THE WOUNDED TURKS AND THE FALL OF DAMASCUS, 1 OCTOBER 1918

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This paper, based on British, Australian and American sources, will endeavour to discuss the capture and occupation of Damascus by General Edmund Allenby's Egyptian Expeditionary Force on 1 October 1918 and the events which followed it. The chief purpose will be the investigation of the effect on the wounded Turks left in Damascus of the decision to allow the Arabs to administer the city. It will also attempt, with reference to international law, to make an assessment of the deplorable condition of the Turkish prisoners of war and hospitals in Damascus.

WAR-TIME AGREEMENTS AND THE ARABS

The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 16 May 1916 between Britain, France and Russia had provided for the formation of an Arab state or states in some of the territories of the Ottoman Empire in Asia, conditional on the Arabs obtaining the towns of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. One of the areas set aside for this purpose was to be under the influence of Britain, and another under the influence of France. This influence was defined in the aforesaid agreement as priority of rights of enterprise and local loans, and the exclusive right to supply advisers and civil servants to the respective state or states[1].

Early in 1918 the Sykes-Picot Agreement became common property in Arab Asia, thanks to the generosity of the Soviet government which released it and the efforts of the Ottoman officials who made use of it. Thrown into medley was the Balfour Declaration of sympathy with Zionist aspirations of 2 November 1917, which was a public instrument from the start. Arab rebels under Sharif Hussein of Mecca – who were earlier promised independence by London – began to raise their eyebrows, and British officials to issue statements of reassurance. The High Commissioner for Egypt, Sir Reginald

[1] Text of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, ed. E.L. Woodward and Rohan Butler, first ser., London, 1952, iv, pp. 245-247.

Wingate, was authorised to explain in response to a formal inquiry by seven Syrians in Cairo on 16 June 1918 in which the British government pledged itself to recognise 'the complete and sovereign independence of an Arab area emancipated from Turkish control by the action of the Arabs themselves.'[2]

The above was in obvious contradiction to the provisions of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, for the Sharifians might 'emancipate' areas in which France's rights were recognised by Britain. But such a contradiction was not, in fact, allowed. The operation of the rule laid down in the Declaration to the Seven was regulated locally by arrangement between the commander-in-chief of the British forces in Palestine, General Allenby, and Emir Feisal, son of Sharif Hussein, by which the Arab rebel elements operated almost entirely in the area given to the Arabs in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Here, then, there was no formal contradiction. But a vital modification in the Sykes-Picot scheme had been, all the same, effected. In this scheme a territory had been assigned to the Arab state; but the state was to be set up to operate under the supervision of France. The Declaration to the Seven made it seem as though the Arab government of the region of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo where Feisal's forces were allowed to operate, could be totally independent of French control and French supervision, and that Britain would support such a state of affairs. In this belief the Sharifians entered in the last months of the First World War. It was on this question that they were to be at issue with France. The Declaration to the Seven led them to believe that they could count on British support in their quarrel[3].

The Declaration to the Seven gave Sharifians reason to think that British and French policies were diverging, and that Britain would not support France in carrying out the terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The declaration made their advantage clear by its apparent concession that, in the areas captured by the Arabs, an independent government could be set up, unfettered by the control of a Great Power; not as the Sykes-Picot Agreement stipulated, subject to the influence of France and Britain. The

[2] Great Britain, *Parliamentary Papers, 1939*, Cmd. 5974, pp. 48-51.

[3] Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire 1914-1921*, London, 1987, p. 116.

question remained whether the Sharifians would be able to capture anything single-handed[4].

Following the defeat of the Ottoman armies in Palestine on 19-24 September 1918, the British troops were converging on Damascus. Britain had seen that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was, to say the least, inconvenient. So–upon the withdrawal of the Ottoman 4th Army from the city on the evening of 30 September – Feisal's forces, operating on the extreme right of Allenby's Egyptian Expeditionary Force, was to be allowed to enter Damascus on 1 October 1918 to help Britain to exclude France from Syria. This shows the Clausewitzian aspect of Allenby's campaign: military operations, once commenced, were tailored for a political and imperial end – to give Britain more clout at the Paris Peace Conference, and to help provide for the long-term stability of the British Empire. Feisal's presence assisted Britain in its attempt to plan for all contingencies in post-war negotiations[5].

