



DECOLONISATION À LA CHURCHILL

WINSTON CHURCHILL'S IDEALISATION OF LAWRENCE'S ACTION
IN THE POST-WAR MIDDLE EAST IN "LAWRENCE OF ARABIA"

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Few people in France are aware of the uneasy "Special Relationship" with Iraq which has characterised – some would say "plagued" – British Middle East policy since the First World War. Hence the misunderstandings when Tony Blair enthusiastically joined in the American President's punitive expedition – most educated people in Britain knew it only prolonged a long history of litigious and contentious relations, but French politicians and journalists had no idea of this.

Arguably, it all started with the declaration of war on Turkey on 11 November 1914 and the decision a few days later to proclaim the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire as a British war aim. A Committee chaired by Sir Maurice de Bunsen reported on the question on 30 June 1915, recommending something like the solution adopted for West Germany after the Second World War, namely a federation reducing the powers of the central Government. Simultaneously, in Damascus, a number of Arab secret societies which had been calling for rebellion against their Ottoman masters even before the war started issued a document, the "Damascus Protocol", in which they proclaimed their intention of fighting alongside Britain if an agreement on the future of the Arab lands, based on independence, could be arrived at.

Earlier in 1915, these Arab secret societies had approached Hussein bin Ali al-Hashemi (hence the "Hashemite" dynasty), Sharif¹ of Mecca², asking him

¹ An exact transliteration of Arabic into the Latin alphabet is impossible. Hence the variations found in the titles (Sharif, Sherif; Amir, Emir) and names (Faisal, Fayçal; Hussein, Husayn).

to lead the revolt, and they formally confirmed this before his son, Faisal (bin al-Hussein bin Ali al-Hashemi) at Damascus on 23 May 1915, begging him to present Hussein with the “Damascus Protocol” for his approval and support. This choice of Hussein and Faisal was to have enormous consequences, first because the “Hashemite dynasty” was in conflict with the other important royal family of the Arabian Peninsula, the “Saudis”, whose chief at the time was Abdulaziz ben Abderrahmane Al Saud, commonly known as Ibn Saud, who controlled the eastern coast of the Peninsula. To make things worse in this rivalry, Hussein was “interested more in the fortunes of his own family than Arab self-determination”, as Margaret MacMillan puts it [398]. Secondly, because the “Hashemites” were of the Sunni branch of Islam and therefore not welcome to rule over Shiite populations.

Roughly speaking, the Protocol would have thrown back the Ottoman frontiers to what is now the southern frontier of Turkey. A few weeks later, Sir Henry McMahon, British High Commissioner in Egypt, started a correspondence with Hussein bin Ali, culminating in his letter of 24 October 1915³, which was interpreted by the Arab rebels as conceding independence on their terms, with the possible exception of safeguarding French ambitions and interests in “The districts of Mersina and Alexandretta, and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo”. Curiously, Hussein and his friends did not see the limitations implicit in the letter, which severely restricted their freedom in the face of the provisos inserted to assert British influence and interests:

² The member of the Arab nobility entrusted with the stewardship of the Holy Places of Mecca and Medina.

³ Apparently, the complete correspondence (14 July 1915-10 March 1916) was only published in English in 1938, by George Antonius, a diplomat born of Greek Orthodox parents in the Lebanon, educated in Alexandria and Cambridge, who represented Arab interests in Palestine at the abortive London Conference of 1939. It constituted Appendix A, “McMahon Correspondence”, of his *The Arab Awakening*, thus preceding the first official publication, by the Foreign Office in March 1939: *Correspondence between Sir Henry McMahon G.C.M.G., G.C.V.O., K.C.I.E., C.S.I., His Majesty’s High Commissioner at Cairo and the Sherif Hussein of Mecca, July 1915-March 1916*. Presented by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to Parliament by Command of His Majesty. Foreign Office: Miscellaneous, No. 3. Cmd. 5957. London: HMSO, 1939.

[...] When the situation admits, Great Britain will give to the Arabs her advice and will assist them to establish what may appear to be the most suitable forms of government those various territories.

