



# DURHAM MIDDLE EAST PAPERS

ABBAS HILMI II'S NOMINATION FOR THE THRONE  
OF SYRIA 1930-1932

**Sami Moubayed**

*Fellow, The Mohamed Ali Foundation*

**Durham Middle East Paper No. 110**

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INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AND ISLAMIC STUDIES

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OF SYRIA 1930-1932

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**Mohamed Ali Foundation Paper No. 04**

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MAF Papers No. 04  
Durham Middle East Papers No. 110  
ISSN 1476-4830  
April 2024

The Durham Middle East Papers series covers all aspects of the economy, politics, social science, history, literature and languages of the Middle East. Authors are invited to submit papers to the Editorial Board for consideration for publication.

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In 2018 Durham University and the Mohamed Ali Foundation<sup>1</sup> launched a fellowship programme to encourage academic research in the archive of the last khedive of Egypt, Abbas Hilmi II (1874–1944), and to make the collection’s strengths more widely known to international researchers.

The collection, which is deposited in Durham University Library’s Archives and Special Collections, provides a rich resource of material on political, social, economic and cultural affairs in Egypt in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. It is hoped that this endowment by the Mohamed Ali Foundation will foster deeper understanding of an important period of Egyptian history and of a transformative era in East-West relations.

Dr Pascale Ghazaleh is Chair and Associate Professor of History at The American University in Cairo. Dr Ghazaleh has taught in AUC’s History Department since 2005. She is an expert on Ottoman history and 19th century Egypt, on which she has published widely. She holds a PhD in History from Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, writing on “Généalogies patrimoniales. La constitution des fortunes urbaines: Le Caire, 1780-1830” (“Patrimonial Genealogies. The Constitution of Urban Wealth: Cairo, 1780-1830”).

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In 1930-1932, serious consideration was given to the naming of Abbas Hilmi II as king of Syria. Although very little has been written about the subject, what we know for sure is that his name was put forth and debated, both on the Syrian street and the upper echelons of power in Paris – which was occupying Syria – before the project was eventually abandoned and discarded completely. It actually came to an abrupt end the day Mohammad ‘Ali al-‘Abed was sworn-in as Syria’s first republican president in June 1932. Some have mentioned the khedive’s nomination in *passim* although nobody has given this episode any serious academic study, trying to find out how serious the project was and why it never materialized. This historical gap has now filled by Abbas Hilmi’s papers deposited and recently digitized and made available to scholars by the Mohammad Ali Foundation at Durham University.

In 1831, the city of Damascus was plunged into chaos when its Ottoman governor, Salim Pasha, tried to enforce a real estate tax on the city’s Muslims. They rose in revolt and shot him dead, right in the middle of an old Damascene mansion, creating a power vacuum in the city that the Ottomans sluggishly tried to refill, with little luck. The sudden turn of events prompted the ambitious viceroy of Egypt, Mohammad ‘Ali Pasha, to send his army to Syria, ostensibly, to put an end to the rebellion and protect the locals from any foreign intervention from Great Britain and France.<sup>1</sup> After laying siege to Acre, the pasha’s men marched towards Damascus; a total of 18,000 troops commander by his second son and heir, the 43-year-old Ibrahim Pasha. On 14 June 1832, Damascus fell to the Egyptians, with symbolic resistance from the locals. Little actual fighting took place and only ten people were killed.<sup>2</sup>

Furious with the Ottomans, the notables of Syria were almost waiting for Mohammad ‘Ali Pasha to rule them, having communicated with him as far back as 1810.<sup>3</sup> The very first contact had been initiated by the governor of Damascus Yusuf Kinj Pasha, seeking Egyptian support in a power struggle between him and the governor of Sidon.<sup>4</sup> Both were Ottoman appointees and technically, so was Mohammad ‘Ali Pasha. But he was the only appointee with the will and ambition to challenge his patrons, carving out a hereditary throne for himself and his family in Egypt that would last from the early 1800s until 1952. His reputation would soon spread far and wide, prompting Arabs to regard him as an iron-willed leader whom they could turn to for support. By 1827 the pasha was receiving gifts from the Damascus gentry, prompting a French diplomat to comment: ‘Mohammad ‘Ali has an ambition to become the pasha of Syria. To make that happen, he has offered to pay the Ottoman treasury anywhere between 7-8 million *quros*hs.’<sup>5</sup> He then appealed directly to the sultan, Mahmud II, demanding Syria in exchange for an annual flat rate of 100,000 sacks of gold.<sup>6</sup> When that too was rejected, he decided to take Syria by force, sending his troops to overrun the country in 1832.