ANARCHY IN DAMASCUS

At 6 a.m. on 1 October, Sharifian regulars entered Damascus. All day and night Bedouin and Druze auxiliaries flowed into the Omayade capital bent on enjoying the conquest and accumulating loot. Local support for the Hashemites was thin, especially among the wealthier citizens, and a city of 300,000 dissolved into anarchy. British units remained outside the city[6]. Shukri al-Ayyubi, the new Arab military governor of Damascus, took a step which had serious consequences: he had the prisons opened and the prisoners, with some 4,000 of them, among whom were murderers, robbers, opium addicts and forgers, were set free. These prisoners started looting and killing, particularly Turkish soldiers who were wounded and sick[7]. "In the streets," says the British journalist W.T. Massey, "the Arabs beat the Turkish soldiery and jeered them and probably many of the dead Turks in Damascus

[4] Ibid., p.117.

[5] The eminent British scholar Elie Kedourie meticulously brings together a huge amount of conclusive evidence to show that Damascus could not have been captured by the Sharifians, but rather that, after the evacuation of the city by the Turks, they were allowed to occupy it and to claim that they had captured it. See his "The Capture of Damascus, 1 October 1918" in *The Chatham House Version and other Middle-Eastern Studies*, London, 1984, pp. 33-51.

[6] Kedourie (1987), p.125. Also A. J. Hill, *Chauvel of the Light Horse: A Biography of General Sir Harry Chauvel*, Melbourne, 1978, p. 179

[7] Kedourie (1984), p.44.

were massacred by their former Arab comrades and by civilians." "I witnessed," he again says, "many instances of the fear of Turkish soldiers. Small groups of them assembled in dark corners of the street waiting for an opportunity to give themselves up. They were usually without arms, which had been taken from them by the civilian population, and their personal belongings had likewise gone."[8]

Handing control of Damascus to Arabs gave British a task which, as Henry Somer Gullett correctly points out in the Australian official war history, "would have taxed the capacity of a Western power accustomed to managing the affairs of great cities."[9] The instruction to stay out of Damascus had to be ignored when the Arabs proved unable to keep order. Repeating the mayhem at Dera to the south, where looting and killing occurred as the Arabs moved in, Damascus by 2 October was suffering from lawlessness[10]. Lieutenant General Harry Chauvel, commander of the Desert Mounted Corps, had to march his cavalry through and the "turbulent city was instantly awed into silence." After the war, Chauvel remembered how with his march through on 2 October: "the effect was electrical." Others have written: "the bazaars were opened and the city went about its normal business."[11]

Gullett confesses that "the situation at Damascus was one unparalleled in warfare. True to its compact with Feisal, and ignoring the dismay and the protests of the capable Christians, the British government, through the commander-in-chief, handed over the administration of the great city to the Arabs immediately on its capture. It is true that many of the Arab civil servants employed by the Turks remained in their offices, and of these some were efficient men. But the strong guiding hand in the affairs of the city was that of the Turk's."[12] Lieutenant Alec Kirkbride, a British officer with the Sharifian forces, backs up the Australian account in his book, *A Crackle of Thorns*: "The police had ceased to function and there was political objection to calling in the British forces, who were camped on the outskirts of the

[8] W.T. Massey, *Allenby's Final Triumph*, London, 1920, pp. 257-263.

[9] Henry Somer Gullett, *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine: 1914-1918*, Sydney, 1984, p.768.

[10] For looting and killing of unarmed Turks by Arabs at Dera, see George de Barrow, *The Fire of Life*, London, 1942, p.211. For the anarchy which followed on from the Turks' withdrawal, see Gullett (1984), pp. 768-770.

[11] Phillip Knightley and Colin Simpson, *The Secret Lives of Lawrence of Arabia*, London, 1971, p.106.

[12] Gullett (1984), pp. 767-768.

town, and so admitting that the new Arab administration was incapable of controlling its own people."[13]

But still more desperate was the situation of the 20,000 exhausted Turkish prisoners, who, unless they were to perish miserably, must at once be generously fed. If the raising of foodstuffs had been left in the hands of British supply officers for a few days, the problem would have been solved, and much suffering and loss of life avoided. But from the moment when control was handed over to the Arabs, not a bushel of grain or a pound of meat or fruit could be requisitioned for the army without their consent and agency[14].