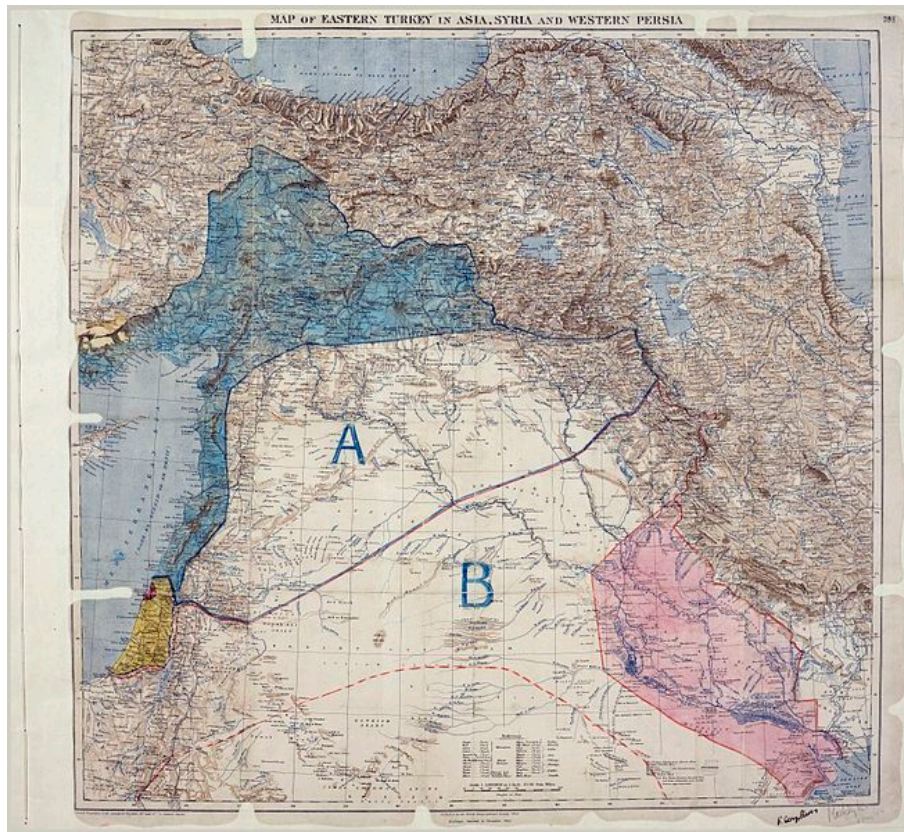
On the other hand, it is understood that the Arabs have decided to seek the advice and guidance of Great Britain only, and that such European advisers and officials as may be required for the formation of a sound form of administration will be British.

With regard to the vilayets of Bagdad and Basra, the Arabs will recognise that the established position and interests of Great Britain necessitate special administrative arrangements in order to secure these territories from foreign aggression to promote the welfare of the local populations and to safeguard our mutual economic interests [...] ⁴

Post-war plans for the whole area were made more concrete with the Sykes-Picot agreement of 16 May 1916⁵, when Colonel Sir Mark Sykes, who advised the Cabinet on Middle East affairs, and François Georges-Picot, from the French Diplomatic Service, secretly carved up the expected Arab spoils of the Ottoman Empire between their two countries.

⁴ The full Correspondence is now widely available on the Internet. One of the best sites is that of the MidEastWeb : < <http://www.mideastweb.org/mcmahon.htm> >.

⁵ Antonius also gives it, as Appendix B, "Anglo-Franco-Russian (Sykes-Picot) Agreement" in *The Arab Awakening*.



Map signed "Sir Mark Sykes and Fr[ançois] Georges-Picot, 8 May 1916"
National Archives, London (MPK1/426), 71x74 cm.

The blue zone would be occupied by the French and the red one – inevitably red, of course, “the red on the map” – would be the responsibility of Britain. The “brown part” (in fact yellowish) was left open to international negotiations – there being no agreement between Britain and France on the policy to be followed regarding the Zionist claim to the land of the ancient Hebrews. Zone A would become a French protectorate, Zone B a British one.

Several problems should have been obvious – but they were apparently not discussed until later. First, the French Government was not told of the McMahon-Hussein correspondence. Secondly, the brown part of the Agreement precluded an immediate concession to the Zionists, which did not prevent Balfour from making his famous Declaration on 2 November

1917. Thirdly the Arabs were never told of the Sykes–Picot talks, let alone their resulting allocation of zones of influence in the land for which they started fighting alongside the Allies of the Entente on 5 June 1916. The Russian Government had been privy to the Agreement because it would be a beneficiary of the carve-up in the Straits, but then the Bolsheviks denounced it publicly in December 1917, to the great embarrassment of the British and French. One man at least saw the contradiction: Sir Henry McMahon, who tendered his resignation to his political superiors. But the new High Commissioner of Egypt, Sir Reginald Wingate, told the Arabs that they had nothing to fear.