Mohammad 'Ali Pasha himself never foot in Syria but handled its affairs entirely through his son. The period of Egyptian rule (1831-1840) was marked by progressive reforms, giving Damascus modern hospitals, pharmacies, police stations, and a sewage system. Military conscription became a must and schools became obligatory. Families were encouraged – with generous monthly stipends from the Egyptian government – to send their children to school, and under Ibrahim Pasha, Syria got its first all-girl school. Christians were given equal rights with their Muslim counterparts, and allowed to use the Gregorian calendar, raise the Cross, repair their churches and celebrate Christmas, Easter, and New Year's.<sup>7</sup> Dress codes for Syrian minorities were lifted, applying to both Christians and Jews. Some dated back to the Mamluk era, and for the first time in history, Catholics were allowed to open their own church in Haret al-Zaytoun, tucked within the cobbled alleys of Old Damascus.<sup>8</sup>

All of that came to an abrupt end when in 1840, Ibrahim Pasha was forced out of Syria by European powers.<sup>9</sup> The period of Egyptian rule in Syria is beyond this study, but its memory would live long in the collective psyche of the Syrian people, and within his own family in Egypt. And this might explain why some Syrians rejoiced when the name of his great-grandchild, Abbas Hilmi II, surfaced as a possible king for Syria, in 1930-1932. That was exactly 100-years after Ibrahim Pasha's forces had marched into Syria and sixteen years after Abbas Hilmi lost his throne in Cairo. Many Syrians had heard of that episode through their grandfathers or read about it in history books. Only a handful, however, knew anything about Abbas Hilmi II. Syrian newspapers only started covering Egyptian affairs during the era of his successors, Sultan Husayn Kamel and King Fouad. And that was only during World War I, after the khedive's exodus from Cairo. For most Syrians, Abbas Hilmi was simply the grandson of Mohammad 'Ali Pasha. And to many of them, that seemed enough to make him king.

Until recently, we knew very little about Abbas Hilmi's nomination for the throne of Syria. Only two books mentioned it, albeit briefly, being the memoirs of Druze statesman Emir 'Adel 'Arslan (published in Beirut in the early 1970s) and Philip S. Khoury's seminal book, *Syria and the French Mandate* (Princeton University Press 1987). It was also mentioned, also briefly, in a handful of British and French diplomatic exchanges, leading some to believe that the project was never serious enough to merit proper study and analysis, neither during the khedive's own lifetime nor after his death in 1944. Abbas Hilmi himself makes no mention of the Syrian throne in his memoirs, and there is nothing about the project at the Museum of Historical Documents of Damascus, with very little at the British National Archives in London, and the

French ones in Nantes. Now with the Abbas Hilmi II Papers made available at Durham University to a wide audience of scholars, students, and Egyptologists, we can build a more proper assessment of how serious the Abbas Hilmi–Syria connection really was, how he was nominated for its throne and why the project never materialized.

### *The Syrian Throne Question*

When liberated from 400-years of Ottoman rule in 1918, Syria briefly got a monarchy, led by Emir Faisal I of the Hashemite family, who was crowned king on 8 March 1920 only to be deposed by the invading French Army on 24 July 1920.<sup>10</sup> Syria's experience with monarchism, although short-lived, was filled with achievements, like penning a constitution, holding the first nationwide parliamentary elections, Arabizing the civil service and both the Arab Academy of Law and the Arab Academy of Medicine (which would later merge to form Damascus University in 1923). It was a monarchy in name and hereditary power only; there was no real crown under King Faisal I, and no throne.

Faisal was toppled by the French in 1920 and five years later, a revolt broke out against the mandate regime in the Druze Mountain, which eventually spread to the fruit-orchards surrounding Damascus, known as al-Ghouta. The French responded with brute force, torching entire villages in the Damascus countryside and on 18 October 1925, shelling the Syrian capital. The ancient Bzurieh and Hamidieh markets were destroyed, and so were parts of the conservative neighborhood of al-Midan, outside the Old City. Anywhere between 500-1,000 Syrians died in twenty-four hours of French aggression.<sup>11</sup> An opportunity to pull the country back together came in late 1926, when French President Raymond Poincaré appointed Henri Ponsot as the new high commissioner for Syria and Lebanon. A career diplomat who had served in Berlin and Canada before handling French colonial affairs in North Africa, Ponsot came to Syria with an elaborate plan to single out moderates with whom France could do business. His assistant Paul Lepissier talked him into revisiting the idea of the Syrian throne, one that could restore stability to the country. Unlike the throne of 1920, which was the brainchild of Great Britain, this one had to be created and installed by France. Ponsot was won over and he wrote to his boss, foreign minister Aristride Brian, saying that a king would 'assure stability, protect national traditions, and safeguard prestige of the country.'<sup>12</sup>

Over the next four years, every now and then an article would appear in the Damascus press, with names of potential contenders for the Syrian throne.

Few were based on facts. Most were actually the product of imaginative journalists, who went as far as to nominate King Zog I of Albania – who spoke no Arabic – for the throne of Damascus. Prime on the list of real candidates was Syria’s ex-king Faisal, who by now had been installed as sovereign of Iraq since August 1921.

