

# TO CONQUER OR DIE: The Economic and Cultural Impact of the Hijaz Railway

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*This article argues that the Hijaz Railway facilitated political control over the region it spanned; in doing so, it examines the impact of the Hijaz Railway on the region's economy and how this affected cultural and intellectual development. Further, the paper divides the period of the Arab Revolt and attacks on the Hijaz Railway into two periods: The Period of Scarcity and the Period of Demolition. The material conditions of each period are analyzed as determining factors in the intellectual development surrounding the Arab Revolt. The archival sources consulted for this article have been gathered from the Qatar National Library's collection of the India Office Records and Private Papers, as well as a collection of archival records titled "Records of Syria, 1918-1920."*

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## Introduction

T.E. Lawrence, more famously known as Lawrence of Arabia, served as a British officer in the Middle East in the years leading up to and during the Arab Revolt of 1916. As stated in the *Summary of the Hijaz Revolt*, Lawrence's involvement in the Arab Revolt dealt largely with the decommissioning of the Hijaz Railway to lessen Ottoman strength in the region.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to Sharif Hussein's proclamation of revolt and Lawrence's involvement, attacks on the Hijaz Railway were frequent yet ineffective due to industrial inequalities between Arabs and Turks. The Arab attacks on the Hijaz Railway were caused by forced underdevelopment by the Ottomans and scarcity in the region. Consequently, Arabs were largely interested in only plundering the trains for weapons, food, and other necessities, rather than completely destroying the railway and their access to these necessities. Ultimately, the Arabs were not experienced nor equipped enough to engage in active destruction of the Hijaz Railway, thus the attacks on the railway lacked any serious impact.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the Arabs' ineffective attacks on the Hijaz Railway, the Turks were able to maintain the lines of communication from Medina through Damascus made possible by the railway, thus keeping strict military control over the inadequately equipped Arab forces. However, the Hijaz Railway was not just a means of exploitation of the region, but also—as evidenced by early Arab attacks—a valuable resource for plundering food, weapons, and water.<sup>3</sup> The ideology and motivations of this period are defined by the scarcity of commodities in an industrially underdeveloped region.

Other contributions to the scholarship on the Arab motivations for attacking the Hijaz Railway, such as Scott Anderson's "The True Story of Lawrence of Arabia,"

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<sup>1</sup> "Summary of the Hejaz revolt," British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/MIL/17/16/13, in Qatar Digital Library.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

propose that it was not the economic scarcity, underdevelopment, or settling of indigenous lands that sparked these attacks on the railway, but rather the direct strategy of T.E. Lawrence during his campaign in the Arab Revolt.<sup>4</sup> Anderson addresses a key point: Had T.E. Lawrence, and by extension the British government, not provided military and economic aid to the Arab revolutionaries, the transition from pillaging the railways towards active demolition of the Hijaz Railway never would have happened.

In contrast to other analyses of policy, actions, and decisions made by Lawrence and the British government towards the Arab Revolt, the argument proposed and developed in this article is a Marxian analysis. The argument suggests that as the material conditions changed in Syria and the Hijaz, the development of indigenous lands, forced changes to religious pilgrimage routes, and the providing of advanced and ample military weaponry, the ideology of the revolution changed. The strategies and military tactics of Arabs did not change spontaneously or out of thin air, rather they were a reflection of the potential of the material conditions and their change over time.

### **Rails of Subjugation: The Hijaz Railway's Role in Establishing Hegemonic Rule in Syria and the Hijaz**

The Hijaz Railway served foremost as a tool for colonial expansion and industrial exploitation of the Hijaz and Syrian regions of the Middle East. The railway stretched across the Western coast of the Arab world from Medina in the Hijaz towards Damascus, then Beirut, in Syria.<sup>5</sup> The Hijaz Railway was constructed and financed by the Ottoman Empire, so it served as an industrial power that threatened the hegemony of British colonization and imperialism in the Middle East. Further, capital ownership of the Hijaz Railway determined the specific motivations and movements of value throughout the region. M. Metin Hülagü stated in *The Hijaz Railway* that, while the railway served first as a buffer against the interests of European capital, it eventually served as the “Achilles’ heel that would cripple” the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire in the Hijaz and Syria.<sup>6</sup> The Hijaz Railway served as the key that consolidated Ottoman hegemony over the region in the Levant and Hijaz, but was also its own demise—it proved that hegemony without persuasive ideology does not last.