The Arab Revolt, as it came to be known, therefore continued, under the leadership of Faisal bin Hussein – and the “advice” (using the term for want of a better word) given by Colonel T.E. Lawrence, who felt that the modernising enthusiasm of the Young Turks was as bad for the inhabitants of the region as was their temptation towards westernisation and abandonment of their traditional culture, a conviction acquired during his pre-war contact with these populations on the occasion of his archaeological work in the Lebanon and Syria. The first great victory of these irregular forces was achieved almost exactly one year after the start of the Revolt, on 17 June 1917, when they took Aqabah, a port on the Red Sea at the southern tip of what is now Jordan. From there, Faisal, Lawrence and their tribal forces led a war of attrition against the Damascus to Medina railway, also known as the Hejaz railway, much in the way that the Boers had harassed the far superior British troops just over fifteen years before. The ultimate objective was Damascus, if only because the deeply Francophobe Lawrence thought that this would “biff the French out of all hope of Syria”⁶ – and in this he was unofficially backed by Sir Henry McMahon, and his successor Sir Reginald Wingate, with the active support of the Arab Bureau, created in Cairo in January 1916 to coordinate British intelligence and propaganda efforts in the region, one of the prominent civilian members being the Orientalist and archaeologist Gertrude Bell [BRYSAK : 286]. Damascus finally fell to Faisal’s troops on 1 October 1918, with Lawrence in the forefront, just after a vanguard of Australian cavalry had made the first breach. In popular memory, the role of the Australians is totally forgotten and all the glory goes

⁶ “Won’t the French be mad if we win through?”, he added [LAWRENCE 1915]. More on this can be found in BAKER : 73.

to Faisal and his faithful advisor. On 2 October, General Sir Edmund Allenby took possession of the city in the name of the Allies.

In “Lawrence of Arabia”, his essay first published in 1937 in *Great Contemporaries*⁷, Winston Churchill indicates that during his first meeting with Lawrence over luncheon just after the war – he does not give the precise date, but we know it took place in Paris during the Peace Conference – he wrongly rebuked Lawrence for publicly snubbing the King by refusing to accept the decorations bestowed upon him. In fact, Churchill had only learned this in 1937, although Lawrence had refused the decorations in a private interview with the King on 30 October 1918, when Lawrence was home on leave after his exertions around Damascus. Lawrence explained his conduct in terms approvingly reported by Churchill:

This was the only way in his power, he said, of rousing the highest authorities in the State to a realisation of the fact that the honour of Great Britain was at stake in the faithful treatment of the Arabs and that the betrayal to the Syrian demands of France would be an indelible blot on our history. [156]

At the time of this lunch, Churchill reminds the reader, he was Secretary of State for War, and he had been so busy on the Western Front that he knew little of the Arab Revolt. So in order to learn more, he adds, “I called for reports and pondered them”. He also consulted Lloyd George, the Prime Minister, who “said that the French meant to have Syria and rule it from Damascus, and that nothing would turn them from it”. Then follows a sentence whose grammar makes it ambiguous, depending whether it is construed as semi-reported speech (this would be Lloyd George speaking) or simply in the past tense (in which case it would be Churchill’s deductions after what he read in the reports):

The Sykes-Picot agreement which we had made during the War had greatly confused the issue of principle, and only the Peace Conference could decide conflicting claims and pledges. This was unanswerable. [157]

⁷ For the genesis of the collection, see James Lancaster’s review in *Cercles*:
< <http://www.cercles.com/review/r61/Muller.html> >

This reliance on the Peace Conference was perfectly in keeping with the letter that Sir Edmund Allenby sent to reassure Faisal on 19 October 1918. As the General explained to his superiors in London:

[In it] I gave the Amir Faisal an official assurance that whatever measures might be taken during the period of military administration they were purely provisional and could not be allowed to prejudice the final settlement by the peace conference, at which no doubt the Arabs would have a representative. [...] I reminded the Amir Faisal that the Allies were in honour bound to endeavour to reach a settlement in accordance with the wishes of the peoples concerned and urged him to place his trust whole-heartedly in their good faith⁸.

It also chimed in with the righteous Anglo-French Declaration of 7 November 1918:

The aim which France and Great Britain have in view in prosecuting in the East the War let loose by German ambition is the complete and final emancipation of the peoples so long oppressed by the Turks and the establishment of national governments and administrations deriving their authority from the initiative and free choice of the native populations.⁹

There are at least two further twists to this disingenuous story. *First*, the Anglo-French objective alliance to turn the tables on the lofty ideals of President Wilson and his pet creation, the League of Nations. The idea of conferring mandates, not complete sovereignty, over the former possessions of the defeated, perfectly suited British and French colonial appetites since independence was relegated to a distant future, when the populations were sufficiently educated to envisage self-government. Under cover of benevolent paternalism, the two Empires could pursue their own agenda. Even better, the mandates did not count as compensation and therefore did not reduce their claims for Reparations.