He still harbored a desire to rule Syria so did his younger half-brother Emir Zayd, Algerian notable Emir Sa’id El Djezairi, and Damad Ahmad Nami, a Circassian aristocrat who happened to be the ex-son-in-law of Sultan ‘Abdulhamid II. They were all looped into one category as potential kings, along with Abbas Hilmi II, then in exile in Europe after having been dethroned from Egypt in 1914. Faisal of course was Syria’s former sovereign, considered by many as the only legitimate king after having been coronated and sworn-in by Syria’s democratically elected parliament in 1920. His brother, Emir Zayd, had served as deputy in 1919-1920. The Algerian emir Sa’id El Djezairi lived in Damascus, where he was born and raised. Briefly in September 1918 he created an interim cabinet to run the country in the immediate aftermath of the Ottoman evacuation. Ahmad Nami, also known as the ‘damad’ (son-in-law of the sultan in Persian), had served as both president and prime minister of Syria between May 1926 and February 1928. Abbas Hilmi was the only outsider among the group. Apart from hearing stories of his grand-grandfather’s tenure in

Damascus, he had never visited Syria in his life and would die an old man in 1944, without ever setting foot in the country.

### ***Brief stint with Palestinian Affairs***

By 1931, Khedive Abbas had been living in exile for a total of seventeen years. With the passing of time, all hope at seriously returning to the Egyptian throne began to fade and he began inching closer to Levantine affairs, starting with Palestine, the burning issue of the 1920s and 1930s. Secret talks between Arab notables and members of the Jewish Agency had been underway since 1913.<sup>13</sup> The Jews were trying to convince Arab leaders to support their state in Palestine, in exchange for Zionist organizations considerable influence in Europe to help the Arabs secure their independence from the Ottomans. Prominent Arab figures had joined the talks at different junctures of the talks, including Musa Kazem al-Husseini of Palestine, Riad al-Solh of Lebanon, and Jamil Mardam Bey of Syria.<sup>14</sup> Abbas Hilmi was never close to Palestinian politics, yet he decided to join the talks, in anticipation hijacking them to his advantage. It is unclear whether this stemmed for any actual commitment to the Palestinian Cause – which seems unlikely - or whether he used to it keep himself relevant to regional and international politics. The ex-khedive suggested meeting with Chaim Weizmann, president of the Zionist Organization, suggesting a roundtable between Jewish and

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Palestinian leaders aimed at coming out with a solution to the issue of Palestine, deemed satisfactory to both parties. Broadly, the initiative came to be known as the ‘Khedive Project’ and it included: Creation of an Arab federal union under which Palestine would be a free and independent state, free of any British military influence or presence. This federal Arab stage (which would also include Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq) would give

the Jews right to live in Palestine, with a limited form of autonomy mentioned specifically in the Arab ‘constitution.’<sup>15</sup> Nobody seemed to like the Khedive Project, however, neither the Arabs nor the Jews, although it did attract significant media attention.

Up until then, Syria was seemingly not on his mind, and it only began to matter when he started reading his name in the papers, sometime in mid-1930, as a king-in-waiting. That triggered a series of communications between Abbas Hilmi and a handful of Syrian figures who began reaching out to him, offering to lobby the Syrian street on his behalf. Some were undoubtedly sincere in their efforts; others were charlatans hoping to milk the khedive for money. Members of the clerical establishment (the ulema) argued for restoration of a crown, claiming that Islam knew new other form of government since the death of the prophet. Republicanism was alien to the entire Arab World and never had Muslims experienced it throughout their long history (with exception of the Tripolitanian Republic of Libya that emerged after World War I). The ulema considered it an important form of rule and so did the officer class, whose top brass had been discharged from service after the Syrian Army’s defeat in the standoff with the French – known as the Battle of Maysaloun – 1920. They looked towards their comrades in Egypt and saw how well-trained, well-paid, and respected they had been since the days of Mohammad ‘Ali.

### ***The Syria Throne Correspondences***

*First correspondent: ‘Aref Hikmat Agha al-Qalaa*

On 10 September 1931, an Aleppo-based military physician, Dr. ‘Aref Hikmat Agha al-Qalaa, reached out to the khedive in writing, through a friend. Hailing from a prominent family of the Aleppine middle class, he was an Ottoman-trained doctor, then in his mid-fifties, who had previously served as one of Sultan Mehmed VI’s escorts. Agha al-Qalaa describes Abbas Hilmi as the ‘most deserving of the Syrian throne, and its crown’ than any of the names currently

“...HE WOULD  
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SUMMER...”

making the rounds in Paris and Damascus.<sup>16</sup> He explained saying: ‘People say that France wants to restore the monarchy to Syria and that a meeting will be held to decide on that, and other pending issues, next November.’ Agha al-Qalaa’s letter came just weeks before parliamentary elections were due to take place throughout Syria in December 1931, and he suggested supporting a handful of sympathetic MPs who would be willing to raise the khedive’s name within the Syrian Chamber of Deputies and call for his enthronement in Damascus. ‘That is our only hope’ he wrote to the khedive in Switzerland.<sup>17</sup>

