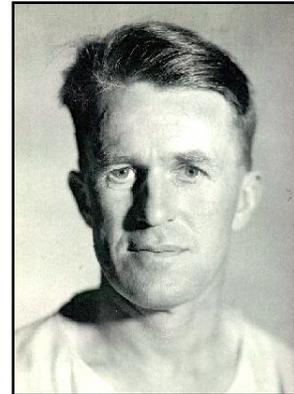


## Lawrence of Arabia: A Hero's Journey

*Leading a personal crusade for Arab independence, British scholar and intelligence officer T.E. Lawrence altered the course of history and helped to shape the modern Middle East. Though an enigma to himself and others, Lawrence was lionized during World War I as the "uncrowned king of Arabia." From the January 1999 issue of NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC.*

by Don Belt

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**LAWRENCE WAS NOT CUT OUT FOR KILLING.** That much became clear on one of his first forays of World War I, when the young British officer was leading a small party of Bedouin fighters through the mountains of western Arabia to join a larger force outside Medina. This was early in the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire, a drive for Arab independence that Britain was supporting to advance its own war against the Turks. Lawrence at the time was a 28-year-old scholar with a history degree and a flair for schoolboy pranks and archaeology; his military experience consisted primarily of reading books on the subject at Oxford.

As his band passed through a rocky, tree-lined valley, Lawrence called a halt and collapsed on a blanket in the shade. He was stricken with dysentery and had already fainted twice that day from fever; he was also in excruciating pain with sores on his backside from weeks on a camel. As Lawrence rested, a fight broke out between two of his men. He heard a gunshot. Moments later he found himself confronted with a chilling test of his leadership.

A Moroccan under his command had shot and killed another guerrilla, a Bedouin of the Ageyl tribe. Relatives of the dead man howled for blood. As he stood before the killer, who was groveling for mercy, Lawrence's fever rose as he realized what he had to do.

"There were other Moroccans in our army; and to let the Ageyl kill one in feud meant reprisals," he later wrote in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, his account of the war. Likewise, if another of his men executed the Moroccan, there would be retribution. Lawrence had no choice: He had to kill the offender.

“I made him rise and shot him through the chest,” wrote Lawrence, who had never killed a man. “He fell down on the weeds shrieking, with the blood coming out in spurts. . . . I fired again, but I was shaking so I only broke his wrist.” Finally Lawrence leaned down and “shot him for the last time in the thick of his neck under the jaw.” Afterward Lawrence was so ill that his men had to lift him into the saddle.

T.E. Lawrence would later be internationally acclaimed as Lawrence of Arabia. A many-sided genius, he would also make important contributions to the fields of literature, diplomacy, and the British military. No less a figure than Winston Churchill would call him “one of the greatest beings alive in our time.” But because he was Lawrence—a hero fully conscious of his own failings—the things he did in that war would haunt him for the rest of his life.

“I once asked him whether he felt badly about such horrible exploits,” George Bernard Shaw, a friend, wrote after Lawrence’s death. “He said, of course he did, very badly indeed.”

**THOMAS EDWARD LAWRENCE** was a large man trapped in a small man’s body. He stood five foot five, which annoyed him, but his facial expression—steady blue eyes, strong chin, handsome features—and his composure gave the impression of much greater size. When introduced to someone, he would instinctively clasp his hands behind his back and make a little bow: He loathed physical contact, even shaking hands. His voice was soft, with a touch of the upper class, and he rarely wasted words. Many people, including his mother, described him as inscrutable, even as a child growing up in Oxford, England.

By age eight or nine his hobby was history, especially the Middle Ages, and he would later spend long hours poking through excavations in Oxford for sherds of old pottery and glass or bicycling off to study some distant medieval castle. While his schoolmates were busy at sports and horseplay, Lawrence instead seemed to be hardening his body and spirit for some future ordeal. He slept little, ate little, and experimented with self-imposed tests of physical endurance. He papered his room with handmade portraits of knights and other luminaries to draw closer to the age of chivalry, which draped his imagination like some tapestry woven with codes of honor and heroic deeds—ideals by which Lawrence would ultimately judge his own life.

It was about this time that Lawrence pieced together the devastating truth about his family: He was illegitimate, and so were his four brothers. Lawrence’s father, whose

real name was Thomas Chapman, was an Anglo-Irish aristocrat who fled an unhappy marriage to live with his children's governess, Sarah Junner. The couple passed as "Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence" from then on and had five sons together, but they never married.

Only can only guess how Lawrence, a rosy-cheeked acolyte intent on forming his own higher code of honor, felt about his parents and his unwitting part in their disgrace. Acknowledging his troubled identity in a letter in 1927, Lawrence wrote that his parents' shame had made him a "standing civil war" as an adult. "They should not have borne children."

Lawrence entered Oxford University in 1907 with a scholarship to Jesus College. Brigid Allen, a literary scholar who serves as the Jesus College archivist, helped provide me with a glimpse of his student days. From the trove of her office, she extracted the college register from 1907. There, in the bursar's compact scrawl, were listed terms of Lawrence's scholarship ("50 pounds per year"), his subject ("modern history"), and his father's occupation ("no occupation"). Also listed were the extra charges that students were billed for lunch foods—milk, cheese, beer, bread—delivered to their rooms. What did Lawrence eat for lunch? Bread and water, nearly every day.