M. Metin Hülagü stated in *The Hejaz Railway* that generally railways “facilitated the advancement of European colonizing nations.”<sup>7</sup> The Hijaz Railway consolidated Ottoman control over Syria and the Hijaz, thus threatening the potential grip on the region by British and French interests. However, it was only the *demolition* of the railway that enabled European colonizing nations to establish hegemonic rule in a post-Ottoman Middle East. In a letter between Sir Nicholas O’Conor to Sir Edward Grey in 1906, O’Conor stated that those loyal to Turkish rule yet indigenous to Arabia possessed “no share capital” of the railway.<sup>8</sup> Such a condition is one outlined fairly frequently in colonized or occupied lands of indigenous peoples. The indigenous Arabs of Syria and the Hijaz possessed no ownership over the new means of production built on their land. O’Conor positioned this conflict of share capital and its relations as one national and financial concern, directly connected to the conflict

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<sup>4</sup> Scott Anderson, “The True Story of T.E. Lawrence,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (Smithsonian, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Map of the route of the Hijaz Railway [106r] (1/2), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/10/12/1, in Qatar Digital Library.

<sup>6</sup> M. Metin Hülagü, *The Hejaz Railway: The Construction of a New Hope* (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2010), xvii-xxiii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>8</sup> File 3142/1903 “Hedjaz Railway,” British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/10/12, in Qatar Digital Library.

between Arabs and Turks.<sup>9</sup> Foreign capital constructed a means of industrial and economic exploitation, and, in the region, no native inhabitants possessed a share in this same vehicle of capital.

Before the construction of the Hijaz Railway, the nomadic Bedouin of the region achieved economic viability by providing safe passage for pilgrimage to Mecca. The Bedouins understood safe passage throughout the difficult-to-traverse region. In *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, Helen Metz described the landscape of the southern regions of the Hijaz Railway as one dominated by largely non-arable land. Further, rainfall was limited in the Hijaz region and deserts of Syria.<sup>10</sup> However, the Bedouin of the region were able to thrive despite low levels of rainfall and a lack of industrialization in Syria and the Hijaz due to their nomadic lifestyle and ability to survey and determine the areas in which rainfall would occur. These skills enabled the Bedouin to be the dominant force in ensuring passage across Syria and the Hijaz for Muslims to complete pilgrimage to Mecca.

Following the construction of the Hijaz Railway, the transport provided by the Bedouin was outclassed by the much faster trains, as the trip from Damascus to Medina took only two days by railcar. In T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence stated that the pilgrimage to Mecca provided by the Bedouins ceased upon the creation of the Hijaz Railway.<sup>11</sup> Further, by the accounts of the British military, some thirteen to fourteen thousand Muslims conducted pilgrimage to Mecca by means of the railway.<sup>12</sup> The Ottoman Empire created the Hijaz Railway to follow the same path used by the Bedouin, traveling through oases and economic centers from Beirut to Medina and disrupting the lifestyle and economic sustenance that these pathways provided for the indigenous people of the region.<sup>13</sup>

The sudden industrialization of the passage offered for pilgrimage by the Bedouins facilitated the economic hardship and forced cultural change for the indigenous groups of Syria and the Hijaz.<sup>14</sup> The Hijaz Railway dictated a forced obsolescence of the pre-industrial Bedouin economy rooted in providing safe passage to embark on Hajj. This forced obsolescence introduced by the Hijaz Railway marks the beginning of what will thus be referred to as the period of scarcity of the Arab Revolt. This period of scarcity is characterized by the economic underdevelopment and inadequate supply of basic commodities for the indigenous people of the region as a function of Ottoman supremacy through the Hijaz Railway.