⁸ Reproduced as Annex H in the March 1939 Report of the Colonial Office (Cmd. 5974).

⁹ Appendix E, "Anglo-French Declaration (November 7, 1918)" in *The Arab Awakening*.

Secondly, Lawrence himself, beyond the façade of recognition of Arab culture on equal terms with that of the West, was more than doubtful that the “liberated” territories were fit to govern themselves. As he reported to his superiors in January 1916, “The Arabs are even less stable than the Turks” [LAWRENCE 1916]. He may have been right, of course, and events seemed to confirm his views, with Gertrude Bell writing home on 12 October 1919 after visiting Damascus that “the Arab Govt. is all round perceptibly worse than that of the Turks”¹⁰ – but this is beside the point. What matters is the discrepancy between Lawrence’s public pronouncements and the reality of the reports which he sent to the Arab Bureau for the edification of the British Government. He in fact believed that a victory of the Arab Revolt would primarily further British interests in the region, arguing that the successor states would be “harmless to ourselves” [LAWRENCE 1916], the idea being that “if properly handled they would remain in a state of political mosaic, a tissue of small jealous principalities incapable of cohesion” [LAWRENCE 1916]. It was not quite “Divide and rule”, but “Take advantage of the divisions to rule”.

The Peace Conference devoted little time to the fate of the former Ottoman possessions compared with the haggling over the Reparations to be paid by Germany and the redrawing of the map of Central Europe. Faisal had made the trip to Paris, with Lawrence as his “chaperon, translator and paymaster”, as Margaret MacMillan puts it, pointing out that Faisal received money from the Foreign Office. This is how Churchill recaptures the atmosphere of the times:

It soon became evident that his cause was not going well in Paris. He accompanied Feisal everywhere as a friend and interpreter. Well did he interpret him. He scorned his English connections and all question of his own career to what he regarded as his duty to the Arabs [158].

In fact, as Churchill knew perfectly well when he wrote his essay, the most important discussions between the victors on the subject took place outside

¹⁰ Gertrude Bell’s fascinating letters on the Mandate are available on the website of the Gertrude Bell Archive run by Newcastle University Library: <<http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/index.php>>
This particular letter is on Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University Library: <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=354>

the main sessions, in Clemenceau's flat, on 20 March 1919, with only the major participants present¹¹. While the only voice speaking for the United States was that of President Wilson, Italy had two representatives, Orlando and Baron Sonnino (the Foreign Minister), France three: Clemenceau, Pichon (the Foreign Minister) and Berthelot (Secretary General of the Quai d'Orsay). Great Britain was strongly represented, with Lloyd George, Balfour, General Allenby, General Bols (Allenby's Chief of Staff) and Sir Maurice Hankey, then Secretary to the Cabinet. The minutes make for fascinating reading. Pichon started by trying to establish the French claim – not to Syria, of course – but to a mandate to help Syria progress towards civilisation. He went back as far as the reign of Louis XIV and pointed to the many schools, hospitals and railway lines which France had built in the area. Lloyd George countered by pointing out that Syria had been reconquered with very little French help and by referring to the promises made in the McMahon letter of 24 October 1915 – to which of course Pichon retorted that the French were not committed by a document whose very existence they only recently learned. The French agreed to cede Mosul in Zone A to the British in Zone B, but in exchange they wanted the British Empire – Lloyd George spoke not for “little England”, but in the name of the whole Empire – to back their demand for a mandate over Syria. Upon which President Wilson took the moral high ground, candidly reminding the European Imperialists that “one of the elements in those mandates was the desire of the people over whom the mandate was to be exercised” and stating the American philosophy:

One of the fundamental principles to which the United States of America adhered was the consent of the governed. This was ingrained in the United States of America thought. Hence, the only idea from the United States of America point of view was as to whether France would be agreeable to the Syrians. The same applied as to whether Great Britain would be agreeable to the inhabitants of Mesopotamia [FRUS : 9]

In an admiring tone, Churchill explains that in Paris, Lawrence was able to confront Clemenceau on equal terms:

¹¹ The full minutes, published by the United States Department of State, are now on line on the University of Wisconsin website:
<<http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/FRUS/FRUS-idx?type=turn&entity=FRUS.FRUS1919Parisv05.p0011&id=FRUS.FRUS1919Parisv05&isize=M>>

He clashed with the French. He faced Clemenceau in long and repeated controversies. Here was a foeman worthy of his steel. The old Tiger had a face as fierce as Lawrence's, an eye as unquailing and a will-power well matched. Clemenceau had a deep feeling for the East; he loved a paladin, admired Lawrence's exploits and recognised his genius.