CONDITION OF THE TURKISH HOSPITALS

Already all the buildings in the city were overflowing with sick Turks; and the nearest casualty clearing station was at Kuneitra, forty miles away. The Turks in the main hospital (Hamidiye Barracks) died at the rate of seventy or eighty a day, and were buried by their fellow countrymen in a great continuous trench. They had no cover even for the sick. Few of the men had blankets; they had no medical organisation. There were no drugs, bandages, or food fit for sick men; no sanitation. Food for the prisoners was scarce. Men were dying at the rate of 170 a day. Very little assistance could be obtained from the local Arab authorities of Damascus, who had taken possession of the Turkish army stores. They demurred from doing anything unless paid exorbitant rates in gold. The hopeless Arab administration was indifferent to human suffering[15].

One particularly gruesome incident was the looting of the main Turkish hospital. It contained between 600 to 800 wounded. The inmates were maltreated, and a few were massacred. Colonel W.G. Elphinston, a British army officer, wrote: "when riding through Damascus the day after the city was taken, we passed the main hospital and saw a considerable number of naked corpses piled in the courtyard in heaps, five or six feet high, apparently – from their condition – comparatively recently dead and thrown from the windows of the upper storey. It was not surprising that such sight

[13] Alec Kirkbride, *A Crackle of Thorns*, London, 1956, p.9.

[14] Gullett (1984), p. 768. See also Alec Kirkbride, *An Awakening*, London, 1971, pp. 126-127.

[15] Ibid., pp. 773-775.

gave rise to considerable comment."[16] During that time many of the wounded and sick died. None was available to remove either the corpses of the dead or the excrement of the living, and this combined with undressed wounds, many of which became gangrenous, polluted the air and made entry into the place an ordeal which could only fill one with pity for the sufferers and disgust at the filth and smell[17].

At midday on 2 October an Australian doctor appeared, imploring Colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence –who had entered the city with Feisal's forces– for the sake of humanity to take notice of the Turkish hospital. Lawrence ran over in his mind the three hospitals in Arab charge, the military, the civil, the missionary, and told him that they were as well cared for as they could be. The Arabs could not invent drugs and Chauvel could not let them have any of his. The doctor went on to describe a huge range of filthy buildings without a single medical officer or orderly, packed with dead and dying; mainly dysentery cases, but at least some typhoid; and it was to be hoped, no typhus or chlore. There was a sickening stench and a heap of dead bodies laid out on the stone floor, some in uniform, some naked. A few were corpses of no more than a day or two old; some had been there for days. It seemed that every bed held a dead man; but as Lawrence went forward there was a stir as several tried to raise their hands. Not one of them had strength to speak, but the dry whisper "Pity,pity" came in unison[18].

Later on the day Lawrence was arranging other improvements when an Army Medical Corps major strode up and asked him shortly whether he spoke English. "Yes," said Lawrence. The major looked with disgust at his skirts and sandals and asked: "You're in charge?" "In a way I am," Lawrence answered. "Scandalous, disgraceful, outrageous, ought to be shot" the major bellowed. At this sudden attack Lawrence, whose nerves were very ragged, began to laugh hysterically; he had been so proud of himself for having bettered what was apparently past hope. The major had not seen the charnel-house of the day before, nor smelt it, nor helped in the burying of the putrefying corpses. He smacked Lawrence hard in the face and stalked

[16] W.G. Elphinston, *Royal Central Asian Journal*, vol. XXXI, part I, 1944, p. 107.
[17] F.G. Peake, ibid., vol. XXX, part III-IV, 1943, pp. 331-332.
[18] Robert Graves, *Lawrence and the Arabs*, New York, 1991, pp.383-384.

off. Lawrence stood for a moment in contemplation. He could feel no anger with his attacker, only shame for himself and his spiritual uncleanliness[19].

As already mentioned, the difficulties that the newly formed Arab administration had in running Damascus impacted mortally on the sick and wounded Turks in the main military hospital who were left without proper medical care. Medical services had fallen apart and there were at least 1,800 wounded Turks languishing in various hospitals. The withdrawal of the Turkish administration resulted in confusion as Feisal's Arabs found it impossible to provide the necessary municipal services to keep a large city functioning. However, the partial evidence available today indicates that the wounded Turks left in Damascus suffered not just because of Arab logistical problems, but also because the political need to exclude the Egyptian Expeditionary Force from Damascus left the sick and wounded Turks bereft of care.

