

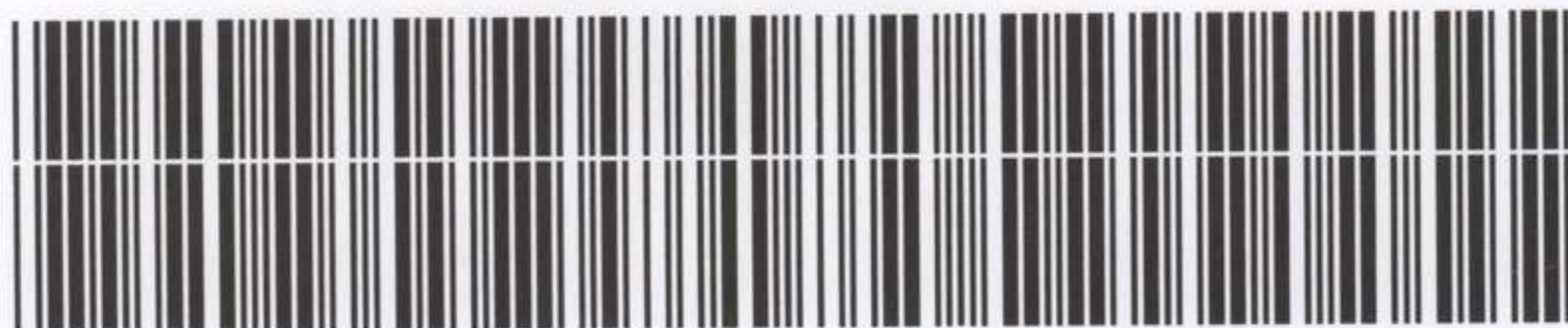
AWM4
Australian Imperial Force unit war diaries,
1914-18 War

Formation Headquarters

Item number: 1/6/30 Part 4

Title: General Staff, General
Headquarters, Egyptian
Expeditionary Force

October 1918



AWM4-1/6/30PART4

October 1.

No precise moment can be fixed for the fall of Damascus. Politically its independence from Turkish domination was proclaimed about 1400 on Sept. 30 while Jemal Pasha, Commander of the Fourth Army and numbers of armed Turks and Germans were still in the city. Yet, so reduced was the moral of these troops, that they wearily trailed out of Damascus along the north bank of the Barada and gazed apathetically at the Sherifian flags which proclaimed the jubilation of the Damascenes at their defeat and emphasized the collapse of four centuries of empire. No formal surrender took place as the municipal authorities welcomed the troops alike of the Desert Mounted Corps and of the Sherifian Army as liberators and allies, and no enemy administration survived in such a form as to be able to take upon itself the task of arranging a capitulation. The last days of Turkish rule in the famous city had indeed been full of humiliation for the defeated side. People refused to sell provisions to Turks, even for gold. It was impossible to obtain supplies for the hospitals, and the Germans forcibly seized all available transport for their own especial benefit. During the morning of the 30th the Damascenes were delighted to witness a brisk fight between Turks and Germans, provoked by the rapacity of the latter over the distribution of vehicles. Satisfactory numbers on both sides lost their lives in this encounter, which was, apparently, the most formidable of many similar skirmishes between the Turks and their Prussian patrons, evidence of which had been forthcoming in the shape of numerous German corpses all along the line of retreat. In the hospitals the Turkish sanitary department entirely collapsed during the last five days, so much so that one of the first tasks to be undertaken after the occupation of the town, was the very necessary burial of bodies which had been left three, four, and even five days, on the floor where they had died. Food was obtained for the surviving patients, and the hospital staff was forcibly induced to resume its duties. The 14th Cavalry Brigade and Sherifian troops had entered Damascus on Oct. 1, but in so large a city it is not surprising that both detachments were ignorant of the arrival of the other, and that both thought that they were first in. In point of actual time a detachment of the 10th Australian Light Horse Regiment under Major Olden reached the Serail at 0630 on Oct. 1, while Colonel Lawrence and the Sherifian Camel Corps were a little later, but it was not until 0830 that General Chauvel motored into Damascus to confer with the Civil Authorities. During the early hours of the morning of Oct. 1, the 14th Cavalry Brigade intercepted numbers of Turks who were still trying to reach Damascus, in ignorance of the fact that the city was no longer a refuge for them. The rest of the 5th Cavalry Division concentrated at Deir Khabiye at 0600 and moved up the Kiswe-Damascus road to join the 14th Brigade. The 4th Cavalry Division which had left Zerakiye at 0300 followed. At 1030 the 14th Cavalry Brigade was sent through the town to Jobar to co-operate with the 3rd Australian Light Horse Brigade in closing the Duma road to those Turks who were trying to escape that way.

