Line in the Sand:
Lawrence of Arabia, Moral Treachery and World War One

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Glamourized on screen as the heroic Lawrence of Arabia, Thomas Edward Lawrence was in reality a tormented soul who wrestled with British treachery in their dealings with the Arab Revolt. By his participation in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Lawrence tried to make amends for the now infamous Sykes-Picot agreement which undermined the public undertakings to support Arab Independence in exchange for Arab support in the First World War. Tragically, even his later attempts to change his identity ended in failure and in his early death. The toxic legacy of betrayal, deceit and sedition is still played out in the Middle East.

A seminar for interfaith leaders and public servants interested in the consequences of treachery.
Introduction

By one of those wonderful moments of serendipity, I recently found myself bumping up against Thomas Edward Lawrence, agent of His Majesty’s Government in the 1916 Arab Revolt and immortalised on screen as “Lawrence of Arabia”.

Every day while I was on sabbatical, walking to the Hebrew University Campus on Mount Scopus, I passed by the Commonwealth War Graves where the familiar-sounding names and the county regiments stood in stark contrast to the cranes and tower blocks of modern Jerusalem rising all around. “The land on which this cemetery stands”, says the superscription, “is the free gift of the people of Palestine for the perpetual resting-place of those of the Allied Armies who fell in the war of 1914-1918 and are honoured here”.

In April I cycled across the Wadi Rum in Jordan, criss-crossing the Hijaz Railway which, as we’ll hear later, was both a strategic asset and a liability for the occupying forces of the Ottoman Empire, and where Lawrence spent years harrying
the Turks in the campaign which ended in the Arab liberation of Damascus.

And finally, reading the pages of Lawrence’s account of his part in the revolt – The Seven Pillars of Wisdom – I couldn’t help noticing that he had written it while staying at No 14 Barton Street, just around the corner. He did so, incidentally, while on a seven-year research fellowship from All Souls’ College in Oxford.

So this paper falls into three parts – and I am going to use the analogy of camera lenses.

In the first section, I want to use a **wide-angle** lens to take in the political hinterland in which Lawrence found himself operating. Then with a **macro** lens, I want to look in more detail at this strange, heroic, troubled and quixotic figure, T E Lawrence. And finally, with as it were a **telescopic lens**, I want to look forwards into our own day and probe what lessons, if any, can be drawn. I say “if any” advisedly. Even an
amateur historian must first and foremost start, continue and end with the events of the day. Their interpretation is one thing: as to the implications of those events a century on, one has to enter the realms of speculation.

**World War I and the End of the Ottoman Empire**

– *The Wide-Angle Lens*

The Sheik-al-Islam published his proclamation, summoning the whole Muslim world to arise ... “Oh you Muslims, you are smitten with happiness and are on the verge of sacrificing your life and your goods for the cause of right ... obey the commands of the Almighty, who, in the Holy Koran, promises us bliss in this world and the next ... The Chief of the Believers, the Caliph, invites you all as Muslims to join the holy war!”

This was the introduction to five fatwas or religious legal declarations made in the name of Sultan-Caliph Mehmed V, the Sultan of Ottoman Constantinople, translated into Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Tatar, spread throughout the Muslim world and exhorting Muslims to take up arms against Christians in Britain, France and Russia at the start of World War I.
By the time any of the political and military figures we are concerned with arrived on the scene, the heyday of the Ottoman Empire was as distant as the Elizabethan era was to the English. In 1876, the Sultan was bankrupted; the British took over Cyprus in return for Disraeli’s support for the Ottoman claim over territories in the Balkans; Suez and Egypt soon followed. Like vultures circling above a dying and once-great beast, the colonial powers hovered, waiting for their moment. The French stepped in to buy up Government debt, but the rise of the Young Turks in 1908 seemed at first to herald a new dawn, but in fact ushered in Turkification and the swift dissolution of the Empire. Libya and the Balkans were lost for ever in 1912.

But this was also a decisive moment for what we now call Arab Nationalism. In the early centuries of Islam, being ‘Arab’ meant living in or at least coming from the Arabian Peninsula, distinguishing them from Persians or the Maghreb. Later, being Arab meant being part of the ‘ummah” that
supranational religious identity which unites Muslims everywhere.