Agha al-Qalaa added: ‘We (in Syria) will continue to support you over King ‘Ali,’ the eldest son of Sharif Hussein, who was starting to develop a Syria ambition of his own after being dethroned from his father’s kingdom in the Hejaz. He would pay a courtesy visit to Damascus next summer, in July 1932, to see how serious the throne project was, and how much support it enjoyed among the Syrian public. Abbas Hilmi strangely did not make such a trip, communicating with his Syrian supporters in writing or by proxy. He would soon start exchanging letters directly with ‘Aref Hikmat Agha al-Qalaa, who strongly advised him to visit Damascus and Aleppo in order to familiarize himself with their elites and power centers. Agha al-Qalaa

manages to convince the khedive that he had a strong following in Syria, regardless of how true and authentic that was. He wrote: ‘You abandoned the sultanate of Egypt but there is another sultanate looking in your direction. It is awaiting your visit because there are those being nominated for its throne who are unwanted by the people of Syria, like King ‘Ali of the Hejaz, Sharif ‘Ali, and Sharif Zayd. We won’t move in that direction without your approval.’<sup>18</sup>

Two months after the khedive’s correspondences with ‘Aref Hikmat, *The Daily Telegraph* ran an article on 23 December 1931 entitled ‘The Ambitions of Ex-Khedive: Designs on Throne of Syria.’ It read: ‘It is unlikely that he has received, or will receive, any encouragement and support whether from the French High Commissioner or from the Syrian nation. But he is striving hard to win favor of both.’<sup>19</sup> The article implies that the khedive was actually marketing himself for the Syrian throne – which is incorrect – since he never made such a bid. He didn’t respond to *The Daily Telegraph* article, but instead, nudged one of his friends, General Robert Blakeney to write a reply on his behalf.<sup>20</sup>

*Second correspondent: Hasan Khaled Pasha Abu al-Huda*

After the letters of ‘Aref Hikmat Agha al-Qalaa, one of khedive’s Egyptian interlocutors, Hasan Khaled Abu al-Huda Pasha (1871-1936), begins writing about Syria. Not to be confused with future Jordanian prime minister Tawfiq Abu al-Huda, this Abu al-Huda was also twice prime minister of Jordan, but he hailed from the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Syria unlike Tawfiq, who was from Acre in Palestine. He is the son of Abu al-Huda al-Sayyadi, one of the top advisers to Sultan ‘Abdulhamid II and was close both to the emir of Jordan, ‘Abdullah Ibn al-Hussein, and his brother, King Faisal of Iraq, making him a valuable source of information on Hashemite ambitions in Syria.<sup>21</sup> Abu al-Huda was far better informed than ‘Aref Hikmat Pasha, explaining why the khedive took his letters more seriously. And when he began corresponding with the khedive he was already back at the premiership of Transjordan. Abu al-Huda was also well-connected to the royal court in Egypt and he reported to the khedive that King Fouad was ‘very unhappy’ with his nomination for the throne of Syria and had sent an envoy to Damascus with the objective of bringing down the entire project. The king’s envoy was Karim Thabet, a journalist who in future years would serve as King Farouk’s interlocuter with Syrian president Shukri al-Quwatli and his successor, Colonel Husni al-Za’im.

Abu al-Huda explains to the khedive that the Syrian throne question had stirred something ‘akin to madness in Egypt,’ adding: ‘It has upset them (the royal court) a lot.’<sup>22</sup> He also mentions a report from Thabet to King Fouad, saying that he had met scores of influential Syrians who varied in their enthusiasm towards a restored crown in Damascus, adding that Turkish operatives were



working in the Syrian north, trying to revive the Muslim caliphate. The Ottoman caliphate had continued to exist after World War I, until it was abolished by Mustapha Kemal in March 1924. Thabet advises King Fouad to step in and start supporting Syrian republicans to make sure no crown is restored to Damascus, whether an Egyptian or Hashemite one. Thabet even suggests hosting a conference for Syrian republicans in Cairo, whose agenda would be, among other things, destroying Abbas Hilmi's bid for the throne of Syria. And this 'advice' might be what actually convinced King Fouad to give political sanctuary to a handful of influential Syrian republicans, headed by future president, Shukri al-Quwatli, who spent the 1920s and early 1930s in Cairo, as a guest of the king of Egypt.

Abu al-Huda Pasha is clearly a supporter of the khedive, and he sympathizes fully with his nomination for the Syrian throne. Whether intentionally or not, however, he paints a grim, and often inaccurate picture of the situation in Syria, implying that the country is on the verge of collapse and that only Abbas Hilmi can rescue it from the abyss. In one letter, he mentions how the speaker of parliament Subhi Barakat ordered his men to assault the son of Aleppo chief Ibrahim Hananu, stirring great tension in the Syrian north. This story was based on bazaar gossip and no such assault took place in Aleppo, due to mutual

respect between Barakat and Hananu, despite their political differences. 'The situation is very unpleasant' writes Abu al-Huda Pasha, adding on 9 May 1932 that an article appeared in the Palestinian newspaper *al-Karmil*, about Abbas Hilmi's candidacy for the Syrian throne. He describes it as a 'famous paper known for its nationalistic line' and says that he bought 100 copies and distributed them in Aleppo, Homs and Hama. He also adds that he wrote letters to the editors of the Damascus dailies, asking them to syndicate the article.<sup>23</sup>