Meanwhile, the Australian Mounted Division, which had been astride the Beirut road all night, at 0500 pushed forward the 3rd Australian Light Horse Brigade through the town and blocked the Aleppo road. On the way this brigade captured a train, with 483 prisoners, eight guns, and thirty machine guns, and engaged an enemy column at Duma. The 10th Australian Light Horse Regiment charged the rear of this column, killed numbers of the enemy and captured 600 prisoners and thirty-seven machine guns. The pursuit was continued and in the evening some Germans and machine guns were taken at Khan Kusseir. The brigade remained at Duma for the night. At 0825 next morning the brigade galloped for nearly six miles across country and charged an enemy column with sword. The Turks were broken and lost many dead, in addition to a captured Divisional Commander, 1,500 other prisoners, three guns, and twenty-six machine guns. This brought the operations round Damascus to a close.

Story of the Arab Movement.

A *Sherif* (Arabic plural *Ashraf*) in the Moslem world is one who claims descent in the male line from the Khalif Ali (656-661 A.D.) by his marriage with Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Mohammed (died 632). There are many of these Ashraf in Arabia, Morocco and the Sudan, but among those generally accepted as such, only the Ashraf inscribed in the Register of Mecca, which has been strictly kept for many centuries past—if not from the days of the Prophet himself, are of absolutely unquestioned authenticity. They are divided into a number of clans, living mostly in the Hejaz, and form an accepted aristocracy with peculiar privileges under a law of their own.

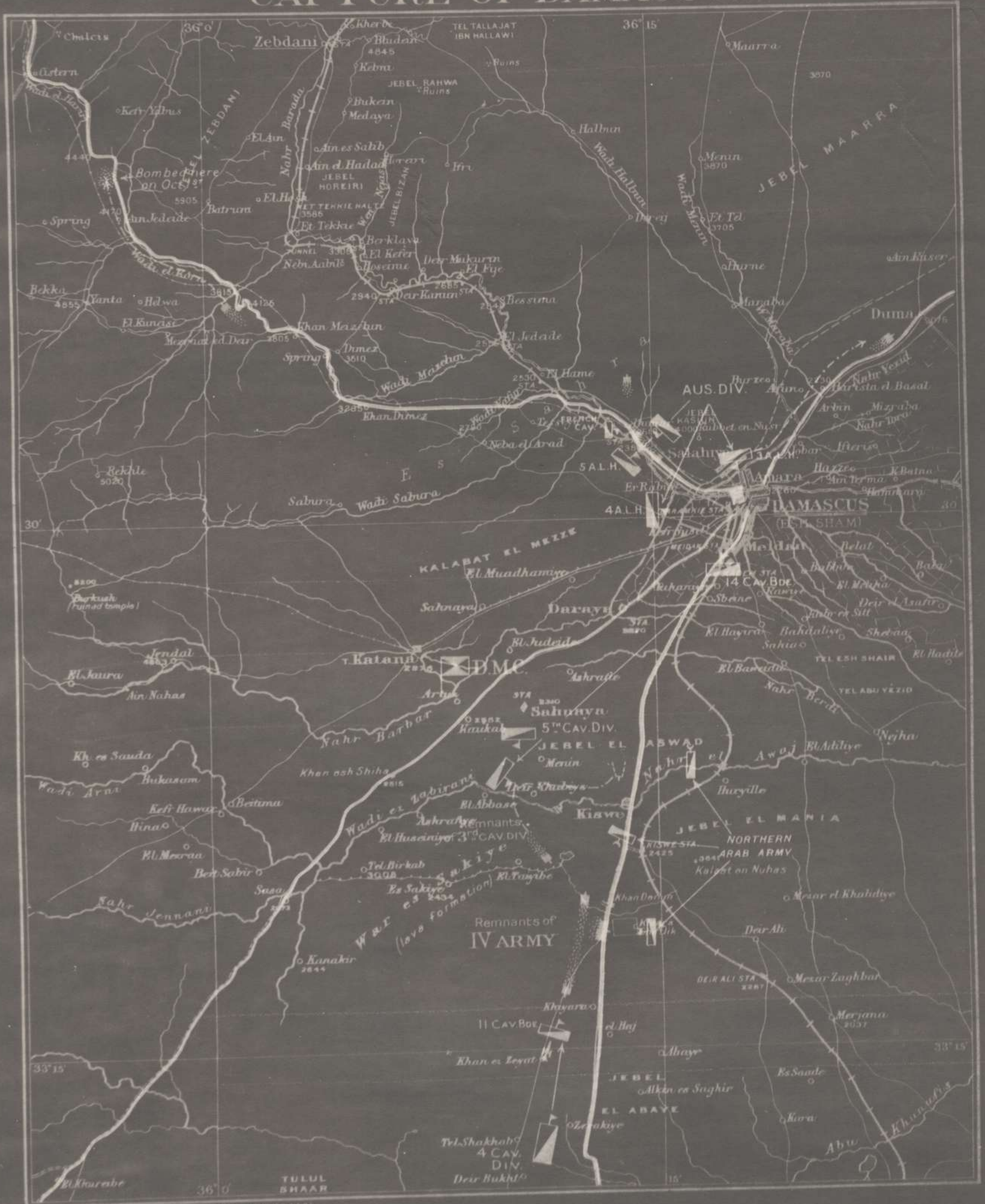
For the first four centuries after the death of the Prophet, the Ashraf were not very numerous and had not as yet established their position as a political power. Towards the end of the tenth century, however, one of the Ashraf of Mecca got possession of his native town and inaugurated in the Hejaz a tradition of Sherifian temporal power, the holder of which was regarded as the Emir and head of the Ashraf, or, as he has for centuries been known in Europe—"The Grand Sherif of Mecca."

