

A Forerunner. The “Majlis Idara” Stamp of Kerak

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Sometime in 1920 – probably in October – the Jordanian town of Kerak ran out of its small supply of stamps of the Arab Kingdom of Syria.

The latter regime, which ruled all the present “East Bank” Jordan area down to Ma’an and Petra, exclusive, has been expelled from Damascus in late July, 1920, by French occupation forces. His Majesty King Feisal having taken refuge in Palestine. Kerak formed the southern-most town of any importance in the Kingdom of Syria, as Ma’an and Aqaba, now in Jordanian territory, were at that time part of the domains of Arab King Hussein in Mecca.

The area was being governed, at that time, by a provisional Local Council, the Majlis Idara, still owing allegiance to the Arab Kingdom of Syria, pending clarification of its confused political status. A British adviser, appointed by the imperial authorities in nearby Palestine, was stationed in Kerak to assist the Majlis.

The adviser knew of, and had applied for, a supply of Palestine stamps overprinted “Transjordan” which were in the process of being prepared and distributed in the more accessible towns of the region, but Kerak being isolated by distance and virtually impassible roads during the rainy season, no shipments of the overprints had gotten through.

Local Issue

After consultation with the Majlis, and in view of a pressing need for both postal and fiscal stamps, the adviser resorted to a provisional local issue that was to be Jordan’s only locally-prepared forerunner to the first definitive issue of 1920.



The “Salameh” copy of the Majlis Idara stamp of Kerak tied to a piece by seal-type cancel (lower right), and the date in manuscript (diagonal across face of stamp). The designation of the value is in manuscript in the upper right and left. Photo by Boutrelle.

Taking the official seal of the Majlis Idara, the adviser impressed it on plan sheets of gummed paper in green ink, each impression falling within a pencil-ruled square 3½ cm. in size.

Several hundred of these stamps, valued at one piaster each, were so printed, each being initialed “A. K.”, in violet ink, by the adviser, Alek S. Kirkbride, later British Resident and eventually first British Ambassador to Jordan.

They were put into immediate use, and eventually a few copies straggled through to Jerusalem where the postal authorities, now realizing that the need for Transjordan stamps at Kerak was a very real one, took effective steps to get through a small supply, by November 1920, when the new definitives came into general use throughout the country.

R. T. Ledger of Amman, Jordan’s leading philatelic authority and author of the “Philatelic History of Jordan, 1922-1952” (Greek Convent Press, Jerusalem, 1953), discusses this issue briefly on pages 5, 6 and 8 of his handbook, but he says: “copies either mint or postally used... (are) very rare” and does not illustrate the item. The postmark of Kerak which was then in use, however, is illustrated on page 98. It is a circular seal-type cancellation, similar to those found on the 1926 Jambiya issue of Yemen, and incorporates the date “1919” beneath the town name, in Arabic. This type

of cancellation (possibly with slight modifications and altered year date), remained in use until 1922.

The Salameh Copy

Fortunately, the writer was able to locate a used on-piece copy of the Majlis Idara stamp in the possession of Mr. George Salameh of Jerusalem; Jordan, and to get the owner's permission to photograph it.

Mr. Salameh, for 25 years a Middle East specialist, acquired the rare item in 1938 in Amman from an officer of the Arab Legion. Neither he nor any of his friends nor the writer have been able to locate another copy, mint or used.

Careful examination of the Salameh copy and its markings not only, confirms the information presented by Ledger but also adds additional data to our small fund of knowledge about the period and method of use of this item as well as the insertion of the figure of value, mentioned but not described by Ledger.

The basic green seal in the center of the stamp measures $2\frac{1}{4}$ x $2\frac{1}{4}$ cm. in size, being in the shape of a horizontal oval.

Although the impression of the seal, which appears to have three rows of colorless Arabic script on a dark background, is too faint to read in its entirety, the bottom portion incorporating the Moslem date, 1338 A. H. (26 September 1919 through 14 September 1920) is clear enough to be legible to the naked eye.

The penciled borders, mentioned by Ledger, are visible top and bottom, spaced $3\frac{1}{2}$ cm., but none are visible to left or right. The seal is impressed 8 mm. from the top border and 5 mm. from the bottom.

MS Designation of Value

Also within the borders, to upper right and left of the seal, respectively, are the Arabic words "*Kirsh Msri*" ("One Egyptian Piaster"), inserted in MS form with violet ink. Mr. Kirkbride's initials "A. K." also appear in this violet ink below the seal and cutting into it slightly.