Abu al-Huda also mentions that King Faisal is due in Amman in June 1932, where he hopes to meet his two brothers, 'Ali and 'Abdullah, to unite their efforts towards aborting the chances of any non-Hashemite for the throne of Syria. Abu al-Huda frequently refers to himself as a 'humble servant' of the khedive, saying: 'Your servant will attend their meeting,' obviously in his capacity as prime minister of the Emirate of Transjordan. He goes on to say that King Faisal is upset 'with your servant' because 'I am obstructing their policies in Syria (the Hashemite family). But being your humble servant, that doesn't matter to me.' Abu al-Huda says that the Hashemite royals sent his predecessor Rida al-Rikabi, a former premier under both Faisal and 'Abdullah, to drum up anti-Abbas Hilmi sentiment in Damascus. Rikabi hailed from a large and illustrious Damascene family and was popular among the officer class,

having served in the ranks both of the Ottoman Army and that of Faisal and his father, Sharif Hussein of Mecca. 'They have high hopes in Rikabi' writes Abu al-Huda, 'although the former premier was unable to gain a single vote in the parliamentary elections of 1932, and suffered a humiliating defeat.'<sup>24</sup> He is referring here to Rikabi's nomination on behalf of *Hizb al-Umma al-Malakiyya*, a pro-monarchial party created by ex-officers in Faisal's Army, which contested through him, the parliamentary elections of 1932 in Syria, failing to win a single seat.

#### *Third correspondent Ahmad Hafez 'Awad*

Back home in Cairo, the Syrian throne question had indeed raised tension to dangerously high levels, as Abu al-Huda had correctly described, due to King Fouad's disapproval of making his nephew sovereign of another Arab state. That would create a rival Arab monarchy in the region, divide the family of Mohammad 'Ali, in addition to creating unnecessary tension between him and the French, who were still controlling Syria. Kareem Thabet returned from Damascus with news that the khedive was not entirely unpopular, and that many would indeed support him, if and when he showed up in their midst. The reaction rection of King Fouad can namely be found in the letters of Ahmad Hafez 'Awad, former private secretary to the khedive who was now serving as editor-in-chief of *Kawkab al-Sharq*.<sup>25</sup> On 22 February 1932, he wrote his first letter on Syria, telling his former boss that instead of opposing him openly and coming across as a spoiler, King Fouad had decided to secretly back his main challenger, Emir Sa'id El Djezairi. From 'Awad's papers, we can tell that the king was seemingly under the impression that Abbas Hilmi would no longer be working in politics, and when news reached him that he was considering the throne in Syria, Fouad set out on ruining the project and putting an end to the khedive's ambition.

Born in Damascus to Algerian notability in 1883, Emir Sa'id was grandson of Emir 'Abdelkader El Djezairi, the former ruler of Algeria who rose in revolt and led a seventeen-year insurgency against the French, until he was finally arrested in 1847. He spent the next eight years in French jails, where he and his family members were tortured, before being released to Ottoman Damascus, where he lived until his death in 1883. Emir Sa'id copied his grandfather in practically everything and greatly admired how he had been declared the ultimate leader of Damascus due to his knowledge, generosity, and reputation as a Muslim hero. Briefly in September 1918 Emir Sa'id had served as a self-appointed ruler of Syria, running state affairs during the interim period between exodus of the Ottomans and entry of the Arab troops led by Faisal. In mid-1924, Emir Sa'id set up a Caliphate Society in Damascus, modeled after the Khalifat Movement in India.<sup>26</sup> Its aim was to find a suitable replacement

to the last Ottoman caliph, ‘Abdulmejid II, whose position in Istanbul had just been terminated by President Mustafa Atatürk that March. Emir Sa’id gathered a number of Syrian notables around his project, saying that the world’s fifteen million Muslims needed a single authority to follow, proposing—to nobody’s surprise—that he assumes the job himself. Many supported the Caliphate Society, if not necessary Emir Sa’id’s ambitions, although the project quickly fell apart and was all but dead in 1928.<sup>27</sup>

In February 1932, Sa’id El Djezairi received an invitation to meet the king of Egypt. He was received with red carpets at ‘Abidin Palace, and a banquet was held in his honor in the city of Tanta, north of Cairo, followed by a Ramadan iftar at the home of the preacher at al-Azhar. The palace lobbied on his behalf with Cairo-based British officers, saying that he would make a fine king for Syria.<sup>28</sup> Abbas Hilmi did not say a word, although he was clearly unhappy with all the attention Emir Sa’id was getting in Cairo—out of all places. Egypt’s political elite chose to completely ignore Abbas Hilmi’s nomination for the throne of Syria, acting as if Emir Sa’id were the only serious candidate for the post. Accompanying the Algerian prince to Cairo was his friend Mohammad Rifaat, secretary of the Grand Orient Masonic Lodge of Damascus, where Emir Sa’id served as Grand Master. At the emir’s orders, Rifaat held separate talks with French officials in Cairo, trashing Abbas Hilmi while polishing the name of his boss, Sa’id El Djezairi. In return, the French ask him to write a detailed report about Emir Sa’id’s past, explaining why he would make a good king and what segments of Syrian society support him, based on concrete fact, rather than wishful thinking.<sup>29</sup>

