



# Background Paper: Sixth Annual Conference for Historical Studies

“The Arab Government in Damascus (1918–1920)”

The Sixth Annual Conference for Historical Studies convened by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) will be held in Beirut in April 2019. Participants at the 2019 Conference are invited to address the theme of the “Arab Government in Damascus from 1918 to 1920”.

In the midst of great historical transformations unfolding and the demise of the Ottoman Empire, King Faisal’s government held out the promise of the construction of modern, national state in the Arab Mashreq. This period of transformation was part of an era of comprehensive global transformation from a world of empires to a world of independent states. The majority of other nationalist movements rising across the Ottoman world – from their emergence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the outbreak of World War I and the settlements that came in its wake – were able to achieve independence and resolve the national question. By contrast, the attempt by the Arab movement to achieve independence for Arabs and establish an independent state in the Levant in union with Iraq collided with Anglo-French colonial rivalries, struggles, divisions, and understandings, ultimately falling victim to those rivalries at a critical period of global change. This led to what can be termed the “Arab Issue”, described by Azmi Bishara as the Arabs’ inability to realize a national unity. This continues to be a pressing issue today; the “Arab Issue” makes itself felt as an Arab-wide cause, one which goes beyond the boundaries of the present-day Arab states. Arabism, in this sense, has continued to provide the mortar which holds together each of the currently existing Arab states.

The short-lived Arab government in Damascus, was an experience in modern Arab governance, reflected in the trappings of the modern state, in its legal, administrative and political sense. The most concrete form taken by the Faisal’s government in Syria was the Syrian National Congress, the duties of which included several composite functions: it was simultaneously an elected legislature and constituent assembly. It also marked the earliest attempt at an elected government in Syria since the demise of the Ottoman Empire.

An Arabist Syrian identity, the essence of which was expressed by King Faisal (later Faisal I of Iraq) as “Religion belongs to God; the Homeland is shared by all” and “We are Arab before we are Muslim, Christian, and Jew”, provided the guiding vision of that period. The independence of the political authorities; the building of a Syrian national army together with compulsory military conscription; the creation of the nucleus for a modern Syrian university and for an Academy of the Arabic language; the minting of a Syrian national currency; the formation of representative political parties; the delineation of a sphere for varied public opinion; an institutional system for decentralized control by the provinces within a wider unitary state; an enhanced role for women in society; these and other features of modern Syria can be traced back to that brief experience. The constitution of the Arab state of Syria, or what is referred to as the Kingdom of Syria, or sometimes the Arab Kingdom of Syria, was modern and open; it was a modern *civil* constitution, one which implemented a sense of secularism if in a broad sense. This modern institutional experience adopted the best of the Ottoman tanzimat: elements of modernization and renaissance, which it applied as institutional cement for a new Syrian Arab national life after the collapse of the Ottoman state.

The Kingdom's government emerged from the Syrian National Congress, which was elected in line with the protocol of the Ottoman Empire, held in two stages and including delegates from across the Levant. Although it remains unclear how representative of contemporaneous attitudes in Syria this Congress was, it appears on the basis of several indicators (all of which require more in-depth research) to have been the largest representative organ of public attitudes at that time. Certainly, the Damascus National Program for self-determination seemed to have enough credibility for it to be adopted country-wide. Representation of Syria's confessional, religious and cultural diversity was indeed genuine, with delegates to the Congress representing the various elements of the Syrian population: Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, Christians, Jews, rural notables, intellectuals and patrician urban notables, all of whom had social and political authority within their communities, being well represented.

The Congress' sessions were chaired by Mohammed Fawzi Al-Azm, Hashem Al-Atassi and Sheikh Rashid Rida. The experience of the Syrian Congress constituted a unique experience of institutional tolerance in the history of the Levant until that time, and one that was led by elected representatives.

The experience of the Arab Government did have its share of internal contradictions. First was the rise of regionalist tensions, Syrian, Iraqi, Palestinian, and Levantine in orientation within its very core. There was, as well, opposition from the Hijaz, despite the fact that Syrian Army included in its ranks some of the military officers from Iraq and elsewhere who had first taken part in the Great Arab Rebellion. International political pressures on the Arab Mashreq finally cleaved the Arabist movement into Syrian and Iraqi flanks. Also prominent were generational political divides between the old guard of the Arab movement and the younger generation and between the Damascus notables and the new elites. In other words, the Arab Government in Syria was a fertile testing ground for a number of competing trends and political developments. It also witnessed the introduction of "the people" into the world of politics and decision-making and growing popular demands to take part in the course of history.