Yet there was a major obstacle in his way – Lawrence's special pleading was no match for the deep-seated ambitions of the French:

But the French sentiment about Syria was a hundred years old. The idea that France, bled white in the trenches of Flanders, should emerge from the Great War without her share of the conquered territories was insupportable to him [Clemenceau], and would never have been tolerated by his countrymen. [158]

In Syria, a provisional Arab government under Faisal had been put in place by Allenby. Clemenceau feigned to agree in order to gain time until the Mandates were allocated, recognising on 6 January 1920 before Faisal "the right of the Syrians to unite to govern themselves as an independent nation". Then, there was a dramatic acceleration of events. The Syrian National Congress made Faisal King of Greater Syria on 7 March 1920, proclaiming independence on the next day. This was of course unacceptable to the French – but paradoxically it was also bad news for the British, since the Syrian National Congress included Palestine in its definition of Greater Syria, which was incompatible with Britain's objective of getting a mandate for it, and because it also called for political and economic union with an independent Mesopotamia or Irak (as it was then spelt).

Whatever hopes Lawrence may still have entertained were crushed on 25 April 1920, when in the course of the drafting of the Treaty of Sèvres, the remaining members of the Allied Supreme Council (the United States Senate having rejected the Treaties and the League of Nations) met at the San Remo Conference and allocated the mandates over Mesopotamia and Palestine to the United Kingdom while France received Syria, including the Lebanon.

The news led to an immediate uprising in Syria, as expected, and the French Army intervened "with the utmost sternness" [CHURCHILL : 158]. Faisal had to flee to England, and his supporters were definitively crushed in a one-day

battle on 24 July 1920. The French made Damascus, for which Lawrence had fought so hard, the capital of their Syrian Mandate. They respected their bargain with Lloyd George and left the potentially oil-rich area of Mosul to the proposed Iraqi State under British Mandate. This was officially stipulated in the Treaty of Sèvres (10 August 1920), which in fact remained a dead letter because the Kemal Republican revolution eliminated the Ottoman Empire signatories before Turkey had ratified it. As a sideline to the meetings of the Prime Ministers, the San Remo Conference also confirmed the agreements passed between Sir Walter Long and Henri Bérenger, the British and French petroleum ministers, in April 1919, whereby by accepting to relinquish Mosul, the French would get 25% of Iraqi oil. The French also accepted that the Turkish Petroleum Company, founded in 1912 as an International consortium, but by 1919 a British-controlled company, would receive preferential treatment in Iraq over their own *Compagnie française des pétroles*. One advantage for both, which did not last long, was the exclusion of the Americans from the oilfields of the region. The announcement on 5 May 1920 of the so-called San Remo Oil Agreement between Britain and France was one more blow to those like Lawrence who might have kept any illusions about the cynical great power politics played by the two victors in this area as in the rest of the world. Interestingly, when trying to reconstruct what Lawrence may have felt at the time, Churchill only alludes to French action in Syria :

I am sure that the ordeal of watching the helplessness of his Arab friends to whom he had pledged his word, and as he conceived it the word of Britain, maltreated in this manner, must have been the main cause which decided his eventual renunciation of all power in great affairs. [159]

Here, of course Churchill clearly distances himself from Lawrence's illusion – some would say conceit – that he in any way spoke in the name of his Government (“his word, and as he conceived it the word of Britain”). Earlier in the paragraph, he had already introduced an element of *Realpolitik* which considerably reduced Lawrence's claim that the Arab cause was of capital importance in the peace settlement: “Indeed, when so many things were crashing in the post-War world the treatment of the Arabs did not seem exceptional” [158].

Still, August 1920, when Faisal arrived in England, was a low point for Lawrence, because the situation was hardly better in the British-controlled area which Churchill did not mention. In Mesopotamia as in Syria, the Arab-led Guardians of Independence and other “Nationalists”, as they would henceforth be called, never accepted the idea of a protectorate or mandate and they became increasingly restless as the final settlement with Turkey approached. The San Remo agreements and the Treaty of Sèvres made a mockery of the promises made during the war. Open armed rebellion against the proposed British mandate erupted in July 1920 in the Mosul area, spreading south.