Abbas Hilmi must have gone over these letters repeatedly, trying to read between the lines whether he still stood a chance as king, if his opponent were Sa’id El Djezairi. In another report sent by Ahmad Hafez ‘Awad he is told that weeks after Kareem Thabet wrapped up his Syria visit, King Fouad ordered two envoys to Damascus, with two objectives. One was to lobby on behalf of Emir Sa’id, and second was to whether his nomination had managed to erode some of Abbas Hilmi’s popularity. They two emissaries were Sadiq Pasha, an Egyptian, and Salim Izziddine, a Syrian working at the Egyptian Ministry of Interior. They met with various sectors of Syrian society, including the Druze community leaders, and according to a report that they sent to Abbas Hilmi: ‘If Khedive Abbas is nominated for the Syrian throne, then we will object and fight him with our swords.’<sup>30</sup> We can never know how true that statement was or whether it was entirely fabricated by its authors, knowing that anything negative about the khedive would be music to the ears of King Fouad.

“PLENTY  
OF RUMORS  
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CIRCULATING  
ABOUT SYRIA...”

*‘Awad Bey’s Advice*

‘Awad retaliates –despite the Khedive’s orders – with a counter-trip, visiting numerous Palestinian towns and cities. He writes to Abbas Hilmi on 26 January 1932, saying that he met with British colonial administrators working on the Syria File, asking what they thought of the khedive’s chances of success in Syria. ‘Summarizing what I was able to gather, I can say that the Syrians need assurances; they need to be assured that your candidacy is not a French project. They want to have a say in who rules them. They don’t want France to impose a king on them, nor any form of government unless they are given the honorifics of having chosen it.’<sup>31</sup>

‘Awad Bey adds: ‘Plenty of rumors have been circulating about Syria, its throne, and Your Highness.’ The khedive’s former secretary claims that everybody was asking him about what his former boss thought about the nomination, but says that he would always refuse to comment, or give vague answers like ‘maybe’ or ‘if it happens, it would be Syria’s good luck, although I don’t have a definite answer whether His Highness will accept the Syrian throne or decline it. This is a political matter to be decided by the Great Powers.’<sup>32</sup>

‘Awad then tells the khedive that he was visited at the offices of his newspaper by Sheikh Rashid Rada,

the Cairo-based Salafi cleric and editor of the Islamic newspaper *al-Manar*.<sup>33</sup> 'Awad describes Rida – who had been the last parliament speaker under King Faisal – as a 'good friend' who likes the Khedive and wants to know how serious was the possibility of making him king of Syria. His support must have sounded very appealing to 'Awad, given Rida's paramount influence within religious circles in both Syria and Egypt, and his unrivaled position as the ranking Sufi cleric of his generation. He is the most senior Syrian figure to support Abbas Hilmi as king, and the only official from King Faisal's entourage. Part of that was due to Rida's own disenchantment with Faisal for having accepting the French ultimatum of 14 July 1920, which called on him to disband the Syrian Army and prepare for the French Mandate in Syria. In fact, his last encounter with Faisal was to debate Syria's first and only royal charter, penned just weeks before the fall of Hashemite rule in Syria. To Faisal's dismay, the royal charter had greatly limited his powers, transforming him a constitutional monarch, which is Rashid Rida wished all monarchs to be, even Abbas Hilmi, if ever enthroned in Damascus. Faisal never appreciated the trappings of democracy that came with the new charter, rejecting a clause that forced him to obtain parliamentary approval for all his decrees. 'Who are you?' he aggressively asked Rashid Rida, adding 'I am the one who created Syria.'<sup>34</sup> That of course is what Faisal believed. Rida famously replied: 'Syria was created long before you.'<sup>35</sup> In future years Rashid Rida also lobbied against his father, Sharif Hussein's bid for the Islamic caliphate, claiming that all members of the Hashemite family were intellectually unfit for such a position.

'I sensed a strong desire on his part to support the idea (of your nomination) because he is against the Faisal option,' wrote 'Awad.<sup>36</sup> Rashid Rida said that he was willing to support khedive in Syria – if asked – adding that there are plenty who would do the same, some being state-employees.<sup>37</sup> 'Awad also mentions meeting an unidentified Syrian journalist who told him: 'The khedive has plenty of chances here (in Damascus).' On 6 August 1932, 'Awad sent Abbas Hilmi a copy of the Damascus daily *Alef Baa*, with a story about his nomination for the Syrian throne.<sup>38</sup> It was run by the Palestinian journalist Yusuf al-'Issa, who was once a hardboiled Faisal supporter.