Nevertheless, throughout its short political history, the most significant tensions and pressures that governed the emergence and development of the Arab Government were Anglo-French competition over the division of Mashreq, the expansion of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the San Remo Conference of 1920, all of which are now well-known. Here, however, the problem of Arab-Turkish relations came to the fore, along with the different and polarized positions within the Arab Government, the Arab movement, and the Syrian National Congress over it with the beginning of the national liberation movement in Turkey led by Mustafa Kemal. This has not been adequately studied from an Arab or Syrian perspective (emphasis on Syrian or Arab).

The emergence of modern nationalist movements from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, beginning in the nineteenth century and through the end of World War I has been widely studied, as has the period of the formation of the Arab movement and its cultural and political advancement, and the crisis of Turkish-Arab relations in the remnants of the Ottoman world after the arrival of the federalists to power (1909), although the Arab historical writings of this period still require further objective research free of the subsequent ideological and political influences that have dominated Arab historiography. Aided by extensive archives, the periods of Anglo-French competition over the Arab nation, the partition of the Mashreq between the French and the British, and the position of the international powers in the dynamics of that conflict were similarly well studied. Yet the Arab Government in Damascus (1918-1920), born of a confluence between the Arab movement in the form of its most important association, *al-Arabiya al-Fata*, and the Sharifs of Hijaz, in what was known as the Great Arab Revolt (1916-1918) which together joined forces with the British during World War I in return for a promise of Arab independence, stands out as singularly understudied.

It should not come as a surprise that Arab authors tend to relegate this brief period of time. For the “Hashemite” historians, the focus has always been on the more successful and influential through time experiences of the monarchies established in Jordan and Iraq. Likewise, modern Syrian academic history has also avoided touching on the Arab Government, treating Faisal’s government as just one developmental stage on the path to a fuller Arab nationalism. This neglect was a result of a change in approach from Arab nationalists beginning in the 1940s, a point during which there was a break with the older, more traditional Arab nationalist leadership. Despite this, the 8 March continued to be recognized by the Syrian leadership as Syria’s official Independence Day, in deference to the declaration by the Syrian National Congress. Things changed in 1946 however, when this occasion was relegated by the more pressing conflict with the Jordanian leadership with which the Syrians were in competition for the chance to create a “Greater Syria”.

The above introduction is not intended as a prelude to discussions at the upcoming conference—in fact, this material could possibly provide the impetus for an entirely separate conference at a future date, whether convened by the ACRPS or another sponsor. It is included here merely to point out how marginalized the history of Faisal’s Syrian kingdom has become in official Syrian discourse; it has been relegated to an afterthought in official history curricula.

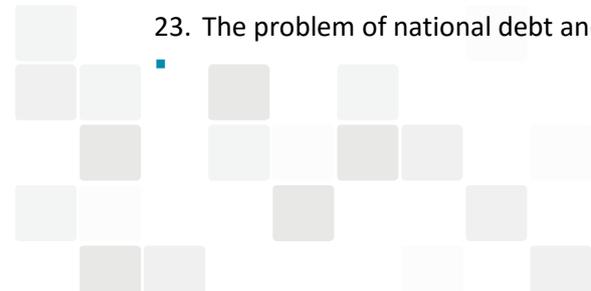
Given its significance to Syrian history, this presents a true paradox. There is a similarly confusing aspect to this story: the dearth of Syrian, and more broadly Arab, historical treatments of this period is not due to a lack of primary sources in the Arabic language. Indeed, there is an abundance of first-hand accounts of the period. Regrettably, these sources have not yet been employed in a systematic academic study of the Arab Government, whether in light of the Arab sources, or even in view of available Western archival sources.

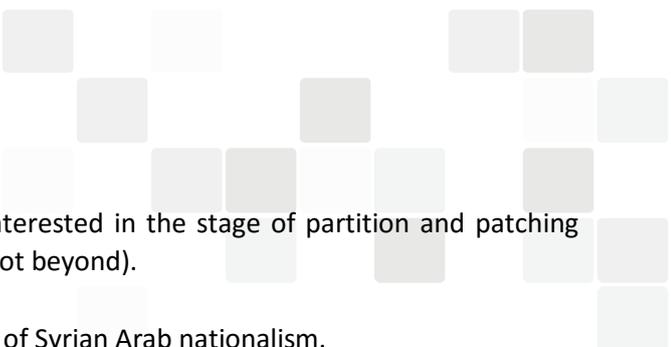
In light of the above, this conference focuses exclusively on the experience of the Arab Government in Syria (1918-20). Of course, it is impossible to ignore the nature of its period and the history leading up to it, and even the history afterwards, but this experience is the focus of the conference.

We look forward to receiving new academic treatments or those with added research value based on the available primary and secondary that have not yet been used to study that experience critically. While the ability to bring Arabic language sources to light is highly valued. There is a relative abundance of memoirs, as well as official government decisions published in *Al-Asimah*, part of which were also published in the official *Aleppo* newspaper. These decisions provide rich and interesting material for analysis.