Medical units of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force were ordered to stay out of Damascus, as is shown by the war diary for the assistant director of medical services of the Australian Mounted Division: "All wheels halted at El Mezze in compliance with strict orders that no troops should enter Damascus."[20] The result for the wounded Turks left behind by their comrades is outlined by the Australian medical team with the Australian Mounted Division in no uncertain terms: "Condition of 600-700 patients in this hospital was found on inspection to be indescribably hideous and inhuman. Left by all save a handful of Turkish medical personnel, starved for three days, and suffocated by the stench of their own offal and the unburied dead, the plight of these wretches was more than miserable."[21]

Captain William Yale, America's liaison officer with the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, corroborates the assistant director of medical services in a letter written in 1968, where he remembers the plight of the wounded Turks[22]. Yale's evidence is particularly useful in that he was a senior figure,

[19] Ibid., p.386. Also Anthony Nutting, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Man and the Motive*, London, 1961, p.172.

[20] War Office Papers, Public Record Office, London – henceforth referred to as "WO" – 95/4553, Australian Division Medical Services, WD 1 October 1918.

[21] Ibid., WD 3 October 1918. This type of language is unusual for a war diary.

[22] Yale Papers, box:1, file:1, report "The Turkish Hospital", dated 17 September 1968 enclosed with letter (same date) to publishers of *The Secret Lives of Lawrence of Arabia*. St. Anthony's College Middle Eastern Centre, Oxford.

and by his own account held Allenby's forces in Palestine in high regard; he thus seems unbiased. In his account Yale stated that British policy was, "to allow the Arab military forces and the local municipal Syrian leaders to assume responsibility for governing the city and maintaining law and order." An Australian officer showed Yale the hospital and said that he, "had asked authority to supply the Turks' needs and had sufficient supplies to do so. He said he would probably be court martialled if I reported his conversation with me." For Yale the "ghastly heartrending sight" of the sick and wounded Turks was something he never forgot: "Nothing I did during the whole world war period do I regret so deeply and with such shame as my failure to use my position wisely and calmly to alleviate the atrocious suffering of these 800 men."[23]

Yale informed Brigadier-General Gilbert Clayton, Allenby's Chief Political Officer, of the conditions in the hospital, and the latter's response was direct: "I told Clayton that something must be done at once to feed and care for those poor men in the hospital. I said it was ghastly hypocrisy to talk about German atrocities in Belgium while allowing 800 Turks, sick and wounded, to starve to death. Clayton was a cold, hard, self-controlled man upon whom my emotionalism had no effect. Quite indifferently he said to me, 'Yale you are not a military man.'"[24]

Yale does say that Clayton had not seen the hospital, but his conclusion points the real finger of blame: "I am convinced Clayton did nothing because of political reasons, not wishing the British to interfere in the affairs of the Arab administration in Damascus." This excuse can have provided little succour for the wounded and sick Turks who were left with, "no food, no nurses, human excrement ankle deep."[25] It was to Chauvel's credit that he re-occupied the Turkish military hospitals after four days' Arab control as the Turkish wounded were receiving no care. The Australians, headed by Colonel Rupert Downes, then set about cutting the death rate from 70 to 15 a day[26].

[23] Ibid., file: 9, "It Takes So Long", Memory of the Turkish Barracks in Damascus 1-5 October 1918 written by Yale on 11 February 1938 and sent to Elizabeth Monroe in 1968.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., file: 1, report "The Turkish Hospital", 17 September 1968.

[26] Hill (1978), p. 183.

GRAVE VIOLATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

Yale's reports and the other testimonies amply indicated earlier in the paper clearly reflect substantial violations of the then international law governing the rules on the conduct of war and occupation. Article 4 of the Fourth Convention Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land signed at the Hague in the Netherlands on 18 October 1907 and entered into force on 26 January 1910, to which both Britain and the Ottoman Empire were parties, stated that prisoners of war were under the control of the hostile government and not the individuals or corps that had captured them. So they had to be humanely treated. Killing or wounding soldiers disabled by sickness or wounds, or who have laid down arms and surrendered; disgraceful treatment of dead bodies and appropriation and destruction of property belonging to hospitals and the like were among important violations of rules regarding warfare which amounted to war crimes. All personal belongings of the prisoners of war except arms, horses and military papers would remain their property; and in practice personal belongings are understood to include military uniform, clothing, and kit required for personal use, although technically they are government property.