But by the time, it was already too late for the Khedive or any of the ambitious kings-in-waiting. On 11 June 1932, Syria got its first presidential election and Mohammad 'Ali al-'Abed, an independent Damascene millionaire, was elected president. He was an old-school politician whose father had been senior adviser to Sultan 'Abdulhamid II. A Sorbonne University-graduate, 'Abed had served as Ottoman ambassador to the US in 1908. Former prime minister Rida al-Rikabi had campaigned on a monarchial party called *Hizb al-Umma al-Malaki*, which failed to win even one seat in the parliamentary elections of that year, showing

just how unpopular the monarchial project really was in Syria.<sup>39</sup> Weeks after Syria's new president was sworn-in, 'Awad Bey wrote another letter to the khedive dated 25 July 1932, advising him to refrain from criticizing Mohammad 'Ali al-'Abed. 'The regime that has been installed in Damascus cannot last. It has many enemies. A revolt and confrontation will take place. Let us wait until the fire eats itself out. We will then be sought after, rather than come across as seekers (of a throne).'<sup>40</sup> He was referring to tensions in the president's relation with the National Bloc, the leading anti-French movement in Syria, headed by future president, Hashem al-Atasi. It had withdrawn its support of 'Abed after he appointed Haqqi al-'Azm, a Francophile, as prime minister of Syria and in 1936, would lead a sixty-day strike that would bring down the entire 'Abed administration. Although 'Awad's prophecy would eventually prove correct, he had no way of knowing that this is how the 'Abed administration would end, just four years later.

The election of Mohammad 'Ali al-'Abed put the khedive's supporters in difficult waters. If anything, it proved that all the empty promises they had been making since 1930 were no more than wishful thinking. Neither the people of Syria wanted a monarchy, and nor did the French who were in control of the country. Although they did toy with the idea of a king, albeit briefly in the early 1930s, they eventually settled for republicanism and welcomed 'Abed's election as the start of a new era in Syria. That put the throne question on a backburner, and it was not raised again by the khedive's supporters until November 1933 when his old interlocuter, the Aleppo-based physician 'Aref Hikmat Agha al-Qalaa sent a letter to Abbas Hilmi saying:

The republic that was created under Mohammad 'Ali al-'Abed has failed to achieve its desired objectives. The people believe that the republic is both weak and inefficient, and that is explains why they have turned their attention once again towards restoration of the throne. They are saying: we want Khedive Abbas Hilmi Pasha as sultan of Syria.<sup>41</sup>

This was just two weeks after the 'Abed administration had entered into a full-blown confrontation with the French, after Syrian lawmakers rejected a proposed friendship treaty with Paris. Colonial administrators blamed 'Abed for the treaty's demise, believing that he had nudged parliamentarians into aborting it, via parliament speaker, Subhi Barakat. In response, the French high commission in Beirut had issued a decree on 21 November 1933 suspending the Syrian parliament for what remained of the 'Abed presidency.<sup>42</sup>

*Fourth correspondent Mohammad Nasib al-Khayyat*

'Aref Hikmat Agha al-Qalaa might have expected a speedy collapse of the Abed presidency, although it would remain in power until December 1936. All talk about 'Abed's eminent fall might have re-aroused the khedive's appetite for Syria, although developments on the ground were proving contrary to everything his supporters were telling him. He continued to receive period reports from various Syrians claiming to be speaking on behalf of the Syrian people, all saying that people were furious with the republic and wanted to see him enthroned in Damascus. One of his very last Syrian interlocutors, which happened to also be the least convincing, was Mohammad Nasib al-Khayyat, a native of Damascus who fled Syria in 1926 to work at the French Foreign Ministry in Paris.<sup>43</sup> Khayyat is the second most frequent Syrian to appear in the Khedive's papers, after 'Aref Hikmat Agha al-Qalaa. He corresponds frequently with the khedive, and on 7 May 1934, asks Abbas Hilmi for 'instructions' on how to move forward on Syria. He also mentions that he has established a direct connection to Lam'aa al-'Abed, the sister of President 'Abed, implying that she has an influence over her brother that could be useful.<sup>44</sup>

Although we don't have a date for Khayyat's first exchange with the khedive, the last was on 20 March 1936. That was at a high point in

Damascus, days before a delegation from the National Bloc headed to Paris to negotiate Syria's future. All of its members, headed by Hashem al-Atasi, were staunch republicans representing the parliamentary opposition to President 'Abed. Khayyat tells the khedive how the National Bloc had led a sixty-day strike against both Abed and the French, bringing the country to a grinding halt, which prompted colonial administrators to invite them to Paris for official talks. Khayyat suggests investing in their absence to visit Syria and meet with its political elite on behalf of the khedive. But he then makes the one mistake that none of his predecessors made: asking for money to pay for the visit's expenses.<sup>45</sup> His offer was rejected by Abbas Hilmi, who by now seems to have lost interest in the entire Syria project. In the very same final letter dated 20 March 1936, Khayyat says that he has been appointed secretary of the Druze Mountain mini-state in southern Syria, months before it was re-incorporated with the rest of Syria. Khayyat once again tells the Khedive that he has plenty of supporters among the Druze, notably with Emir Hasan al-Atrash, governor of the Druze Mountain and husband of the Cairo-based Syrian singer Asmahan. But although some continued to entertain the idea of a king, others had grown completely detached from it, as explained by Emir 'Adel Arslan, a celebrated Druze statesman of the 1930s. In his memoirs, Arslan attributes this sudden coldness to the

