

CHAPTER VI

THE ARABS

If the Allied failure at Gallipoli left the Turkish people elated and eager for conquest, they did not lack opportunity to demonstrate their fighting capacity. Heavily engaged in Mesopotamia and Transcaucasia, they were embarking upon a campaign of unknown magnitude towards Egypt, while already the Germans were demanding that they should assist the Central Powers in south-eastern Europe. And now, early in 1916, they were menaced by revolt in southern Arabia. The traditional attitude of Turkey towards the Arabs was drastically changed by the Young Turk Administration. Hitherto the Arabs had been governed loosely and gently, a policy due in part to their capacity to resist the measures of repression enforced against non-Turks in other parts of the Empire, and in part to the fact that they were Moslems and of the true faith. The Arabs, not only of Arabia proper, but of eastern and to a less extent of western Palestine, and even of Syria, were always more or less armed. They were migratory and elusive in their habits and, living in regions of comparative desert far removed from the seat of the Empire, were able to evade conscription and in a large measure to escape taxation. The old Turkish policy was to govern them, so far as they were governed, by the free employment of their own notables. These men, who exercised considerable tribal control, were relatively successful as Turkish tax-gatherers and administrators. They grew rich out of their share of all taxes, and the central government took the balance and was well content. But the Young Turks, in their mad dream of an empire purely Turkish in blood and speech, and obliged to find lucrative posts for those who were faithfully serving them, deprived many of the Arabs of Syria and Palestine of their official positions, and so antagonised the most influential men among the subject race. The passionate peoples of the Near East have a quick, childlike sense of injury. The bazaars of the cities rang with excited exaggerations of the outrage committed by the Young Turks; and the grievance,

speeding in that magical way common with all news in the country, was soon felt over the wide desert to the east and south.

Then came the Young Turk proclamation of a holy war. The Moslems of the Empire were besought and incited to persecute and massacre all Christians. The Arabs received the proclamation with indifference, and the special appeal made to the people of the Hejaz in southern Arabia was answered by Sherif Hussein with a fine touch of humour. Hussein, a well-informed man whose sons had considerable personal acquaintance with Europe, asked Talaat if the Germans were to be killed along with the rest of the Christians. Soon afterwards the Arabs of the Hejaz showed an active disposition to revolt, and on 1st March, 1916, Vice-Admiral R. E. Wemyss,¹ Commander-in-Chief of the East Indies and Egypt Naval Forces, advised General Murray that "there appears to be some promise of inducing Arab combination against the Turks in Arabia."

In this volume it is not proposed to describe in detail the progress of the Arab rising and subsequent campaign. But it will be desirable to trace it in broad outline, because of the important influence which it had upon the British conquest of Palestine and Syria. Hussein, believing that, in a rising against the Turks, he would be warmly backed by his people of the Hejaz, approached the British Government for assurance of support in gold and munitions. These negotiations introduced to the campaign the gallant band of Englishmen who afterwards played so influential and picturesque a part in the Arab war against the Turks. The young Englishman shows nowhere to such advantage against men of all other races as in the handling of coloured alien peoples. The personal hold gained in wild Arabia by a few British civilians and officers, unsupported by military force, was a rare tribute to their courage, tact, and ability. The British Government hampered their negotiations by a policy of indecision and delay; but finally the necessary guarantees of arms and money were given, and in June the Arabs of the Hejaz declared war against their Turkish rulers at Constantinople.

¹ Admiral of the Fleet Lord Wester Wemyss, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.V.O. First Sea Lord, 1917/19. b. 12 April, 1864. Died, 24 May, 1933.

To understand the merits and shortcomings of the Arabs as fighters, it is necessary to be seized of their social and political conditions as the war found them. There was then no such thing as an Arab race bound together and stimulated by a common patriotism, or by any definite collective aim. Arabia was a sparsely peopled land, held by a large number of principalities similar in blood and speech and religion, but each living its own intensely parochial life, and each divided again into many more or less independent tribes. These tribes were animated by no desire for nationhood or progress. The aim of each was to live as independently, as simply, and with as little manual labour as possible. An extremely primitive people, their lives were on the eve of the war much like those of their roaming forefathers before the first crossing of the Jordan. They asked only to be left alone by any authority or people beyond the boundaries of their tribe. They were passionately opposed to the restrictions of government: and, with all their traditional reputation for hospitality, perhaps no people in the world was at heart so antagonistic to the approach of the stranger. They wished for no Western innovations, no material development, no increase in industrial activity.