Article 7 of the said convention stipulated that the government into whose hands prisoners of war had fallen would be charged with their maintenance. In the absence of a special agreement between the belligerents, prisoners of war should be treated as regards board, lodging, and clothing on the same footing as the troops of the government who captured them. Article 47, in particular, formally prohibited pillage.

The patterns of military administration in Damascus were supposed to follow international practice as prescribed in the Hague Convention. The British clearly disregarded the general rules on the occupied enemy territories as defined by this convention. It was essential to obey the main rules of military occupation. Therefore the neglect of the Turkish hospitals in Damascus by Allenby's forces, was, to say the least, unlawful. In fact, the Paris Peace Conference was a year later to accept the Hague Convention as the basic document of the international law of war, as it was to proclaim in the Covenant of the League of Nations on 28 April 1919. In the cold light of history it seems that the British authorities who caused these atrocities to be carried out deserve to be treated as war criminals as surely as any who were tried following the Second World War at Nuremberg.

British war criminals should have been tried, when evidence was abundant and the memory of their crimes still fresh. The terms of the Moudros Armistice of 30 October 1918 were, however, silent concerning war crimes, but the British war criminals could have been punished for offences against the laws of war, and for participation in massacres. The difficulty regarding war criminals is, as a rule, of course, to get them into one's possession at all. It was a pity that the damage done by the failure to avenge the Turkish prisoners who died in Damascus on 1-2 October 1918 was irretrievable.

The poor conditions for the wounded Turks were a direct result of Allenby being instructed to promote an Arab administration, as is shown by the order received on 1 October: "Our policy should be to encourage the setting up of their central, local or regional Arab administration, as the case may be, and work, at least ostensibly, through them entirely." [27] This instruction was from the Foreign Office, and passed through the War Office, and it indicates how the Arabs could be useful for Britain: "it is important that the military administration should be restricted to such functions as can properly be described as military, so as to give to no inconvenient claim where unnecessary of French civilians."[28]

The French looked upon this obvious British connivance with indignation, Paris accused London of "perfidious machiavellism" of hiding behind the "façade" of Arab nationalism to undermine French influence in Syria[29]. During the war Britain had already in the Sykes-Picot Agreement recognised French interest in Syria, which indeed it had already acknowledged in 1912. Towards the end of the termination of hostilities, all the latent rivalries which had been temporarily quiescent during the fighting burst into flame. France, even before the beginning of the war, had never concealed its ambitions in Syria. On 21 December 1912, for example, the Prime Minister of France, Raymond Poincaré, had declared in a speech in the Senate that "we have traditional interests in Syria, which we intend to have respected."[30] France therefore immediately objected to the formation of the Damascus government and to the appointment of Feisal as its head.

[27] WO 33/960, WO to General Headquarters Egypt, 1 October 1918.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Howard Sachar, *The Emergence of the Middle East: 1914-1924*, London, 1970, p.264.
[30] John Bagot Glubb, *Britain and the Arabs*, London, 1959, p. 103.

CONCLUSION

In terms of international politics it must have been that the Turkish sick and wounded were marginal to the central objective of giving the impression that Feisal's Arabs were in charge. Turks suffered as a result of British *realpolitik*. It was of course Anglo-French rivalry in the Levant which explains these extraordinary incidents of 1918. By 1 October 1918 Palestine and Damascus were occupied in its entirety by British troops, an army of nearly a million. Their only competitors were the two French regiments in Beirut. It was this military predominance which gave the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, the idea of tearing up the 1916 agreement and substituting British power. Though French susceptibilities had to be considered within the general framework of preserving the Entente, Paris was never in a position to challenge British control of the Middle East. Moreover, the Sykes-Picot Agreement though still remaining as a diplomatic instrument was considered historically out of date. What was meant by this was that not only did Britain control the Middle East but Russia had left the war and the United States had come in. The absence of Russia meant that the 1916 agreement was now inoperative whilst the advent of the United States meant that America cannot be ignored in any settlement of Syria and Palestine. One of the seeming aims of the British foreign policy in the Near East was to exclude France from Syria as it had excluded from Egypt previously. Britain used the Sharifians to forestall French claims to a privileged position in Syria.