

26 November, 1916

Personal Notes on the Sherifial Family by T.E. Lawrence

The Arab Bulletin, 26 November 1916

One can see that to the nomads the Sherif and his three elder sons are heroes. Sherif Hussein (Sayidna as they call him), is outwardly so gentle and considerate as to seem almost weak, but this appearance hides a deep and crafty policy, wide ambitions and an un-Arabian foresight, strength of character and persistence. There was never any pan-Arab secret society in Mecca, because the Sherif has always been the Arab Government. His influence was so strong in the tribes and country districts, as to be tantamount to administration; and in addition he played Arabs' advocate in the towns against the Turkish Government.

Particularly have his tastes and sympathies been always tribal. The son of a Circassian mother, he is endowed with qualities foreign to both Turk and Arab, but he determined to secure the hearts of the nomads by making his sons Bedouins. The Turks had insisted that they be educated in Constantinople, and Sherif Hussein agreed most willingly. They have all had a first-class Turkish education, and profit by their knowledge of the world. However, when they came back from Constantinople as young Levantines, wearing strange clothes and with Turkish manners, Sherif Hussein at once made them change into Arab things, and rub up their Arabic. He gave them Arab companions, and a little later sent for them, to put them in command of some small bodies of Arab camel corps, patrolling the pilgrim roads against the Auf. The young Sherifs fell in with the plan, as they thought it might be amusing, but were rather dashed when they were forbidden to take with them special food, or bedding, or saddle cushions, and still more when they were not given permission to come to Mecca for the Feast, but had to spend all the season out in the desert with their men, guarding the roads day and night, meeting nomads only, and learning to know their country and their manners.

They are now all thorough Bedouins, and as well have from their education the knowledge and experience of Turkish officials, and from their descent that blend of native intelligence and vigour which so often comes from a cross of Circassian and Arab blood. This makes them a most formidable family group, at once admired and efficient. It has, however, left them curiously isolated in their world. None of them seems to have a confidant or adviser or minister, and it is doubtful whether any one of them is fully intimate with another or with their father, of whom they all stand in awe.

Sidi Ali. -- Short and slim, looking a little old already, though only thirty-seven. Slightly bent. Skin rather sallow, large deep brown eyes, nose thin and a little hooked, face somewhat worn and full of lines and hollows, mouth drooping. Beard spare and black. Has very delicate hands. His manners are perfectly simple, and he is obviously a very conscientious, careful, pleasant, gentleman, without force of character, nervous and rather tired. His physical weakness makes him subject to quick fits of shaking passion with more frequent moods of infirm obstinacy. Apparently not ambitious for himself, but swayed somewhat too easily by the wishes of others. Is bookish, and learned in law and religion. Shows his Arab blood more than his brothers.

Sidi Abdullah. -- Aged thirty-five, but looks younger. Short and thick built, apparently as strong as a horse, with merry dark brown eyes, a round smooth face, full but short lips,

straight nose, brown beard. In manner affectedly open and very charming, not standing at all on ceremony, but jesting with the tribesmen like one of their own sheikhs. On serious occasions he judges his words carefully, and shows himself a keen dialectician. Is probably not so much the brain as the spur of his father. He is obviously working to establish the greatness of the family, and has large ideas, which no doubt include his own particular advancement. The class between him and Feisal will be interesting. The Arabs consider him a most astute politician, and a far-seeing statesman: but he has possibly more of the former than of the latter in his composition.

Sidi Feisal. -- Is tall, graceful, vigourous, almost regal in appearance. Aged thirty-one. Very quick and restless in movement. Far more imposing personally than any of his brothers, knows it and trades on it. Is as clear-skinned as a pure Circassian, with dark hair, vivid black eyes set a little sloping in his face, strong nose, short chin. Looks like a European, and very like the monument of Richard I, at Fontevraud. He is hot tempered, proud and impatient, sometimes unreasonable, and runs off easily at tangents. Possesses far more personal magnetism and life than his brothers, but less prudence. Obviously very clever, and perhaps not over scrupulous. Rather narrow-minded, and rash when he acts on impulse, but usually with enough strength to reflect, and then exact in judgement. Had he been brought up the wrong way might have become a barrack-yard officer. A popular idol, and ambitious; full of dreams, and the capacity to realise them, with keen personal insight, and a very efficient man of business.

Sherif Zeid. -- Aged about twenty. Is quite overshadowed by the reputation of his half-brothers. His mother was Turkish and he takes after her. Is fond of riding about, and playing tricks. Has not so far been entrusted with any important commission, but is active. In manner a little loutish, but not a bad fellow. Humorous in outlook, and perhaps a little better balanced, because less intense, than his brothers. Shy.

Yenbo, October 27, 1916

T.E.L.

Return to [World War I Document Archive](#)
Comments, corrections and suggestions are welcome:
[Jane Plotke](#) (content) or [Richard Hacken](#) (form).

Last Updated: February 10, 1996.