But the rise of European colonialism in the region in the 19th century introduced a new concept: that of nationalism, where a narrower set of parameters could define a more local identity, rather than a broader Islamic one. Remember, before the conclusion of World War I, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Iraq simply did not exist as nation states in the way we currently understand: these are the creation of those years.

The significance of all this is summed up in the ‘Eastern Question’ which raged around the Cabinet table in Downing Street. In the event of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, how would the territories previously occupied be divided between the colonial powers, and more pressing, how could the Arabs be persuaded to support the Entente Powers of Britain, France and Russia. Ironically, the rise of the Young Turks, which had promised so much, did much to encourage
Arabs in the opposite direction. So the central question became – would the Arabs support the Allies on the promise of independence against the Central Powers, or would they throw their weight behind the failing Ottoman Empire and their German backers, with the prospect of more modest autonomy?

Here opportunism played a part. Guardianship of Islam’s most holy sites – Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem – was still vested in the Sultan in Istanbul, the Caliph or successor to the Prophet. However, before the outbreak of war, the Sharif of Mecca, Hussein bin Ali, approached the British authorities in Cairo (via his son Abdullah) for support as his relationship with Istanbul became strained. The Sultan’s call to jihad against the Allies in 1915 gave this an urgent dimension.

In the same year, Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, and Sharif Hussein entered a famous correspondence, in which McMahon had two aims: firstly, to encourage an Arab revolt against the Turks to weaken them
militarily; secondly, by getting the Arabs on board, to provide a bulwark against those criticising Indian Muslims enlisted in the British Army. With the exception of Palestine, the north of the Persian Gulf and what now known as Iraq, McMahon agreed: “to recognise and uphold the independence of the Arabs in all the regions proposed by Sharif Hussein of Mecca”. This included the whole territory between Egypt, Syria and Persia, and would also lead to the proclamation of an Arab Caliphate of Islam.

What the Government at the time wanted was a pliable ruler who would look naturally to Britain for support. As Ronald Storrs, McMahon’s oriental secretary put it: “a hereditary, spiritual Pope with no temporal power, dependant on Britain for income and protection”. But Hussein was not quite the patsy which McMahon imagined, as he found out when he tried to delay. Hussein replied abruptly: “The fact is, the proposed frontiers and boundaries represent not the suggestion of one individual ... but the demands of our people who believe that those frontiers form the minimum
recover to the establishment of the new order for which they are striving”.

However, there was a significant fly in the ointment, the ‘Entente Cordiale’. An 1898 fracas with the French at Fashoda in the Upper Nile, in which Kitchener had intervened, led to the establishment of the 1904 Entente Cordiale between France and Britain. This set out a series of colonial claims: Britain would get Egypt and the Sudan; France would extend its North African reach to Morocco. A few years later, Britain renounced any claim to Syria.

The French were horrified at the thought of an overall Arab Revolt, which they foresaw would lead to their own expulsion from Syria and Lebanon. While the French were losing so heavily on the Western Front, their traditional influence and position in the East was being undermined by the British. As one of the French negotiators put it: “After the expenditure of so many lives, France would never consent to offer independence to the Arabs, though at the beginning of the
war she might have done so”. Considering Arab self-rule an impossibility, he concluded that “what the British want is only to deceive the Arabs”.

But in secret, negotiations were indeed going on as to how to carve up the Ottoman Empire. For the British, Sir Mark Sykes, MP for Hull, and for the French, Francois Georges-Picot. By the middle of 1916 – just as the Arab Revolt was fermenting – the British, French and Russian secretly agreed to a new map of the Middle East. The Blue area would see the French take control of Syria and the Lebanese Coast, together with part of Turkey bordering northern Syria. In the Red area, Britain would rule part of the Persian Gulf up to Baghdad, and then a line across to Acre, with an enclave around Haifa. From the ‘e’ in Acre to the ‘k’ in Kirkuk, as Sykes put it. A Brown area kept Palestine, with the holy city of Jerusalem, separate: in other words, the international community would have to decide if the British and French could not agree about how it should be divided between them.
Alongside these two agreements – one with the Arabs promising them independence in return for support against the Ottomans, and the other with the Entente Powers carving up the region without any regard for the people who lived there – there now came a third piece of the jigsaw. That of Zionism.