### **Productivity, Underdevelopment, and Settler Transformation**

The dislocation of indigenous peoples and transformation of land in the regions peripheral to the Hijaz Railway antagonized class and ethnic divisions. With the railway's completion, lines between class and ethnicity became blurred; Arabs became the exploited class of the region, forced out of their homes due to rapid industrialization and economic hardship, while the Turks became the land-owning settler class.<sup>15</sup> Simultaneously, the railway aided mass control over the region by

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Helen Metz and Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1993), 171.

<sup>11</sup> T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997),

<sup>12</sup> File 3142/1903 'Hedjaz Railway', IOR/L/PS/10/12, 66.

<sup>13</sup> Metz, *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, 171.

<sup>14</sup> "Hedjaz Railway," India Office Records and Private Papers.

<sup>15</sup> J.M. Grierson, "Military Report on Arabia," in *Records of Syria, 1918-1973, Volume I: 1918-1920*, ed. Jane Priestland, (Cambridge: Cambridge Archive Editions, 2005), 6.

revolutionizing not only the speed of travel and transport of commodities but also by providing a vast communications infrastructure.<sup>16</sup>

The *Military Report on Arabia* described the mountain regions of Syria as “fertile and well cultivated.”<sup>17</sup> Agriculture defined the mountains regions while pastoral and nomadic lifestyles defined the deserts of Syria and the Hijaz. Consequently, the nomadic Bedouins generally lived in the less-arable deserts. Unlike the deserts, after the construction of the Hijaz Railway, the mountain regions grew to be inhabited largely by sedentary settlers, mostly Turks. In the *Military Report on Arabia* it is explicitly noted that, while the settler lifestyle in the regions surrounding the Hijaz Railway became more popular, it forced Arabs out of populated regions in the mountains into the less-dominated deserts. The dislocation of indigenous peoples and transformation of land in the regions peripheral to the Hijaz Railway served to antagonize class and ethnic division. With the railway’s completion and successful gentrification of Syria lines between class and ethnicity became blurred as the Arabs became the exploited class of the region, forced out of their homes due to rapid industrialization and economic hardship, while the Turks became the land-owning settler class.<sup>18</sup> Simultaneously, the railway served as a way of mass militaristic control over the region by revolutionizing not only the speed of travel and transport of commodities but by providing a vast communications infrastructure.<sup>19</sup>

While the desert regions of Syria were generally infertile, the inland regions—particularly the mountainous ones—were agriculturally productive. For instance, the Hauran, a breadbasket region south of Aleppo produced roughly 200,000 tons of cereals each year, as well as silk, cotton, wool, fruit, and olives.<sup>20</sup> As noted in the report from Major-General J.M. Grierson, the Hijaz Railway resulted in a significant increase in the trade of these commodities to other regions, including Turkey, Europe, and Africa.<sup>21</sup> Jordan’s primary crops were barley and wheat, harvested in April and May respectively. Lebanon harvested wheat as well; however, it was harvested later in the year, in June. The explanation for the differentiation between harvest times can be explained by the vast climate differences in Syria. Climate did not change based on latitude very much, if at all, throughout the region, but rather based on height above sea level. In the mountains, the colder seasons lasted longer, and the climate caused a larger delay in harvests, while in tropical climates, such as Jordan, the climate allowed for much earlier harvests.