Among such a people it was as difficult for an ambitious prince like Hussein to promote a general rising against the Turks as it was for the Turks to bring about a holy war against all unbelievers. It was speedily discovered by the Hejaz leader and his British advisers that the tribes would not leave their districts and engage in a war of indefinite length at the prompting of an appeal to their nationalism. Something more definite and tangible must be offered. The Arab chiefs made this clear. They would, they said, under no terms promise troops to the Sherif for a campaign removed from their immediate homes. But if Hussein and his allies would pay them their price in rifles, munitions, and gold, and would bring the war to them, they would assist in the destruction of the Turks within the boundaries of their particular tribes. As nothing better offered, these terms were accepted. Hussein, and the British officers who were on special service with him, then evolved a scheme to make the most profitable use of the Arabs available for service. A few thousand Hejaz

Arabs, some of whom had served with the Turks, were enrolled and trained as a camel corps for prolonged service wherever they might be needed. These men, who in the course of the war reached a fair level of efficiency, were led by a few British officers and non-commissioned officers, assisted by Arabs of the nobler class. They were trained in the use of artillery and machine-guns, and became the nucleus and backbone of the miscellaneous Arabian army. They alone of the Hejaz force wore distinctive military uniform; and they were the only Arabs, with the exception of a few personal followers of the Emir Feisal, one of the sons of Hussein, to be engaged in the campaign all the way from the Hejaz to Damascus and beyond.

As the campaign developed, Hussein's influence—or rather the influence of English gold—travelled far, and in October, 1918, Hejaz men, supported by the local tribesmen, fought in the bazaars of Aleppo. Nevertheless the majority of the powerful principedoms stood aloof from the rising, and the actual combatants were drawn almost entirely from the Hejaz men of the south and the tribes which dwelt close to the long new pilgrims' railway which, running south from Damascus, skirts the western fringe of the Arabian desert.

The tribes which elected to fight with Hussein approximately observed the terms of their bargain. They received rifles and ammunition on a lavish scale from the British, and golden English sovereigns, unseen in Europe in those days, poured in a full and constant stream into the desert. The Arabs in return performed with more or less enthusiasm and capacity the tasks imposed upon them in their own districts. Raids on moving trains on the Hejaz railway and the annihilation of Turkish posts, with an occasional attack upon isolated Turkish columns, made up their part in the war. The usual procedure was for a British officer, accompanied perhaps by a very small force of the Arab regulars, to arrive with his plan of operations in the district belonging to a tribe; upon which the chief or chiefs who had promised co-operation would call up their fighting men.

As a rule, in these little engagements the Turks were greatly outnumbered. But they were, man for man, vastly superior to their rebellious subjects. The Arab of the desert, when

equipped for battle, is one of the most picturesque figures in the world. Armed with his modern rifle and great quantities of the ammunition which is so dear to his heart, he carries also a vicious little dagger and often a sword. His Arab horse is disappointing. In place of the noble steed of tradition, the modern animal is nearly always an ill-conditioned, scraggy pony, which receives very harsh treatment from its owner. But the shortcomings in the horse are more than balanced by the splendour of the man. Tall, straight, and spare, the modern Arab of the desert is one of the most beautiful physical examples of the human race. His large, dark, flashing eyes, his good features, his black, shining beard, are all impressive; but it is in his bold pride and grace of bearing that the Arab is in this as in every age without a peer. As a soldier he was one of the most useless and harmless individuals that have engaged in modern battle. Contrary to general belief, he was entirely without experience as a fighter. His tribal "wars" are mere spectacular demonstrations in which no one in particular is killed. The regular Arab soldiery under British leadership developed some steadiness in action. But the mercenaries of the desert were never a menace to the Turk unless they found him at a marked disadvantage. Accustomed to no sort of discipline, they were in action ignorant of formation and of tactics, except those suggested by native cunning and self-preservation; and, as might have been expected, if they failed to overwhelm the Turks in their first wild rush, or by ambush, they invariably broke off the fight and fled in disorder. A British officer of distinction who served with them during the war described them as "good ten-minute fighters"; and he added: "If you are leading them, and the Turks are not beaten in the first ten minutes, it is well to break away, or you will find yourself the only man left in action on your side."