As Churchill puts it, Lawrence “simply did not know what to do. He turned this way and that in desperation, and in disgust of life” [158]. One manifestation of his will to make the voice of the Arabs heard was to write to the newspapers, suggesting in a letter to *The Times* on 12 August 1920 that the new regime in Iraq, under supervision from the India Office, was no more liked than its Ottoman predecessor against which the Arabs had rebelled with the encouragement of Britain. He went further ten days later in *The Sunday Times* :

The people of England have been led in Mesopotamia into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honour. They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information. The Baghdad communiques are belated, insincere, incomplete. Things have been far worse than we have been told, our administration more bloody and inefficient than the public knows¹².

His good friend Gertrude Bell seemed equally puzzled by the population of Baghdad, writing to her mother on 5 September 1920 that “No one knows exactly what they do want, least of all themselves, except that they don’t want us”¹³.

Churchill the private man espoused these doubts about the “Mesopotamian entanglement”. His papers contain the draft of a letter to Lloyd George

¹² “Mesopotamia: The Truth about the Campaign”, by “Ex-Lieut-Col. T.E. Lawrence”. *The Sunday Times*, 22 August 1920.

¹³ Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University Library:

< http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=416 >

BRAYSAC [288] wrongly attributes the phrase to a letter to her father on 30 August.

dated 31 August 1920 – never sent – in which he wondered why the situation had turned sour after the high hopes which followed the Armistice in the “thankless deserts” of Iraq:

It is an extraordinary thing that the British civil administration should have succeeded in such a short time in alienating the whole country to such an extent that the Arabs have laid aside the blood feuds that they have nursed for centuries and that the Suni and Shiah tribes are working together. [GILBERT, *Companion 2* : 1199]

Yet the Great Powers took no notice and on 11 November 1920 Mesopotamia officially became the State of Iraq – a name apparently proposed by Sir Arnold Wilson, the British official in charge of the area in the preceding months – with a League of Nations mandate entrusted to the British Government, *de facto* making it part of the “informal Empire”. Meanwhile, Wilson's administration was powerless to quell the rebellion definitively in spite of increased British military presence. It seems that it was also Wilson who first proposed to enthrone as king of Iraq the dethroned king of Syria, Faisal. Wilson's unsuccessful policy of repression had become an embarrassment to the new Mandatory Power. He was dismissed in October 1920, and a few days before the proclamation of the new State of Iraq, a new High Commissioner officially took on his functions in Baghdad. Shareen Brysac magnificently reconstructs the scene in “Gertrude Bell and the Creation of Iraq”:

Mesopotamia, 17 October 1920. Baghdad is adorned with flags, palms, and triumphal arches celebrating Sir Percy Cox's return as Britain's High Commissioner. Gertrude Bell, his Oriental Secretary, dressed in her new Paris frock, welcomes him on the railway platform, where he is greeted by a cheering crowd, a seventeen-gun salute, and a military band playing “God save the King”. [283]

Sir Percy Cox had hardly had time to organise his administration, with Arab figureheads carefully picked out by Gertrude Bell, when the new Colonial Secretary appointed on 15 February 1921, Churchill, decided to grasp the nettle by convening a Conference in Cairo to try to put a definitive end to the troubles which had plagued the British-controlled Middle East since the end of the Great War.

Churchill already had the reputation of a die-hard who believed in strong-arm action, as could be seen from his recent attitude to the Bolsheviks in Russia. But, when Sir Percy Cox sent a telegram on 14 January 1921 arguing that only military repression could perpetuate the British presence, Churchill sternly rebuked him on the next day:

No province of the British Empire has ever been acquired by marching in and maintaining a large regular army at the cost of the British Exchequer, but always by skilful and careful improvisation adapted to its special needs. [GILBERT, IV : 516]

In his essay of 1937, Churchill draws a very bleak picture of the situation which prevailed in the new State of Iraq when he took over, without in any way explaining the reasons:

At the time, we had recently suppressed a most dangerous and bloody rebellion in Iraq, and upwards of forty thousand troops at a cost of thirty million pounds a year were required to preserve order. This could not go on. [159]

The Conference took place from 12 to 22 March 1921. Churchill asked “the famous Colonel Lawrence”, as he called him in a letter of 21 February to his wife [GILBERT, IV : 534] to join the Colonial Office as his personal Special Advisor, and it is in that capacity that he was invited to the Conference. Lawrence met Faisal before the Conference, in London, and persuaded him to accept the throne of Iraq, with Churchill’s backing, on 1 March 1921. The minutes of the Conference show that the question was settled on its first session, with a faultless double act between Lawrence and Churchill:

Colonel Lawrence supported the candidature of Amir Faisal not only from his personal knowledge of and friendship for the individual, but also on the ground that in order to counteract the claims of rival candidates and to pull together the scattered elements of a backward and half civilised country, it was essential that the first ruler should be an active and inspiring personality. Amir Abdullah was lazy, and by no means dominating.