In 1915, as the French began to make their views about Syria known, Herbert Samuel, then a British cabinet minister and prominent Zionist, suggested the establishment of a Jewish state as bulwark against any incursion by France as far as the Suez canal. Not only would this win favour with the influential community of British Jews, but it might even help to persuade the United States – with a population of 2 million Jews – into the War: "Help given now towards the attainment of the idea which great numbers of Jews have never ceased to cherish through so many centuries of suffering cannot fail to secure, into a far-distant future, the gratitude of a whole race, whose goodwill, in time to come, may not be without its value".
Having secured the support of Chaim Weizmann, the now (in)famous Balfour Declaration of November 1917 was made in a letter of Lord Rothschild for onward transmission to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland:

His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

We should note: at the time the Jewish population in Palestine was some 10%, owning 2% of the land.

A final word of background, however, must relate to the newly-elected President Woodrow-Wilson whose conviction was that the War itself was in great part the fault of the Imperial Powers. In January 1917, Wilson declared: “No nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation
or people ... every people should be left free to determine its own policy ... the little along with the great and the powerful”. He was articulating ‘self-determination’, and the implications for all three agreements were plain – the Arab revolt for independence, the Sykes-Picot agreement for post-war territorial gain and the Balfour Declaration of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

As Edward House, Woodrow Wilson’s foreign policy adviser put it: “It is all bad and I told Balfour so. They are making it a breeding place for future war”.

**T E Lawrence – The Macro Lens**

This was the stage that Thomas Edward Lawrence entered: publicly made promises, secret deals with the Allies and support for a homeland for a religion which had not had a significant presence in the region for centuries.
Lawrence’s own background is by no means irrelevant. Lawrence was born illegitimate in Tremadog, Wales, in August 1888 to Sir Thomas Chapman and Sarah Junner, a governess who was herself illegitimate. Chapman had left his wife and first family in Ireland to live with Sarah Junner, and they called themselves Mr and Mrs Lawrence. In the summer of 1896 the Lawrences moved to Oxford, where in 1907–10 young Lawrence took a First in History at Jesus College. While at Oxford, Lawrence joined the Officer Training Corps, and did his research into Crusader Castles in the Middle East and followed this after graduation with a series of archaeological digs in Eastern Syria. In 1914 at the outbreak of war, he volunteered and, with his knowledge of Arabic, was posted to the Intelligence Corps in Cairo, but the death of his two younger brothers on the Western Front in the following year made him question the value of his own contribution.

The received wisdom in 1916 was that once Sharif Hussein had captured Mecca, the Arab revolt would peter out when they realised that the Turks could easily reinforce Medina, two hundred miles to the north. This was the opportunity
which Lawrence spotted: the Ottoman supply lines were dependent on the Hijaz railway line which ran from Damascus, and if the Bedu tribesmen could be marshalled, then the Turkish garrison in Medina – poised to retake Mecca – could be strangled.

In essence, the preferred position became that – whatever the promises made between McMahon and Sharif Hussein - a successful Arab Revolt would be in neither of the interests of France and Britain: “the partisans for a great Arab kingdom seek afterwards to act in Syria, and in Iraq, from where we – French and English – must then expel them”. So Lawrence was dispatched from Cairo to Mecca to confirm that the British should not provide any support, and the revolt would then fizzle out.

Once Hussein was persuaded to allow Lawrence to travel inland, Lawrence quickly realised the significance of the Hijaz railway and the part that tribal groups could make: “the Hijaz
war is one of dervishes against regular troops, and we are on the side of the dervishes”, he wrote.

In the coming months, Lawrence moved north to the Red Sea port of Wejh which put him in striking distance of the Hijaz railway inland, and with arms, ammunitions and gold from Britain, a series of raids was carried out. The intention was not to cut off Medina and the Turkish garrison completely, but to tie up their resources and wage a war of gradual attrition. Partly this was to bleed the Ottomans slowly, but partly it was the recognition that if the Arabs were too successful, too quickly, the French and British might lose interest in a wider revolt.