The Conference suggests a reference range (and not an exhaustive list) of topics that cover this experience:

1. Analytical historiographical criticism: critique of what has been written in Arab studies about the Arab movement and its relation to the experience of the Arab Government. This critique also refers to the relatively abundant memoirs and their different narratives of the history of this experiment.
2. The Prince Zeid papers and their analysis in light of the historical context and the representation of young people around him.
3. The French-British conflict and the role of oil in the new amendments, agreements, and partitions.
4. The Syrian Congress: its origin, development and stages.

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5. The independence session in the sessions of the Syrian National Congress.  
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  6. The replacement crisis and the emergence of the Higher National Committee.  
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  7. Structure of the governments of the Arab era.  
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  8. The attitude towards Jewish immigration and the Balfour Declaration on the National Homeland of the Jews and the Faisal-Weizmann Agreement.  
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  9. The Faisal-Clemenceau Agreement  
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  10. The emergence of the Istiqlal Party as the front of *al-Arabiya al-Fatah* (Young Arab Society), and the formation of the parties at the Syrian National Congress.  
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  11. The Damascus notables and the position on the Arab Government.  
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  12. Syrian – Iraqi divisions of *al-Arabiya al-Fatah* (.  
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  13. The conflict between radicals and moderates.  
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  14. Arab–Kemalist contacts and divisions of the Arab movement towards them and the delay of the alliance with the Kemalists.  
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  15. The Arab Government’s problems with the French and the British.  
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  16. The position of the Syrian clans: Al-Fadan, Al-Rula, etc.  
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  17. The February 1919 sedition in Aleppo: between the narratives of participants and French narrative, an opportunity to gauge the nationalist, integrationist positions of the Christian churches with the project of the Arab movement.  
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  18. The emergence of the independent Syrian army and its confrontation at the Battle of Maysalun: a critical analytical comparison between two narratives.  
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  19. The Arab Government's policy towards the question of Lebanon.  
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  20. The Syrian constitution: its sources and the structure of its constitutional law on the state, the unified and decentralized state, the provincial system, the so-called minorities issue, etc.  
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  21. From the Declaration of Independence to Gouraud’s warning.  
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  22. The Defense Ministry: restoration of the army and defense of Syrian Arab national dignity and honor at the Battle of Maysalun.  
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  23. The problem of national debt and the socioeconomic situation during the years 1918–1920.  
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24. The Battle of Maysalun and after (the Conference is interested in the stage of partition and patching together until the formation of the “Syrian Union” and not beyond).
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  25. The role of the Arab Government period in the founding of Syrian Arab nationalism.
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  26. Personalities from different generations: Prince Zeid, Riza Pasha Rikabi, Darwaza, Awni Abdel Hadi, Subhi al-Omari, Satie al-Hosary, Hassan al-Hakim, al-Sarraj, Saeed Haidar, Yasin al-Hashemi, Abdel Rahman al-Shahbandar (government stage only), Hashem al-Atassi, Yusuf al-Azma, Rashid Rida, Fawzi Pasha al-Azm, etc.
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  27. King Faisal al-Shami: Faisal's problems with King Hussein, Prince Abdullah, Syrians pan-Arabists, etc.

The Conference looks forward to receiving original, specialist studies, which involve innovative research efforts on this subject and present new material or treatments, as follows:

1. The Conference is to be held at its regular date in April 2019.
2. The Conference Academic Committee is to receive research proposals through the attached form, no later than \_\_\_\_\_
3. The Academic Committee is to receive completed research papers for peer review by \_\_\_\_\_.
4. All research papers shall be subject to peer review by a competent academic committee with specialist knowledge of the conference topic, prior to the conference. A period of one month will be available to make changes after the conference ends.

## Participation Rules and Guidelines

Abstracts should be submitted together with the author' biography in Arabic or English and should not exceed 700 words. These are expected to meet academic standards and can be submitted until September 30, 2018. Abstracts should be sent to the chairman of the Conference Committee, Dr. Khaled Ziade at the following email account: [History.conference@dohainstitute.org](mailto:History.conference@dohainstitute.org). The research proposal will be subject to an internal peer-review process and researchers will receive notice of acceptance, rejection, or amendments two weeks after the submission date.

For abstracts which have been approved by the Conference Committee, the deadline for submission of completed drafts is January 31, 2019. These are expected to be original works and to make a contribution to the academic literature while adopting the citation style used by the ACRPS. The papers will be peer-reviewed by a specialized committee who will inform authors of all outcomes (acceptance, rejection or approval with amendments) no later than March 1, 2019.