In course of time a fighting Sherif of the Juheinah clan, by name Qatada, became Emir and a Prince of his dynasty during the sixteenth century, established the undoubted predominance of the Emirate of Mecca over the Hejaz, and secured for his own family an exclusive right to the throne. The reigning representative of the senior line of the dynasty founded by the Emir Qatada succeeded to the throne of Mecca as the Emir Husein in 1908, and so long as it was possible to reconcile his position as a vassal of the Sultan of Turkey with his dignity as an Arab Prince and head of the Ashraf, he remained a loyal subject of the Ottoman Empire, but at the beginning of the war the Turkish atrocities in Syria which came on the top of the violent attempts of the Constantinople Government forcibly to Ottomanize all nationalities under its authority, made a revolt of the Arab nation against its oppressors inevitable.

To face Plate 51.

CAPTURE OF DAMASCUS

PLATE 51



Printed by the Survey of Egypt, Dec. 1918 (0453)

Miles 5 4 3 2 1 0 5 10 Miles

Situation at Dusk on 30.9.18 as known at G.H.Q. E.E.F.

In May, 1916, the position of the Emir of Mecca was threatened by the arrival of a picked force of 3,000 Turkish troops in Medina. Their plan of campaign was to march through the Hejaz consolidating the waning Ottoman authority in that principality, and then to proceed to the Yemen in order to reinforce the Turkish army operating against Aden. The foresighted policy of the Emir in preventing the prolongation of the Hejaz railway from Medina to Mecca, caused a much needed delay in the progress of the Turks, and the Emir decided that the privileged position of the Hejaz and possibly his own authority would be menaced by the arrival of so large a Turkish force. He placed himself at the head of the national cause and drew his sword in the defence of the Arab as against the Turk.

The Arab revolt began on June 5, 1916, with the formation of a thin Bedouin cordon round Medina, where Ali and Feisal, two sons of the Sherif Husein, were in command. The Hejaz railway was broken at several points between Medina and Abu Naam; but the Arabs, inexpert in demolition, did not effect enough before being driven off by relief parties with machine guns, to interrupt seriously the communication of Medina with the north, and the besieging force, short of arms and supplies, and with no guns worth mentioning, could do little but watch the city from afar. Jiddah, however, which was attacked on June 9, held out barely a week. Cut off from Mecca by the loss of the blockhouses on the road, and exposed to naval guns and planes, the Turkish garrison, in a weak position north of the town, yielded to the instance of the civilian population and surrendered at discretion. Mecca had passed in the meantime into the Emir's hands, with the exception of the forts and entrenched barracks, held by small garrisons, the bulk of the Turkish force being absent in summer quarters at Taif with the Governor-General. These garrisons, who had had some inkling of what was coming, opened fire on the town, putting a shell or two even into or near the Great Mosque, to the infinite scandal of all pious Moslems; and they were not reduced until artillery was brought up from Jiddah. They had all surrendered by July 16. Taif where over 2,000 men, the bulk of the Turkish force, were entrenched, with Ghalib Pasha, the G.O.C. and Governor-General, held out much longer—till Sept. 23—and then capitulated from hopelessness rather than from scarcity or fear of its assailants. It had been blockaded very effectively for three and a half months by Sherif Abdullah, the Emir's second son, with a mixed force of Ateibah Bedouins and Meccan townfolk, but though regularly bombarded it had never been really assaulted.