It was here that Lawrence met with Auda abu Tayi, leader of the Humaytat tribe which ranged across what we now call Sinai and the Jordanian-Saudi border. A charismatic leader – married 28 times! – he persuaded Lawrence that the Wadi Sirhan, an area to the west of Damascus would make the ideal springboard not only for the revolt in Syria, stirring up
the Rwala tribe, but also to capture Akaba, the sea-port at the top of the Sinai peninsula, as well as encouraging the Jabal Druze, on a plateau to the South East of Damascus, to revolt.

On 10th May 1917, just three days before setting out on a horrendous 300 mile camel-back journey across Al Houl / The Terror, to reach Wadi Shiran, Lawrence had a meeting with Georges Sykes and while he was broadly aware of British duplicity, this now became crystallised in his mind. The passage is worth reading: “Rumours of the fraud reached Arab ears, from Turkey. In the East persons were more trusted than institutions. So the Arabs, having tested my friendliness and sincerity under fire, asked me, as a free agent, to endorse the promises of the British government. I had had no previous or inner knowledge of the McMahon pledges and the Sykes-Picot treaty, which were both framed by war-time branches of the Foreign Office. But, not being a perfect fool, I could see that if we won the war the promises to the Arabs were dead paper. Had I been an honourable adviser I would have sent my men home, and not let them
risk their lives for such stuff. Yet the Arab inspiration was our main tool in winning the Eastern war. So I assured them that England kept her word in letter and spirit. In this comfort they performed their fine things: but, of course, instead of being proud of what we did together, I was continually and bitterly ashamed”. He went on: “In revenge I vowed to make the Arab Revolt the engine of its own success, as well as handmaid to our Egyptian campaign: and vowed to lead it so madly in the final victory that expediency should counsel to the Powers a fair settlement of the Arabs’ moral claims”.

He later drafted a letter to the head of Intelligence in Cairo: “Clayton: I’ve decided to go off alone to Damascus hoping to get killed along the way. For all sakes try and clear this show up before it goes further. We are calling them to fight for us on a lie and I can’t stand it”.

Time does not allow me to go into the disasters which very nearly befell Lawrence, but there was a remarkable success on 6th July 1917 when the Humaytat tribesmen captured the
strategic port of Aqaba, along with 1,300 Ottoman troops, with almost no loss on the Arab side. As soon as the battle was over, Lawrence made his way to Cairo and arrived on the morning that Clayton was drafting him a memo ordering him not to attack Aqaba because of ‘insuperable difficulties’. Even his detractors were now putting his name forward for a V.C.

The second major phase of operations which Lawrence was involved in now began: General Edmund Allenby, who had commanded the British 3rd Army and was regarded as having failed at Arras on the Western Front, was placed in charge of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in June 1917, and was tasked by the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, to take Jerusalem by Christmas. Lawrence’s success at Aqaba was crucial: it protected the Sinai Peninsula along which Allenby was progressing, and also provided a launch-point for continuing attacks on the Hijaz railway line.

Film footage from 11th December 1917 shows General Allenby entering Jerusalem via the Jaffa Gate on foot. And
there is a magical sequence of him talking animatedly with a slight military officer, who is all smiles. It was, of course, T E Lawrence. But the fighting had left its scars: “I’m not going to last out this game much longer”, he wrote after one attack.

The final phase of the campaign was delayed in the first half of 1918 by the German offensive on the Western Front. Allenby was forced to send 60,000 of his best troops as reinforcements but by the autumn of 1918 the Sherifal Army together with Lawrence had been sent to attack Dara, a strategic railway junction south of Damascus which connected the lines between Palestine, the Hijaz and Syria. The entry into Damascus on 1\textsuperscript{st} October 1918 was led by the Arabs, who fully expected to be rewarded with their freedom to create an Arab nation covering the region.

Indeed, up until this point, there had been considerable discussion about ‘The Eastern Question’, with public statements about the right to self-determination. By this stage, after the Russian Revolution of 1917, all the details of
the Sykes-Picot agreement had become known, and it meant that the grounds for that secret deal were now open to review. At the Trades Union Conference that year, Lloyd George said: “Arabia, Armenia, Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine would be entitled to a recognition of their separate national conditions”. Similarly Woodrow Wilson’s *Fourteen Points* included no. 12 stating that Turks should be “assured a secure sovereignty and that other nationalities they currently rule should also be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development”. Even Georges Sykes realised that Sykes-Picot “could now only be considered as a reactionary measure” and in August 1918 began drafting a revision of the 1916 agreement.

