabs are Arabs before Moses, Christ and Mohammed.”

“Freedom and independence are two rights of Syria.”

“Independence and Faisal are two treasures of Syria.”

“The blood of the Syrian is the price of Independence.”

“Syria is the most worthy of countries for freedom.”

“Religion is God’s, and the Fatherland belongs to his children.”

The American consul in Aleppo, who reported the handbills in his dispatch dated March 13, 1920, predicted the election of Faysal as king. He wrote “Though no formal notice has been issued by the local authorities to that effect, it appears that Emir Faysal has been named “King of Syria,” to include Mesopotamia and Palestine,”²² The inclusion of Mesopotamia (Iraq) in the kingdom of Faysal indicates an optimistic desire on the part of the Arab nationalists which in reality did not happen.

Representative of the Committee of Arabian Brotherhood that had been established in Aleppo with the view of bringing the Muslims and Christians to a better understanding with each other departed for Damascus in the morning of 13 March, one week before Faysal’s official election as king, to offer their congratulations to him on behalf of the city of Aleppo. They included four Muslim notables and six Christians among them three bishops. A Jewish notable and the Grand Rabbi in Aleppo had left one day earlier on a similar mission²³. Thus the expectations were already high for a monarchy that would ensure equality and guarantee religious freedom.

Given the upsurge of Arab national consciousness in Syria at the time, the policy of religious tolerance followed by Faysal, the participation of Christians in the administration, and the desire to impress Europe by adopting a European-style form of constitutional monarchy, kingship was the most appropriate institution for the emerging Syrian state. The Arab state under Faysal, however, did not last for

more than four months. It succumbed to the French who occupied Damascus on 25 July 1920. The occupation was in implementation of the San Remo Agreement on 25 April 1920 between Britain and France authorizing France to occupy Syria and Lebanon. The San Remo Agreement was in reaction to Faysal's election as king of independent Syria

The legacy of the Arab government of King Faysal in Syria is that it created the institutions and cadres for a nation state, promoted religious tolerance and Arabized the state²⁴.

Notes

- 1 Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), pp.140-1; Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, The Classical Age*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1974), pp. 459-60; *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition, article *Malik*.
- 2 Najm al-Din al-Ghazzi, *al-Kawakib al-Sāra bi-Ayan al-Mi'a al-'Ashira*, edited by Jibra' il Jabbur (Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al-Jadida, 1979), pp. 294-5.
- 3 Muhammad Ibn Abi'l-Surur al-Bakri al-Siddiqi, 'Uyun al-Akhbar wa-Nuzhat al-Absar, ms., no. 77, Cairo, Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya, fols., 138b-139a; Abdul-Karim Rafeq, *al-'Arab wal-'Uthmaniyyun, 1516-1916*, 2nd edition (Damascus: Atlas, 1993), p.4.
- 4 Muhammad ibn Iyas, *Bada'i' al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i' al-Duhur*, vol. 5, edited by Muhammad Musatfa (Cairo: 'Issa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1961), pp.166-7; Rafeq, *al-'Arab*, p.63.
- 5 Khalil Inalcik, "Appendix: The Ottomans and the Caliphate," *The Cambridge History of Islam*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), see vol. 1, p.320.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp.322-3.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp.320-3; Khalil Inalcik, "Islamic Caliphate, Turkey and Muslims in India," in *Shari'ah, Ummah and Khilafah*, edited by Yusuf Abbas Hashimi (Karachi: Fazlee sons Limited, 1987), pp.17-20; Stanford J. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976-7), vol. 1, p.250; *Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition, article *Khalifa*, pp.945-6.
- 8 Inalcik, "Islamic Caliphate," p.18
- 9 Suraiya Faroghi, *Pilgrims and Sultans, the Hajj under the Ottomans, 1517-1683* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1994), p.185.
- 10 *Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition, article *Malik*, pp.261-2
- 11 For an insightful and exhaustive discussion of Rashid Rida's ideas about the Caliphate, see Mahmoud Haddad, "Arab Religious Nationalism in the Colonial Era: Rereading Rashid Rida's Ideas on the Caliphate," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 117.2 (1997), pp. 253-277.
- 12 Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp.346-7.
- 13 Directorate of Historical Archives, Damascus, al-Mahkama al-Tijariyya, vol. 149.
- 14 *Ibid.*, vol. pp.145,156.
- 15 See for example, Damascus, Shari'a Court Records, vol. 1533, p.89, vol. 1544, p.99, vol. 1548, p.109, Aleppo, vol. 615, p. 82.
- 16 Abdul-Karim Rafeq, "Arabism, Society, and Economy, 1918-1920," *State and Society in Syria and Lebanon*, edited by Yusuf M. Choueiri (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1993), pp.1-26, see pp.4-5.
- 17 Sati' al-Husri, *The Day of Maysalun*, translated from the Arabic (*Yawm Maysalun*) by Sidney Glazer, Washington, 1966, p.113; Yusuf al-Hakim, *Suriyya wa'l-'Ahd al-Faysali* (Bairut: Dar al-Nahar, 1980), p.74.

- 18 al-Hakim, p.74; Khairieh Qasmieh, *al-Hukuma al- 'Arabiyya fi Dimashq bayna 1918 wa 1920*, Cairo, 1971, pp.64-5.
- 19 al-Hakim, pp.87-8, 104.
- 20 Ibid., pp.56-8; Hasan al-Hakim, *Khuburati fi' l-Hukm*, Amman, 1978, pp. 46-7.
- 21 For the text of the pledge, see al-Hakim, p. 143.
- 22 Reported by the American Consul in Aleppo in his dispatch dated March 13, 1920, National Archives (Washington, DC), Records of the Department of State, Microfilm, M722, roll 10, dispatch no. 478.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 For details about the Arab Government in Damascus under Faysal, see the works already mentioned by al-Hakim, Qasmieh and Rafeq. See also Mary Almaz Shahrstan, *al-Mu' tamar al-Suri al- 'Am, 1919-1920* (Beirut: Dar Amwaj, 2000); James L. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of empire* (California: California University Press, 1998); Abdul-Karim Rafeq, "Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft und Politische Macht in Syrien 1918-1925," (translated from English), *Der Nahe Osten in der Zwischenkriegszeit, 1919-1939*, edited by Linda Schilcher and Claus Scharf (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989), pp.440-81.