Smaller places, like Lith and Yambo, surrendered as soon as they were seriously attacked, and the greater part of the Hejaz was now clear of the Turks. So far the task of the Arabs had been comparatively easy. Isolated bodies of troops, divided from all possible relief by 300 miles of hostile, ill-watered country and barred from the sea, were bound to capitulate sooner or later, however superior in fighting quality and equipment to their foes. But the Medina garrison was in a different case. It had been reinforced, re-armed, re-victualled, and reassured by successful sorties during these four months, and, late in September it was able to issue forth, driving the Arabs before it, and make Medina secure by establishing a cordon of fortified posts, thirty to forty miles out along the Mecca roads. This done, the Turks pushed farther still, realizing that their best defence was an offensive and at one time they threatened to occupy both Yambo and Rabugh, the important half-way house to Mecca. But only some 14,000 strong, they had not the forces necessary to hold such distant objectives together with the lines of communication. Considerable Arab armies moved up from south and south-west, and the Turks withdrew again behind the fortified outposts of Medina at the end of the year.

It had become clear that owing to their inexperience in modern siege warfare the Arabs could not expect to reduce Medina. The only operation likely to be fruitful would be systematic attack on the 800 miles of the single track of the Hejaz railway which connects Medina with Damascus. For such raiding however, and for ultimate extension of the revolt to Syria, more northerly bases than Jiddah, Rabugh, or even Yambo, were required. Therefore at the of Jan., 1917, Sherif Feisal, with the Northern Arab Army, installed himself at Wejeh, already occupied by landing parties, and extended his hold farther north to Dhaba and Mowelah on the Midian coast. His brother, Abdullah, had arrived at Wadi Ais, north-west of Medina, leaving only his eldest brother, Ali, in the former theatre of operations.