The primary inhabitants of the Hauran (and Kerak) province(s) of Syria were described as “those loyal to Turkish rule.”<sup>22</sup> As discussed previously, these regions—and the loyal Turkish subjects therein—provided a vast number of agricultural exports for the Ottoman Empire. The increase of settler colonies and wide-scale agriculture were further solidified by the Hijaz Railway, contributing to a larger oppressive force in driving Arabs out of their homes.<sup>23</sup>

So, as the Hijaz Railway provided means of securing new agricultural centers in its peripheral regions, it solidified economic power in the hands of the Ottoman Empire. Beirut served as the primary coastal trade town of the Syrian coast; it

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> J.M. Grierson, “Military Report on Arabia,” in *Records of Syria, 1918-1973, Volume I: 1918-1920*, ed. Jane Priestland, (United Kingdom: Archive Editions, 2005), 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

connected westward to Damascus then went directly south to Medina.<sup>24</sup> The Beirut terminus of the Hijaz Railway was used as the primary means of trade outwards from coastal Syria, and it existed as the main economic port in Ottoman Syria. The Hijaz Railway followed the route of economic value through the Hijaz and Syria so that this value could be effectively extracted and controlled by the Ottomans.

However, the agricultural practices of settlers (that is, Turkish subjects) were foreign to the Arabs of the region who lived largely by nomadic lifestyles and subsistence farming. T.E. Lawrence comments in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* that the commodities produced by the nomadic Bedouin were largely nomadic and pastoral goods.<sup>25</sup> Due to the accumulation of capital in post-industrial Europe, new sources of exploitable labor and commodities needed to be discovered; in this case, this meant the Middle East. Raw commodities from the Arab world were traded and refined by industrial capitalist powers to fuel the advancement of their individual spheres of capital. Afterwards, these refined commodities produced by the raw goods from the Middle East would then be traded back to Arabs at a cost that generated profit for Ottoman or European powers, while pushing the indigenous people of the Middle East into poverty. Later, the Ottoman Empire capitalized on the productive capability of the region, constructing the Hijaz Railway to deprive Arabs of their productive means.

### **Class Character and Economic Inflation of Medical Services**

The class character of the Hijaz Railway was distinctly separate from the character of the Bedouins, as the only individuals able to afford the expensive travel of the Hijaz Railway—costing nearly twelve times as much per pilgrim as Bedouin travel<sup>26</sup>—were foreigners, either the 10,000 Turkish subjects or 2,000 Russians living in Syria.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, the cost of medical or sanitation services in the regions that followed the railways route faced massive inflation. Along the railway, the class character of town centers shifted from nomadic Arab workers towards sedentary Turkish subjects who held more significant economic means than Arabs. The rapid inflation of repair costs of sanitary facilities within the Ottoman occupied Middle East is discussed in a letter from Dr. Clemow, of the Constantinople Board of Health, to Sir Gerard Lowther, of the Britannic Majesty's Government.<sup>28</sup> From 1905, the year of construction, to 1908, costs in Beirut nearly quintupled for sanitary facilities.<sup>29</sup> Notably, in other major cities under Turkish occupation, such as Jeddah, costs only doubled.<sup>30</sup> The creation of new medical facilities, rather than repairing old ones reached a cost in 1908 of nearly fifteen times the 1905 price.<sup>31</sup> Clemow wrote in a second letter to Lowther that there was no hesitation from the Constantinople Board of Health to accept the rising costs of constructing and maintaining these medical facilities.<sup>32</sup>

The Board of Health's lack of hesitation again evidences that those traveling along the Hijaz Railway (and settling in the cities along its route) were wealthy Turkish subjects. The wealth of these subjects was such that they were able to bear the weight of inflation. Also, this lack of hesitation to pay for construction and repairs on these facilities hints at the economic value that the Hijaz Railway itself provided

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<sup>24</sup> Priestland, *Records of Syria*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997), 87.

<sup>26</sup> "Hedjaz Railway," 66.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> File 3142/1903 'Hedjaz Railway', IOR/L/PS/10/12, 92-93.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

for the Ottoman Empire. The value that was extracted from the region by means of the Hijaz Railway was significant enough that it allowed for a nearly fifteen-fold level of inflation on medical facilities. Alongside the construction of the Hijaz Railway came economic barriers that the indigenous Arabs of the Middle East could not traverse through—yet these barriers were easily traversable for Turkish settlers.

