

LAWRENCE'S WAR and the Making of the Modern Middle East

"An Arab war waged and led by Arabs for an Arab aim in Arabia." That was T. E. Lawrence's description of the Arab Revolt (left), a two-year guerrilla campaign in which he served as liaison between British and Arab forces attacking the Ottoman Empire, an ally of Germany. Launched from Mecca by Grand Sharif Hussein and led by his four sons (Feisal, Abdullah, Ali, and Zeid), the revolt aimed to win independence for the Arabs after four centuries of Turkish rule.

Yet even as Britain was endorsing Arab nationalist dreams, it was making secret alliances with France and Russia to divide Ottoman lands among themselves. Moreover, Britain in 1917 committed itself to creating a homeland for the Jews in Palestine. These actions produced a powder keg of competing territorial claims.

Against long odds the Arab Revolt succeeded under the leadership of Feisal and of Lawrence, who personally led raids against Turkish troops and supplies along the Hejaz Railway on the road to triumph in Damascus.

At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, Feisal, with Lawrence at his side, argued for Arab independence—in vain. Over the next two years France was given control over Syria and Lebanon, and Britain received mandates for Palestine and the newly created nation of Iraq. Britain installed Feisal as King of Iraq and positioned his brother Abdullah to become king of another new nation parceled from the desert, Jordan.

British diplomats, including Lawrence, pressured Sharif Hussein to accept the peace agreement. When he refused, Britain abandoned him to the desert warlord Ibn Saud. In 1924-25 the Saudi army routed Hussein's people, the Hashemites, and seized Islam's holy cities.

The rise of nationalism forced out the British and French in the 1940s, while the founding of Israel flooded neighboring Arab countries with Palestinian refugees and polarized the region. Many Arabs today blame Britain, and her envoy Lawrence, for sowing the seeds of turmoil. "I admire Lawrence as a man," notes Suleiman Mousa, an Arab historian. "What I don't admire is the 'peace' he and his country imposed on us."