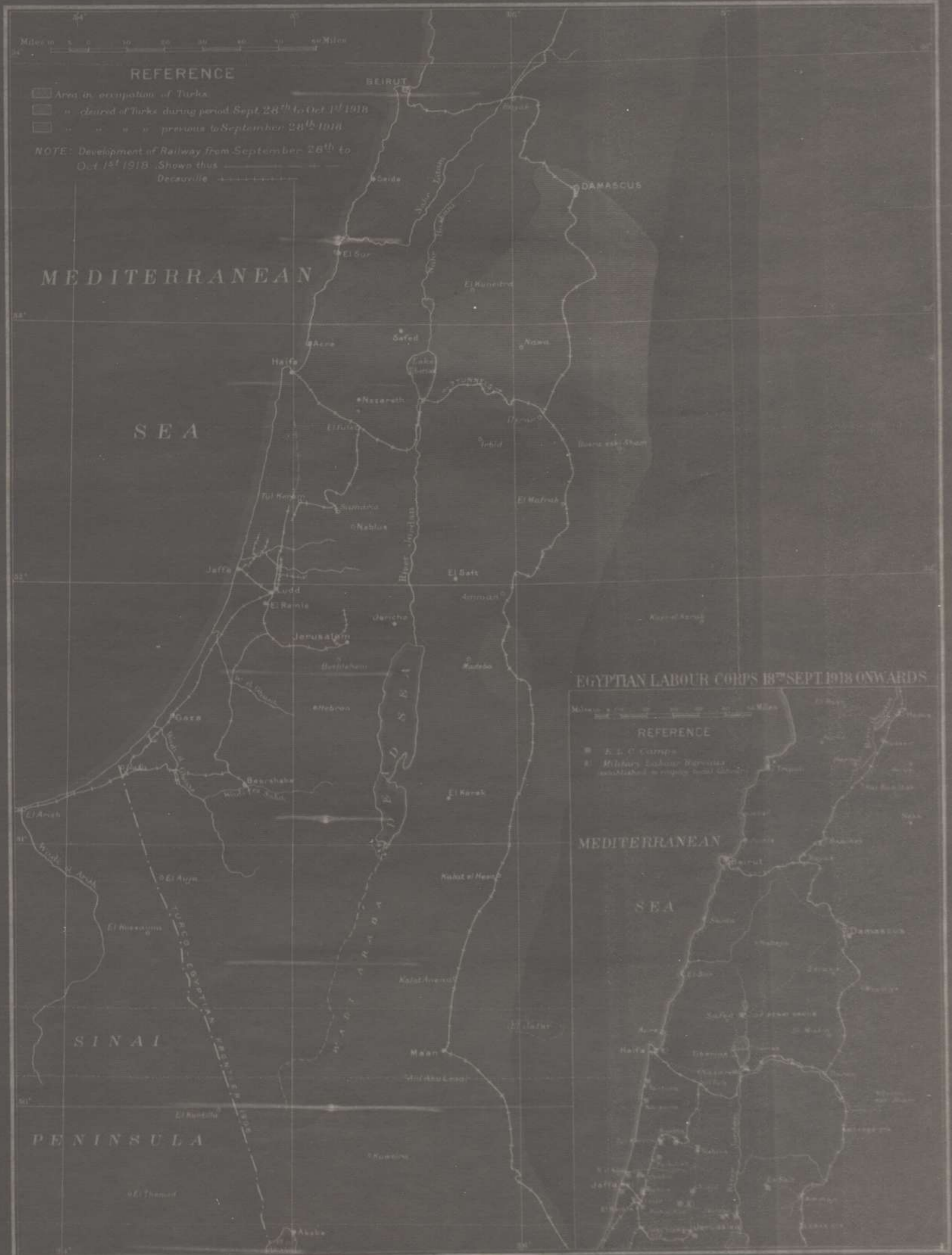
The raiding carried out during the following six months, with British and French help, lowered the strength and spirit of the Turkish forces in Medina, provided scope for adventure which attracted many fresh Arab elements, and offered a demonstration of activity which induced many more to engage themselves on the Sherifian side in view of a move still farther north. But it did not cut off Medina. The permanent way proved harder to wreck irretrievably, and the enemy better prepared to make interruptions good, than had been expected. The alternative scheme, that of blowing up trains, was evolved, and under the direction of Lieut.-Colonel T. E. Lawrence, this form of military activity began to rank almost as a national sport. Numerous instances occurred of small parties of Arabs under Allied leadership, blowing up the engine of a train while in motion. Sometimes the disaster merely resulted in the delay and discomfiture of the enemy—sometimes the Arabs were able to inflict serious losses and capture valuable material as the result of one of these episodes. In any case such destruction invariably impaired the railway track, reduced the number of engines and the amount of rolling stock available, caused delay and laid a heavy burden upon the Turkish lines of communication.

Meanwhile, early in July, 1917, Akaba had been captured from the Turks, and Sherif Feisal moved up. Operations and propaganda could now be extended much farther northwards. Previously there had been no raiding of the railway above Tebuk. Now it was attacked, not only south of Maan but north, while Arab forces threatened both Maan itself and also the forest district on the north-west, whence the railway locomotives were drawing their fuel supply. The effect on Medina was soon evident, and had the Turks been in a position to evacuate by the railway without almost certain disaster, they would

To face Plate 52.

AREA OCCUPIED AS THE RESULT OF OPERATIONS FROM SEPTEMBER 28TH TO OCTOBER 1ST 1918

PLATE 52



Reproduced by the Forces of Egypt No. 1278 (1922)

probably have done so early in the current year. But, for lack of sufficient rolling stock and troops to keep the line during withdrawal, they evidently decided to hold on, as the lesser evil; for, in any case, they were secure for some months of being able to repel direct Arab attack, all reduced and scurvy-ridden though their troops had become, both at headquarters and on the line of communication. There they remained until their surrender became necessary as the result of the Armistice which the Turks were compelled to accept at the end of October. Lines of communication troops who had hoped to make good their escape northwards, when disaster overtook the Turkish armies west of the Jordan were beset by hostile tribesmen and finally surrendered to Chaytor's force at Ziza.