### **Early Assaults on the Hijaz Railway and Turkish Defensive Capabilities**

The Bedouins initially responded harshly to the Turkish occupation of the Arab world and rapid rates of inflation after the construction of the Hijaz Railway. According to British records, attacks on the railway date to as early as 1908.<sup>33</sup> A small group of Bedouin attacked the advisor in charge of construction of the Hijaz Railway, Kiazim Pasha. The raid killed eight or nine Turkish soldiers, while the Bedouins lost three soldiers. Kiazim received a grant of 30,000 soldiers from Constantinople to continue construction of the railway and “punish the Bedouins.”<sup>34</sup>

The defensive stations of the Hijaz Railway were designed to allow a small number of Turkish men, normally ten, to successfully defend the station against siege by Arab raiders. The British records of these defensive stations in 1907 note that these defensive stations held essential commodities including but not limited to water and fourteen days of rations.<sup>35</sup> These stations imply that prior to British involvement in the Arab revolt, small stone buildings measuring roughly eleven by twelve meters and maintained by less than a dozen men, were successfully able to defend against Bedouin revolutionaries.<sup>36</sup> This displays the technological gap between the Turkish and the Bedouins: Turkish industrial power and armaments were strong enough to display raw military supremacy over the unarmed Arabs, who at the time were severely under equipped compared to the Turkish.

### **The Hijaz Railway and the Emergence of the Arab Revolt**

As stated, control of the Hijaz Railway lay in the hands of the Ottoman Empire prior to the Arab Revolt, thus control of these agricultural and economic centers lay in the hands of the Ottoman Empire. The railway served as the vehicle, literally and figuratively, for economic extraction and exploitation of the Arabs’ land. Lifestyles were disrupted, indigenous peoples were forced out of their homes, and the material conditions which defined the Arab or Bedouin lifestyle were fundamentally changed. Ottoman Empire agricultural practices disrupted the Arab lifestyle with the Hijaz Railway as their tool of oppression, further shaping the ideologies of those oppressed by the Ottoman Empire.

In the years of subjugation under the Hijaz Railway, the Hijaz region produced nearly no food of its own, resulting in scarcities of necessary commodities. This resulted in a dependency on the Ottoman Empire. Sharif Hussein, leader of the Hijaz, had become subjugated under the yoke of Ottoman rule by this harsh economic reality. Arabs depended on the great Ottoman project, the Hijaz Railway, for both transportation and trade. The Ottomans distributed food from their fertile regions in Syria to the Hijaz. The strategic planning of the Hijaz railway by the Ottoman Empire forced obsolescence of the Bedouin trade and pilgrimage routes that were now dominated by railroad travel.

Alongside the scarcity of basic commodities was a period of severe water scarcity. Among regions with little rainfall, water quickly evaporated, and shallow

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<sup>33</sup> “Hedjaz Railway,” 104.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>36</sup> Priestland, *Records of Syria*, 35.

cisterns became obsolete.<sup>37</sup> The British government noted the railway faced the problem of acquiring water not only for the soldiers who defended the railway but also for the staff and passengers of the railway.<sup>38</sup> In correspondence between Sir George Barclay to Sir Edward Grey on November 26, 1906, the men discuss the water stored within defensive buildings used by Turkish soldiers along the railway's stations, which amounted to anywhere between 36,000 to 70,000 cubic meters. However, Barclay notes that this amount of water was too little to maintain the regular functioning of the Hijaz Railway.

### **The Arab Revolt**

When World War I broke out, the Ottoman Empire demanded for Arabs to engage in Jihad. Sherif Hussein opposed the false Ottoman Jihad, because true Jihad for him was “doctrinally incompatible with an aggressive war, and absurd with a Christian ally: Germany.”<sup>39</sup> In consequence, T.E. Lawrence lauded Hussein as “honorable, shrewd, obstinate, and deeply pious.”<sup>40</sup> Yet, in reaction, the Ottomans did what Hussein feared most and halted the travel and trade for that benefited Arabs on the Hijaz Railway. In contrast, the British offered a sign of friendship upon the declaration of the Arab Revolt, keeping ports open to allow food (albeit in marginal amounts) to enter the Arab world.<sup>41</sup>