The Arabs captured Mecca at the beginning of the rebellion, and were afterwards successful in their rush upon Akaba and a few other Turkish positions. But when the Turks possessed sound defences, as at Medina, Amman, and Deraa, they were never in the least danger from the Arabs until the British armies had swept all before them in Palestine and were threatening to cut communications behind the Turks

engaged against Hussein. The impotence of the tribesmen was further shown in their failure to deny the Hejaz railway to the enemy. For many hundreds of miles this line ran through Arab territory, guarded by very weak and scattered Turkish forces. But, except for temporary damage by successful raids, the railway continued to bear Turkish troops and supplies over the greater part of its length down to the eve of the armistice.

Still, if it is beyond dispute that the Arab fought purely as a mercenary and not as a nationalist, and that he was so harmless individually as a soldier, he nevertheless played an important part in the war against the Turks. His revolt was a tragedy to Constantinople. The Arab, if spasmodic and feeble in his campaigning, was, once committed, enthusiastic and whole-hearted in his persecution, plunder, and massacre of the Turks whenever opportunity offered. Primitive and greedy in his outlook, he deemed the winning side in the war to be the side which had the most money expressed in gold. Britain poured in the money; therefore Britain was winning, and Turkey was losing. Turkey losing was Turkey enfeebled, and fair spoil for any one who was stronger. This is the doctrine of all or nearly all the Arabs as seen by the British in the Palestine campaign; and it was followed out to the full against the Turks. Had Turkey been able to meet the Arabs on a definite line with barbed wire and a few machine-guns, she could have held them for years with a single division, and would never have had cause for anxiety. But she had to hold them over 500 miles of the Hejaz railway, and this absorbed not one, but a number of divisions. Moreover, the Arab was a distressing enemy, in that he was one who could not be destroyed. If he failed in his picturesque whirlwind raids, he faded away into the desert, where the Turk could scarcely endure, let alone pursue and destroy, his elusive, thrusting enemy. The Arab had no large towns which could be captured, to the detriment of his material and moral resources. He was always careful to avoid decisive pitched battle. As against the Arabs the Turks had imposed upon them the worst of all rôles in warfare, that of passive resistance on a thinly held and extended front.

The Arab revolt served four purposes which were valuable

to the Allies. (1) It diverted to eastern Palestine and the Hejaz a considerable force which would otherwise have been available against the British in Palestine proper and in Mesopotamia. (2) It made a heavy drain for more than two years upon Turkish reinforcements and supplies. (3) It protected the British army, in its advance across Sinai, Palestine, and Syria, from an attack on its right flank. Had the position been reversed—and had the Arabs fought on the side of the Turks and assisted them with transport and supplies on that flank—it is certain that the British army in Sinai and Palestine must have been substantially larger if its purpose was to be fulfilled. (4) It denied the use of the Arabian Red Sea coast to the Germans as a submarine base. This was the immediate and great relief which the intervention of Hussein gave to the minds of General Murray and Admiral Wemyss, and its importance in the conduct of the war was of the first magnitude to both Britain and Germany. By the employment of the Hejaz railway Germany might, at any time from the declaration of war by Turkey down to the middle of 1916, have carried submarines in parts to the Hejaz coast, re-assembled them there, and established at once a most formidable obstacle to the passage of Allied shipping. The narrow waters of the Gulf of Suez would have been ideal for the work of submarines; and their activities further east might at one stroke have crippled the British campaign in Mesopotamia and, by restricting or absolutely preventing direct communication between Egypt and India and Australia, have dealt a heavy blow to all operations in the Near East. Once established in the waters of the Indian Ocean, the spread of submarine bases towards the Far East, and on to Australia by way of the Malay Archipelago, would have been always practicable.



HEJAZ HORSEMEN AT DAMASCUS, OCTOBER, 1918

First Hand Museum (Official Photo No. P325)

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THE WADY UM MUKSHIB, SINAI, IN FLOOD

*Taken by Major W. H. Scott with I. H. Reat
Aust. War Museum Collection No. B-834*



THE HOD (DESERT PALM-GROVE) AT OGHRAFINA.

*Taken by Capt. H. A. Maunder, A.A.S.C.
Aust. War Museum Collection No. B2491*

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