Having secured the adhesion or neutrality of all Arabs as far up as Maan, and made provisional arrangements with others to northward, Feisal could now contemplate an advance into the trans-Jordan country. He had collected, from one source or another, some thousands of partly-trained troops, beside contingents from Bedouin tribes of higher fighting quality than the Hejazis. Also he was much better equipped with guns, small arms, and auxiliary services than any Arab army had been heretofore. The Turks in Maan and the Hishe Forest made attempts to dislodge him from the Petra region in Oct. and Nov., 1917, but proved to weak to press home any advantage they gained. The cold of the highlands in winter, and lack of transport, militated against strong counter-offensives by the Arabs, but in Jan., 1918, they were able to begin an advance towards the eastern Dead Sea lands. There were, but few Turks to oppose them, and the local inhabitants, though jealous and suspicious of a strange force in their midst, did not obstruct. Shobak and the Hishe Forest were occupied, and towards the end of January, the Arabs had taken and passed Tafilah, raided up to Mezra on the Dead Sea, and began to threaten the Turks in Kerak and on the railway north of Jurf el Derwish.

To stay an advance, which, if not checked would bring all their Hejaz forces into an inextricable situation, the Turks renewed, in February, their efforts at offensive, from Kerak and from the railway. The first attempt by an infantry force, about 700 strong, to reach Tafilah ended in signal disaster, barely fifty men getting back to Kerak, with the loss of all guns and material. A second attempt, made from the railway early in March, with two comparatively strong columns, stiffened by German units, effected its purpose with little difficulty, the Arabs retiring from Tafilah to Shobak; but its effect was demonstrative only, the Turks being unable to remain at Tafilah in view of the probability of an advance by the British across the Jordan. The Arabs re-occupied Tafilah on March 18, and, on the Turks withdrawing from Kerak a few days later, a detachment of Feisal's irregular troops entered this place also. They did not, however, stay long. The past month of April was marked by a great increase of Arab activity, and as a result of the capture of all the stations on the line between Maan and Mudowara and destruction of track and bridges for over seventy miles, Medina was finally isolated. Maan was vigorously attacked and the Sherifian forces, although unable at the first attempt to hold the railway station which they had entered, took up a strong position dominating both the station and the town. Further north much damage was done to stations, tracks and bridges, and the Beni Sakhr tribe gave assurances of future co-operation, which were, at the time, believed to be satisfactory. The history of the Es Salt raid (April and May, 1918) showed that this confidence had been misplaced, and the operation did not result in the wholesale destruction of Turkish troops owing to the Beni Sakhr tribe remaining quiescent at the critical moment.

The strong position taken up by the Turkish Fourth Army in the Belka during the summer made it impossible for the Arab Army to attempt an offensive owing to its lack of the resources and heavy artillery necessary for such an operation. The September advance made by General Allenby in Palestine caused the Fourth Army to retire upon Damascus and gave the Sherif Feisal the opportunity for which he had so long been waiting.

From the fall of Damascus to the Armistice.

The result of the September operations left the Turks depressed in moral, and so greatly reduced in numbers as to be almost entirely deprived of power to resist the northward sweep of the cavalry, except in the neighbourhood of Aleppo. The obstacles which still impeded the advance were chiefly those offered by long distances, by bad roads, and by disease. The troops which had passed through the Beisan area suffered severely from malaria after the period of incubation had elapsed, by which time they had advanced into the Damascus area. The widely prevalent influenza also produced many casualties.

In spite of these difficulties there were some examples of rapid advance on the part both of cavalry and infantry. The 5th Cavalry Division, which was engaged in the fighting round Damascus on the last day of September, was fighting Turks fifteen miles north of Aleppo on the last day of October. The 7th Indian Division, at Haifa on Oct. 1, marched to Beirut in a week, and occupied Tripolis on Oct. 18, after halting on the historic shores of St. George's Bay for five days. In the course of the advance to Beirut, this division found time to construct a road, over which guns were taken, across the Ladder of Tyre, a natural obstacle of imposing and picturesque magnitude. Full details of the advances of these two divisions will be found in their respective records.

During the advance of the 5th Cavalry Division on the afternoon of Oct. 22, the Armoured Car Column engaged a number of the enemy's armed lorries near Khan Sebil (thirty-five miles south of Aleppo). An enemy armoured car was captured, and the lorries, which kept up fire from machine guns, were chased for fifteen miles. One lorry was run to a standstill but some of its crew escaped in the darkness, leaving twenty-five casualties and five prisoners. Another lorry with five prisoners was captured next day but the Turkish Commander in Aleppo itself declined to surrender to the Armoured Car Column.

To face Plate 53.