To which Churchill immediately added arguments derived from internal Arab and Muslim politics:

The Chairman pointed out that a strong argument in favour of Sherifian policy was that it enabled His Majesty's Government to bring pressure to bear on one Arab sphere in order to attain their own ends in another. If Faisal knew that not only his father's subsidy and the protection of the Holy Places from Wahabi attack, but also the position of his brother in Trans-Jordan was dependent upon his own good behaviour, he would be much easier to deal with. The same argument applied mutatis mutandis to King Hussein and Amir Abdullah. [GILBERT, IV : 545]

Lloyd George, "a Liberal turned land-grabber" as Margaret MacMillan calls him [393], who wanted to make sure that window-dressing proprieties should be respected before the League of Nations, asked for a plebiscite: "We think it essential that real initiative in any demand for Feisal should come from Mesopotamia" – to which Churchill obligingly answered: "We are quite as fully conscious as you are for desire to secure a spontaneous movement for Feisal in Mesopotamia as a prelude to his being countenanced by us" [ORLANS : 49]. The other major potential claimants to the throne were dissuaded or sent away to Ceylon, and a rigged plebiscite was duly organised, with the Sunni Feisal preposterously receiving 96.8 % of the "popular vote" in a country where most of the ordinary populace was Shiite. The coronation took place on 23 August 1921.

Again, the righteous Lawrence could not ignore these manipulations and Churchill could not fail to be aware that Lawrence was not fooled by this bogus consultation of the Arab common man. And yet, Churchill writes that "[h]e saw the hope of redeeming in a large measure the promises he had made to the Arab chiefs and of re-establishing a tolerable measure of peace in those wide regions" [160-161].

Writing in 1937, Churchill curiously ignores the rest of the story of coups, rebellions, assassinations, mutilations and general bloodshed in the Middle East which followed his passage at the Colonial Office, until 15 November 1922, when he lost his seat at the General Election. As late as 1 September 1922 he himself was despairing of seeing any improvement in the situation, writing to Lloyd George from the Colonial Office:

I am deeply concerned about Iraq. The task you have given me is becoming really impossible. [...] The Turkish menace has got worse; Feisal is playing the fool, if not the knave; his incompetent Arab

officials are disturbing some of the provinces and failing to collect the revenue. [...] Moreover in my own heart I do not see what we are getting out of it. Owing to the difficulties with America, no progress has been made developing the oil. Altogether I am at the end of my resources. [...] At present we are paying eight millions a year for the privilege of living on an ungrateful volcano out of which we are in no circumstances to get anything worth having. [GILBERT, *Companion* 3 : 1973-1974]

This marked the failure of his attempts to impose financial constraints on the new “independent” monarchy, as outlined in a draft letter to Sir Percy a year before: “We cannot accept the position of Feisal having a free hand & sending in the bill to us, but while we have to pay the piper we must be effectively consulted as to the tune” [CATHERWOOD 2005 : 172].

Yet, in his essay of 1937, alluding to the decisions taken during the Cairo Conference and the ensuing meetings in Jerusalem, he concludes on a complacent note:

Towards the end of the year things began to go better. All our measures were implemented one by one. The Army left Iraq, the Air Force was installed in a loop of the Euphrates, Baghdad acclaimed Feisal as king, Abdulla settled down loyally and comfortably in Trans-Jordania. [161]

What makes this even stranger is that according to Churchill, Lawrence “bought into” this rosy picture:

One day I said to Lawrence: “What would you like to do when all this is smoothed out ? The greatest employments are open to you if you care to pursue your new career in the Colonial Service”. He smiled his bland, beaming, cryptic smile, and said: “In a very few months my work here will be finished. The job is done, and it will last”. [161]

Indeed in his letter of resignation from the Colonial Office dated 4 July 1922, Lawrence wrote that he was “very glad to leave so prosperous a ship” [GILBERT, IV : 815]. Of course, all depends what he meant by “it will last”. If we take the point of view of geography, the evidence supports Lawrence’s prediction. As Catherwood puts it, “by the time he lost office in 1922, he [Churchill] had created a map of the Middle East that, with a few changes

here and there, has lasted until this very day" [CATHERWOOD 2005 : 16]. Shareen Brysac has a different opinion, based not on geography, but on Imperial politics:

