

1.5: Syrian National Development During the Sykes-Picot Era

Beside Amir Feisal, who led the campaign for Syrian unity between 1918 and 1921 (despite not being a Syrian) there developed three groups with a similar purpose. The first was the Syrian Central Committee (Le Comite Central Syrien), a shadowy organization founded by the French Chamber of Commerce and Colonial Affairs to prop-up support for French policies in the Syrian diaspora and to lay the groundwork for the execution of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Headed by Shukri Ghanem, a Syrian emigrant in France who expounded the idea of Syrian unity with encouragement and support from the Quai d'Orsay, the Committee spelt out its aims as follows:

(1) Organizing the Syrian emigrants abroad. (2) Transmitting French propaganda to the Syrian community in America. (3) Working for Syrian unity. (4) Working for a federal and a democratic Syria under a French mandate. The Committee was given an active role in the post-war settlement process as a representative of the Syrian current. At one stage, Ghanem claimed before the San Remo conference that he represented not only his own personal views, but those of a "group whose estimated number is in excess of a million." That, of course, was an exaggeration, although at one point Ghanem enlisted the support of the Lebanese-Syrian Committee in Egypt, the Syria-Mount Lebanon Liberation League in the United States, the Lebanese-Syrian Committee in Brazil, and other subsidiary groups from Mexico, Uruguay, and Argentina including the Syrian Unity Party of Antun Sa'adeh. The second group was represented by the Party of Syrian Unity (PSU). Formed by an elite group of Syrian intellectuals and wealthy businessmen in Egypt, it argued for the complete independence of Syria under the auspice of the League of Nations. In contrast to the Syrian Central Committee, the PSU strongly opposed the idea of a foreign mandate and instead demanded an independent state in Syria. It also saw Syria as an Arab nation which should form part of an Arab confederacy, "provided it would not affect its independent national unity and form of government."

The Party of Syrian Unity was the first genuine all-Syrian party to elucidate a working plan for national reconstruction. Its main premises were:

(1) A federal Syria with special consideration to be given to minorities. (2) A representative parliament in each state to coordinate between lo-cal needs and the general interest and to protect minority rights. (3) A federal democratic parliament with prerogatives strictly in federal matters. (4) The establishment of a uniform education system; and (5) the creation of a labour market based solely on individual merit.

After announcing its platform to the public in January 1919, its chairman, Michel Latfallah, handed Clemanceau, the French leader, a draft containing the names of the party's central executive committee and a statement of its aims, in the hope of gaining formal recognition from the French government. But he failed and was not allowed to enter Paris, let alone attend the peace conference, despite a formal application for entry made on his behalf by Shukri Ghanem. The third group was represented by the League of New National Syria (Nouvelle Ligue Nationale Syrienne). The most important feature of this group was that it argued for Syrian unity under an American sponsored mandate. It claimed that the United States was admired by the international community and had shown a clear proclivity to help nations in distress "not for its own self-benefit but for the benefit of those it assisted." It was therefore better equipped than the European nations to lead Syria out of its political wilderness and unto the path of national revival.

The program of the party consisted of three major demands:

(1) A rejection of Ottoman rule under any condition. (2) The granting to Syria of independence within its natural frontiers. (3) Placing Syria under a US-sponsored mandate until Syrians could rule themselves. The League of New National Syria was not alone in enlisting the help of the United States. In Egypt, the editor of the influential newspaper al-Muqqattam had started his own movement to lobby for an American mandate over Syria. His voice and that of the League were also echoed in South America, where some of the leading figures in the Syrian community there, such as Dawood Maja'eece, Albert Abu Khatir, and Dr. Khalil Sa'adeh, gave the idea full support. In general, however, these groups did not achieve anything substantial. Their tendency to view the national crisis in Syria from a totally political perspective, without any real attempt to establish its national identity, meant that they could not give Syrian nationalism the objectivity it needed. In fact, up until the 1930s, Syrian nationalism did not mature into an effective force because it could not go beyond the realm of political propoganda and into the sphere of serious analysis and elaborate criticism. Hence John Daya's comment that

The majority of the pioneers who preceded Sa'adeh in dealing with Syria failed to discuss its [national] qu-estion from a sociological perspective in order to det-ermine whether its people constituted one nation with its own distinctive cultural personality. Rather, their discussions were restricted to the political aspects of independence.

At the social level, the situation was no better. Sectarian affiliation continued to be the main element of the social identity. As Edward Atiya has noted: "You were never a Syrian, one of the two and a half million inhabitants of Syria, but a Moslem, or a Roman Catholic, or a Protestant, and regarded others as aliens." Nonetheless, a genuine attempt was made during this period to steer the country toward political independence. On March 7, 1920, a Congress of Syrian notables met at Damascus, and after a long session passed a resolution stating that Syria was an independent constitutional monarchy within its natural boundaries. On the following day Feisal was proclaimed King. Some groups in Lebanon, however, refused to accept the resolution of the Congress, as did France and Britain. This sparked a long military and diplomatic campaign which ended with the dismemberment of Syria into several parts and its placement under a European mandate. This outcome was inevitable because Syrians had entered the First World War lacking any sense of direction. For instance, in a "Report on the Desires of the Syrians" written by E. H. Byrne soon after the war, one reads: "The fact is that the Syrians are so divided among them-selves that there is no group [that] truly represents them all." In the absence of a united Syrian front, post-war negotiations were left to a group of Syrian and Arab politicians who did not fully understand the intricacies of international diplomacy. Hence, Zeine N. Zeine was partly right in the way he interpreted the Allied pledges to Syrian leaders of the Great Revolt. Although the Allies exercised a great deal of prejudice, dishonesty, and deception, as Zeine has claimed, it should nevertheless be said, in all fairness, that part of the responsibility for the misunderstanding that followed falls on the Syrian leaders themselves for failing to record in writing the pledges that were made to them.