In the first meeting between T.E. Lawrence and Feisal, Hussein's son, Lawrence commented on the defeat that Feisal faced at the hands of the Turks shortly following the outbreak of the Arab Revolt. Feisal's attacks suffered from a lack of significant military armaments to stand up to the Ottoman Empire. These attacks depended on the plundering of materials rather than the demolition of the railway.<sup>42</sup>

In the early days of the revolution and the blossoming relationship between Feisal and Lawrence, the two debated the unequal alliance made between Arabs and British. Feisal remarked that he did not desire for his kingdom to become another British subject. The disproportionate size and strength of the British forces compared to those of the Arabs worried Feisal. He predicted the emergence of a second, unequal, and dependent relationship of the Arabs to a foreign force, beginning with a dependency for food. And Feisal did not want to see his race become subjugated under colonial rule and occupation by the British, just as they had been under the Ottomans. He further expressed his worry of the British sailors who arrived in the Arab world, stating, “soon they will stay nights, and then they will live here always, and take the country.”<sup>43</sup>

Feisal saw the relationship between Arabs and British as one of necessity, but it was not one he was pleased with. Feisal noted the differences amongst morals, motivations, and culture between the Arabs and the British. He lectured Lawrence with respect to these differences, noting that “our race [Arabs] will have a cripple's temper till it has found its feet.”<sup>44</sup> In all, the alliance was one of unsatisfied ambitions for Arabs, as Feisal would be satisfied only once he—and his people—had ascended not to ally, but to equal the British and Lawrence.

However, The General Staff, War Office of the British government, reaffirmed Feisal's observation of disproportionate military power in the *Summary of*

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<sup>37</sup> Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 168-169.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>39</sup> Priestland, *Records of Syria*, 35.

<sup>40</sup> Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

*the Hijaz Revolt*. The War Office stated that, while Feisal commanded nearly 30,000 troops in 1916 at the outbreak of the Arab Revolt spread between three camps, “no single camp had as many as 2,000 rifles.”<sup>45</sup>

Following British involvement in the Arab Revolt and Hussein’s proclamation in 1916, Feisal’s forces were provided with roughly 6,000 to 8,000 more weapons.<sup>46</sup> Feisal’s troops, after being provided with British aid, were then positioned for attacks on the Hijaz Railway. This action from the British Military was the single event in the Arab Revolt that defined the end of the period of scarcity, resulting in a period of sufficient military weaponry and demolition of the Hijaz Railway—the period of demolition.<sup>47</sup> In total, at the end of the revolt and the period of demolition, a total of 28,692 rails, 15 train engines, 29 trucks, and 207 bridges, all operated and controlled by the Turkish soldiers, had been destroyed.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, this period of the revolt culminated in the death of 4,697 Turkish soldiers and the wounding of 871 more. Amongst these casualties were over 9,000 prisoners held by Arabs; 5,827 of these prisoners were later sent to Egypt for internment in August 1918, marking the end of the Arab Revolt.<sup>49</sup>

Describing the economic and military conditions that facilitated the eventual stage of demolition of the Hijaz Railway displays that the railway itself was what enabled Ottoman control of the region. Following the demolition of the railway, Ottoman hegemony withered away thus marking the importance of the railway in imperial subjugation of the region and its people. The railway enabled the transformation of the routes used by the Arab nomads into economic centers as well as Ottoman defensive positions. With this emphasized, Ottoman hegemony existed solely through the Hijaz Railway. Dependence on the Hijaz Railway was ultimately what enabled the collapse of Ottoman hegemony in the region, simultaneously it was the vehicle that enabled economic extraction, racial subjugation, and indigenous displacement for a period of almost thirteen years. To overcome this oppression, there existed only two options: to conquer or die. Put shortly, the Ottomans built the rail-locked coffin that the Arabs buried their hegemony in—A steel coffin of capital and bourgeois oppression.