scandalous life of some Arabian princesses, which coincided with the final chapter of the Syrian throne question. One scandal revolved around Faisal's daughter, Princess 'Azza, who eloped to Rhodes after her father's death in September 1933 to marry an Italian waiter.<sup>46</sup> Another scandal revolved around Princess Fawqiyya, the daughter of King Fouad, who was leading a European lifestyle in Paris and rumored to be having an affair with a Frenchman, despite being married to the Egyptian ambassador to France, Mohammad Fakhri Pasha.<sup>47</sup> For a conservative society like Damascus, such stories only added to people's dismay towards a monarchy, especially one backed by the West. Adel Arslan, remarked in his memoirs: 'Princess Fawqiya, daughter of Fouad ... Princess Azza, daughter of Faysal. What a pity.'<sup>48</sup>

### **Conclusion**

At this point, the Syria connection comes to an end in the official papers of Abbas Hilmi II. The subject is dropped from all discourse, although the khedive continues to follow up on Syrian affairs, without giving the country any serious consideration. And at this point in history, his name stops appearing in Syrian newspapers, disappearing, almost overnight. Speaking to the author in June 2023, the khedive's grandson Emir Abbas says that his grandfather abandoned the Syria project after sending his son to Damascus to meet with its top clergy. 'They claimed ability to read the future on behalf. He came out of the meeting totally unimpressed. And this is when the khedive realized that the Syria project was not serious.' There is no mention in the khedive's papers of Emir 'Abdul Moneim's visit to Damascus, nor when it took place, although presumably, it would have been sometime between 1932-1936.

We can never tell for sure how Syria's future would have changed under a restored monarchy led by Abbas Hilmi II. Would it have heralded stability and economic growth as the French predicted in 1930? Would it have sheltered the country from the series of coups and counter-coups that began in 1949 and ended with the Ba'ath party takeover in 1963, or would it have triggered a much earlier countryside revolt? Syria did eventually get another Egyptian leader again but it was neither Abbas Hilmi nor any member of the Mohammad 'Ali Dynasty. Instead, it was President Gamal 'Abdul Nasser, the man who put an end to the Egyptian monarchy who ruled Damascus under the short-lived Syrian-Egyptian union of 1958-1961. Although they originally welcomed him with open arms and an outpouring of support, the people of Syria would eventually give Nasser a very hard time. They objected to everything about his rule, starting with how the country was run through a police state and socialist economy, running through his ill-advised land redistribution laws of 1958, followed by the nationalizing of private banks and factories in 1961. When a military coup toppled the United Arab Republic on 28 September

1961 the immediate accusation levied against Nasser was that he had been an ‘imported’ president who knew nothing about Syria and its ways of life, relying on an ‘imported’ governor, being his trusted friend and right-hand-man, ‘Abdul Hakim ‘Amer.

That pretty much is what the Syrians said about King Faisal when his rule came to an end in 1920. In as much as Syrians frown upon ‘imported leaders,’ history has shown that only ‘imported’ heads of state – whether kings of presidents – were able to run the country efficiently. Mu’awiyya I, founder of the Umayyad Dynasty of Islam, was an ‘imported’ king from the deserts of Arabia. He gave Damascus approximately seventy-five years of remarkable stability under the Umayyads, making it the jewel of the crown of the Muslim Empire that reached Spain and China. The Fatimads were also imported kings, and so were the Ayyubids, the Mamluks, and Ottomans who ruled Syria for 400-years. We can’t know for sure if Abbas Hilmi would have been a successful ‘imported king’ like all his predecessors, and whether his era would have resembled that of his great-grandfather Mohammad ‘Ali Pasha, another ‘imported’ king, and one of the greatest Damascus has known. That remains a trivial question that can never be truly answered by historians of Syria and Egypt.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Dr Sami Moubayed, a Syrian writer from Damascus, was born in the British capital, London. He is the descendant of a notable Syrian merchant family. He studied political science at the American University of Beirut, and later obtained a doctorate from the British University of Exeter (Department of Middle Eastern Studies) in 2004. He began his career as a researcher at the American University of Beirut in 2000 and in the British magazine The Economist. He was a correspondent for the Lebanese newspaper The Daily Star in Damascus (2000-2001) and a writer for The Washington Post - Post Global (2005-2006) and for the American newspaper The Huffington Post.

He then worked as editor-in-chief of the English-language Syrian magazine Forward (2006-2011), after which he worked as a writer in Al-Safir newspaper (2015-2016) and Al-Sayyad magazine (2016-2017), arriving at the Egyptian Al-Ahram newspaper, which he joined in 2021, and Al-Majalla magazine in London in the year. 2023. He has been a writer for the Emirati newspaper Gulf News since 2001. He was a research fellow at the University of St. Andrews in 2006 and at Durham University in Britain in 2023, in addition to being an elected researcher at the Royal Historical Society in London and a consultant at the Prince Abdelkader Aljazairi Foundation for Culture and Heritage. In December 2017, he established the “Damascus History Foundation” and is Chairman of its Board of Trustees.

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## END NOTES

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- 9 Ibid, 84-85.
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