However, to the dismay of the Arabs and not least to Lawrence and others, as forces entered Damascus on 1st October, Balfour overruled his junior Minister, Cecil, and insisted that Sykes-Picot be honoured. The reaction was one of disbelief: W F Stirling wrote of delegates of “frenzied and almost despairing Arabs who could not believe that we had
signed an agreement which would hand them over to the French”. Feisal, the son of Sharif Hussein protested loudly to Allenby and flatly refused to accept the terms. Lawrence’s own reaction is noteworthy: days after the capture of Damascus, he returned to Whitehall to fight the Arabs’ corner and ensure their representation at the forthcoming Paris Peace Conference in January 1919. However, he too was not immune from recognising the political reality, when in a letter to Sykes, he wrote: “I quite recognise that we may have to sell our small friends to pay for our big friends, or sell our future security in the Near East to pay for our present victory in Flanders”. Speaking of Arab independence, in *The Seven Pillars*, he writes:

> Yet we knew that these were dreams. Arab Government in Syria, though buttressed on Arabic prejudices, would be as much 'imposed' as the Turkish Government, or a foreign protectorate, or the historic Caliphate. Syria remained a vividly coloured racial and religious mosaic. Any wide attempt after unity would make a patched and parcelled thing, ungrateful to a people whose instincts ever returned towards parochial home rule.
But what then of Lawrence? Immediately after the Peace Conference, he returned to London and served for a year as an advisor to Winston Churchill in the Colonial Office. By this time, his collaboration with the American journalist, Lowell Thomas, on a touring show entitled, ‘With Allenby in Palestine’ raised his public profile, to the extent that by early 1920 the tour was re-titled: ‘With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia’. This made him a household name, but was not welcomed by him. He enlisted in the RAF and then in 1923 in the Tank Corps, both under assumed names, before returning to the RAF where he was posted to a remote base in India to avoid publicity. In this period, apparently more happy than in years, and while he was serving at RAF Bridlington, Lawrence developed a love of speed – boats and motorcycles – and it was two months after the end of his military service that, aged 46, he was killed following a motorcycle accident.
Looking forward - — The Telescopic Lens

As I alluded in my introduction, trying to ‘read out’ from historical events any implications for the world a century later is fraught with difficulty, not least because the academic world is littered with dispassionate attempts which end in ‘eisegesis’ rather than ‘exegesis’.

However, there are three groups of questions worth considering.

On the one hand, the political questions revolve around whether the notion of Arab nationalism was itself a European import, designed to carve up territory in such a way as to make colonial rule more manageable. The consequences of the decisions made at that time can hardly be overstated: the British commitment to a Jewish state in Palestine and the post-War mandate which ensued; the French hegemony of Lebanon and Syria as schools of democracy; the invasion in the dying days of the War of the oil-rich territory around Mosul and its inclusion in what became Iraq under British
rule. On occasion, it can appear as if 1918 simply pressed the pause button, which has now re-started once again in recent years.

The second area which concerns me is to do with the way we are currently remembering the centenary of the outbreak of World War I. Absolutely rightly, the main focus of our attention is on the events of the Western Front and on the scale of the conflict. There is some timely revisiting of traditional interpretations of the value and purpose of the War. However, there is precious little in the public arena which even begins to illuminate the way that the Middle East as a region was largely shaped at the time, and that that is an enduring heritage which current day consequences.

The third area for legitimate speculation, however, is much more personal, and that is the impact on the individual of carrying out the wishes of His Majesty’s Government. As his writings make clear, Lawrence was wracked with guilt about how the Arabs he was supporting and leading were tricked
and double-crossed, principally because he was the one doing the trickery and double-crossing. Feted as a hero in the press, Lawrence withdrew and sought an anonymity which he never properly attained, and died aged 46 shortly after leaving military service.

More than that, it is not at all the case that he was simply the unwilling servant doing his Governmental masters’ bidding. He expresses a range of reactions to the events he is both witnessing and fermenting. Horror at the physical nature of war; capable of using his own personality and the weakness of others to achieve political and military objectives; exhilaration at success and despair in failure. To state the obvious: these events required moral compromise to achieve greater political ends. This is the nature of life as an agent, and in this Lawrence used others as much he was used himself.