But despite Churchill's energy and eloquence, despite the admirable hopes expressed by Lawrence and Gertrude Bell, and despite Sir Percy Cox's evident popularity as Iraq's inaugural High Commissioner, the British failed. [BRY SAC : 292]

The Mandate ended on 3 October 1932, when the Kingdom of Iraq became the first sovereign Arab member of the League of Nations – but of course it remained more than ever part of the "informal Empire", since the Anglo-Iraqi treaty of 1930, valid for 25 years from 1932, provided for air bases near Basra and the right of British officials to "advise" the Iraqi Government. The Kingdom itself disappeared in the bloody revolution of 1958, appropriately taking place on 14 July, which established a Republic. The analogy with France does not stop here. Catherwood points out that "[d]uring the monarchical period, from 1921 to 1958, there were fifty-eight changes of government" [217]. Probably a similar figure could be found for France during the same period – but evidently without the political murders.

There was also of course the question of the "brown area" of Palestine, theoretically settled at the Cairo Conference when Churchill, backed by Lawrence, imposed his views, with Mandatory Palestine proper on the west bank and the new Emirate of Trans-Jordania, as it was then called, on the east bank of the river Jordan. Abdullah, Hussein's son and Faisal's brother was put on its throne in September 1922. Once again Lawrence acted, if not as king maker, at least as the most forceful exponent of the case for Abdullah:

He trusted that in four or five years, under the influence of a just policy, the opposition to Zionism would have decreased, if it had not entirely disappeared, and it was his view that it would be preferable to use Trans-Jordania as a safety valve, by appointing a ruler on whom he could bring pressure to bear, to check anti-Zionism. The ideal would be a person who was not too powerful, and who was not an inhabitant of Trans-Jordania, but who relied upon His Majesty's Government for the retention of his office. [...] Sherif Abdullah. [GILBERT, IV : 553]

These very optimistic hopes about the rapid disappearance of Arab resistance to the Zionist project were not shared by Churchill after his visit to Palestine which followed the Cairo Conference. As Martin Gilbert puts it, "Churchill had been in Palestine for only eight days. But he had been much impressed both by the enthusiasm of the Jewish settlers, and by the intensity of Arab hostility against them" [575]. Arguably, if anything, "the intensity of Arab hostility" got worse and worse as time went by, disproving Lawrence's wishful thinking and confirming Churchill's impressions of 1921. And the vote of the League of Nations of 22 July allocating the Palestine Mandate to Britain did nothing to reduce it.

It is thus clear that in 1937, when he wrote his glowing essay on Lawrence of Arabia, Churchill conveniently glossed over the brutality – on both sides – which continued to be so rife in the mock-independent states, and in the region generally, after they had both lost their first-line involvement in the Middle East. But the reasons are not clear. After all, as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the latter half of the 1920s or as a backbencher afterwards, he was probably never consulted over the strong-arm policy of the Colonial Office. We are left with the conjecture that the period coincided with his strongest and most passionate defence of the Raj in India – and he would have rightly faced the accusation of inconsistency if he had supported the use of force in India and denounced it in Iraq.

Churchill's disingenuous idealisation of Lawrence's lofty conceptions – at least as he proclaimed them in public and expounded them in his famous tome, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, "part history, part myth", as Margaret MacMillan describes it [399] – has to be read in the context of 1937. As Churchill reminded his reader, "[i]n these days dangers and difficulties gather upon Britain and her Empire, and we are also conscious of a lack of outstanding figures with which to overcome them". So much for Baldwin and Chamberlain.

Without wanting to carry the analysis of Churchill's sub-text too far, one is nevertheless struck by the self-portrait that he was drawing of the providential man. When writing of Lawrence, he was in fact writing of himself:

They felt themselves in the presence of an extraordinary being. They felt that his latent reserves of force and will-power were beyond

measurement. If he roused himself to action, who should say what crisis he could not surmount or quell? If things were going very badly, how glad one would be to see him come round the corner. [164]

And the best of it all is that he was proved right in 1940 – at least as far as the United Kingdom proper was concerned, since for all his bravado in his speech at the Lord Mayor's Luncheon on 10 November 1942, when he uttered the famous phrase, "I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire" [CHURCHILL 1943 : 344], in the long run he in fact proved powerless to "surmount or quell" the dangers to its cohesion which he clearly perceived.

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