### **The Days After the Demolition of the Hijaz Railway**

On July 24, 1920, French troops defeated Feisal in the Battle of Maysalun, enforcing French colonial rule in Syria. The goal of the French attack on Feisal’s Syria was to demand an acceptance of the French Mandate, limit the size of the Syrian army, mandate French currency, and allow for French occupation of the railways which connected Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. Noting the importance not only of independence from the French Mandate but also a railway free of French occupation, Syrian nationalists attempted to resist the demands of General Henri Gouraud. Feisal ultimately ceded to the demands of the French, but his surrender did not reach the French since “the telegraph wires had been cut.”<sup>50</sup> The French cut the telegraph wires so that even if Feisal approved of the terms of surrender, the message would never be successfully delivered to the French side. In consequence, 12,000 French troops invaded Syria through the Lebanese-Syrian border, leading to Syrian retreat to Khan-

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<sup>45</sup> 'Summary of the Hejaz revolt', British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/MIL/17/16/13, in Qatar Digital Library.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> David Commins and David Leach, *Historical Dictionary of Syria* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2014), 235-236.



Maysalun. The French proceeded to achieve a decisive victory, ending the battle in only four hours. Gouraud was ordered by the French government to occupy Damascus as soon as possible. This battle allowed for the French occupation of the railways and the enforcement of the French Mandate in Syria.

In an article in *The New Republic* following the battle of Maysalun, it was stated that “the Syrian Mandate is the most indefensible example of the mandate system.”<sup>51</sup> The article continued to claim that “no one can be so simple as to suppose that the French are in Syria for any other reason except their own profit.”<sup>52</sup> Despite a brief alliance during the Arab Revolt, Gouraud’s attack on Maysalun exhibits that the interests of French capital outweighed the aspirations of the Arabs. Occupation of the Hijaz Railway and its connecting tracks was essential to the progression towards colonization of the Middle East. French capital required the efficiency and control guaranteed by the railroads.

Prior to Gouraud’s invasion of Syria, the Syrian people were said to have desperately pleaded for a world “made safe for democracy.”<sup>53</sup> Prince Lutfallah of Syria lamented, “In vain we have appealed for a hearing. No one would listen to our pleadings. There is but one thing left to do. That is to fight until we either conquer or die.”<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, the Syrians were betrayed by the League of Nations who “confirmed the French Mandate without submitting it to the people concerned.”<sup>55</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

The construction of the Hijaz Railway disrupted notable aspects of the indigenous culture of Syria and the Hijaz. The agricultural landscape of the Arab world was forcibly changed and dominated by the existence of the Hijaz railway, which tore away the nomadic and subsistence lifestyles of the Bedouin. City centers along the railway became the focal point of all economic stimuli, and along these city centers, economic prosperity quickly became inaccessible to the indigenous people of these lands. It was these changes in the societal structure, facilitated by the Hijaz Railway, that consolidated Ottoman hegemony over the regions it spanned. And, while the railway established industrial hegemony over the region, it starved Arabs economically, intellectually, and socially.

This scarcity was primarily economic through the forced obsolescence of Bedouin pilgrimages to Mecca, as well as the rapid levels of inflation which made the centralized cities along the railways inaccessible to all but Turkish subjects. Yet this scarcity was also defined by a change in military conditions over only a few years. The Turkish forces held a wealth of industrial development and, consequently, weaponry, but the Arab revolutionaries possessed a scarce amount of weaponry in comparison.

Finally, the conditions of this era resulted in the Arab revolutionaries’ formation of military strategies in response: Namely, pillaging the Hijaz Railway rather than destroying it, so that valuable resources for the revolution may be acquired. After British involvement in the Arab Revolt, weaponry and other resources were made readily available to Arabs, facilitating the strategic demolition of the railway. The political aspirations and military strategies of the Arab revolutionaries were responsive to the changes in the economic and cultural landscape of Syria and the Hijaz.

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<sup>51</sup> “The Week,” *The New Republic*, Volume XXXII Number 405 (1922), 30.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

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