Separation was by means of creasing and tearing along the border lines except on the right which was cut with a scissors.

The seal-typed cancel, $2\frac{1}{2}$ cm. in diameter, is impressed in the lower right corner of the stamp, covering 5 mm. of the lower right of the green seal. It is impressed in violet ink and shows similar markings to Ledger's illustration, but with a slightly different alignment of the final letter "k" in Arabic at the left end of the town name, "Kerak", at the top. The final Arabic "q" of *Barq* at the end of the lower inscription "*Barid wal Barq*" ("Post and Telegraph") is also clearly legible.

Due to its slight difference from the Ledger specimen, which incorporates the Christian year date 1919 in Arabic, it is possible that the cancellation on the Salameh copy is from a recut canceling stamp with the date 1920, but the central portion of the device, where the date is found, is not visible on this piece.

Partly MS Cancellation

The rest of the date stamp is written in MS in violet ink in such a manner as to run down diagonally to the left from below the word "*kirsh*" ("Piaster"), across the upper left side of the green seal, across the white space within the border to the left of the seal and beyond the stamp proper onto the piece of cover. The stamp is thus substantially "tied to cover" on both right and left sides by its cancellations.

The MS date is in two lines, the top one, which is underlined, reading "921" in Arabic figures (*i. e.* 1921 according to the customary Arab fashion of writing the Christian date without the one-thousand figure) and the bottom one simply "March 1st", in Arabic letters (*mim, alef, ra, shin*; "Marsh", written right to left, preceded by the figure "1").

This data, written four months after the Kerak stamps were supposedly obsolete and after Adviser Kirkbride had moved on to the post of British Advisor at Amman, shows that either the November, 1920

supply of the first general issue of Transjordan was too small, and soon exhausted, causing the Majlis Idara stock to come into currency for a second period in 1921, or that a purchase of one of the local stamps in 1920 found the adhesive still valid and accepted for postal use four months later. There is no question of its possible fiscal use in this case due to the nature of the cancellations and the lack of a personal seal or signature anywhere on or near the stamp.

No Envelope

The other side of the piece, which measures 6 x 4½ cm. and includes the upper left corner of a sheet of thick paper, bears fragments of a letter or report, incorporating the words: "... over Number 8..." and an unidentified signature. It may have been folded and sealed as old-fashioned stampless covers, without envelope, or it may have gone through the mail as a small postal card type message. Mr. Salameh does not remember that the Arab Legion officer concerned knew or mentioned anything about its use or how it came into his possession.

It was not until the month of use of the Salameh copy of the stamp that the political situation became clarified in the Jordan area, thus permitting the establishment and adequate functioning of a uniform postal service.

It was during the initial period of use of the Majlis Idara stamp of Kerak (October and November, 1920) that the Emir Abdullah ibn Hussein, son of Arab King Hussein and brother of King Feisal I of Syria and Iraq, crossed the desert stretches of Northern Hejaz and entered what is now Jordan at Ma'an. From Ma'an, on 5 December 1920 the prince issued a proclamation announcing his assumption of the office of Viceroy of the Kingdom of Syria in the name of his brother and for the purpose of recovering the realm from the French. He invited the local tribal and municipal authorities, including those of Kerak, to cooperate in raising the necessary

forces to liberate the French-occupied major portions of the Kingdom.

Historic Date

On March 1, 1921, His Highness proceeded to Amman with his armed forces, intent on attacking the French farther north, but was restrained by the British of Palestine who persuaded the Viceroy to remain in Amman with his army and to continue to administer the Transjordan provinces of Syria under British mandatory control. The British, through no less a personality than Churchill himself, with Lawrence of Arabia as his advisor, agreed to work for the restoration of the Arab kingdom in all of Syria.

Thus was born the provisional regime, then emirate, and finally the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

In his memoirs, the late King Abdullah notes that during this month of March, 1921, until his effective assumption of authority in Amman, "there was no inter-communication between the districts". "We linked all the districts together into one unit and removed the administrative barriers between them", Abdullah goes on to say.

King Abdullah's statement, then, would appear to furnish with at least a clue as to why a Majlis Idara stamp of Kerak of October-November, 1920, came to be used on historic March 1, 1921, on the eve of the establishment of a uniform postal administration for the first time throughout all of Jordan.