"He probably felt that eating was a waste of time, or perhaps immoral," said Allen. "He was quite the oddball, you know. Back then everyone played on some team or other. Lawrence was having none of it. I can almost see him, sitting cross-legged on the floor smiling to himself while the other boys enthused about rugger or rowing. He must have been infuriating."

For his senior thesis Lawrence decided to trace the influence of the Crusades on European military architecture. He was already something of an expert on French and English castles; now he needed to learn about fortresses built by the crusaders in Syria and Palestine.

So in the summer of 1909, packing little more than a camera, a revolver, and an extra pair of socks, he boarded a ship for Beirut, and from there he set out alone, on foot, to visit as many crusader castles as he could before the fall term. He had planned his route carefully, studied Arabic, and politely ignored all warnings that an arduous solo trek through a neglected and dangerous corner of the Ottoman Empire might not be a good idea.

By September he had covered some 1,100 miles, walked his boots to shreds, and suffered four attacks of malaria. In northern Syria he'd traded gunshots with a passing horseman; elsewhere he was robbed, beaten and left for dead. He even wore out his extra pair of socks. But he succeeded in visiting 36 crusader castles, making careful

notes, drawings, and photographs of what he saw. These he included in his thesis, which earned him a first class at Oxford—graduation with highest honors.

The adventure also revealed Lawrence's gift for observing and assimilating new cultures. He embraced the ways of the Arabs, roamed their villages, and savored their hospitality. "Here I am Arab in habits and slip in talking from English to French and Arabic unnoticed," he wrote to his mother. "I will have such difficulty becoming English again." His brothers would later wonder if he ever truly did.

**LAWRENCE'S YOUNGEST BROTHER**, Arnold, was a guest on the Jack Paar television show one night in 1964, soon after the movie with Peter O'Toole, *Lawrence of Arabia*, had made his brother a household name in the United States. A professor of archaeology at Cambridge, Arnold was no blind guardian of his brother's memory—but still he detested the Oscar-winning film, which he labeled "pretentious and false." In portraying his brother, the filmmakers "used a psychological recipe," he told the *New York Times*: "take an ounce of narcissism, a pound of exhibitionism, a pint of sadism, a gallon of blood-lust and a sprinkle of other aberrations and stir well." The real Lawrence, he told Paar, "was one of the nicest, kindest, and most exhilarating people I've known. He often appeared cheerful when he was unhappy."

The happiest period of Lawrence's life, by most accounts, was the three years he spent digging at the ancient Hittite city of Carchemish in what is now southern Turkey. Then 22, Lawrence arrived there in March 1911, soon after graduation, to work as an archaeologist. By that time thousands of German engineers, builders, and military advisers were also in the Middle East, training Turkish troops and laying groundwork for what Britain and France feared might be a future military alliance.

Lawrence's duties at Carchemish included supervising the site's Arab labor force, which he greatly enjoyed. The men respected him and relished his novel approach, which was to make the digging fun by turning it into a game. It was Lawrence who began the tradition of saluting archaeological discoveries with shots from a revolver, basing the number of blasts on the relative importance of the find.

In the evenings Lawrence often joined his crew around the fire for conversation ranging from local gossip to the intricacies of tribal politics. He struck up lasting friendships with several of the men, including his Arab foreman, Sheikh Hamoudi, and the site's 14-year-old water boy, Dahoum, who latched onto him like a big brother. Returning his devotion, Lawrence tutored Dahoum in mathematics, history, and geography. He taught him to read and write. And as he later suggested in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*,

Lawrence's dream—winning political freedom for the Arabs—was meant as a gift to lay at Dahoum's feet.

The intensity of their friendship raised eyebrows at Carchemish, especially after Lawrence, who loved to shock, refused to dispel rumors of a physical relationship. Many at Carchemish, including Lawrence's colleague Leonard Woolley, later dismissed these stories as nonsense. Like every other known relationship in Lawrence's life, this bond with Dahoum was almost certainly platonic.

In the British camp's occasional run-ins with the Turks and Germans, Lawrence also showed himself fully capable of using force or intimidation. "He has," Woolley wrote, "a cool indomitable courage . . . disguised by an impudent enjoyment of the humor of the situation; he did not mind the risk, and the bluff appealed to him immensely."

When he heard that a German engineer had horsewhipped one of his men during off-hours, Lawrence, furious, ran to confront him. By threatening to flog the German in front of the whole village, Lawrence extracted a public apology from him. "In 1914 I was a pocket Hercules," he later wrote, "as muscularly strong as people twice my size."

These petty quarrels with the Germans were symptomatic of larger tensions. Lawrence left Carchemish in the spring of 1914; by August Germany and Austria had declared war on their enemies in Europe. When Britain sided with France and Russia, Lawrence and three of his four brothers joined the war effort (the youngest, Arnold, was then 14). His older brother, Robert, became a medic, while his younger brothers Will and Frank were sent to the front lines in Europe. Both were killed within a few months of each other in 1915. Lawrence was devastated.

Because he spoke Arabic and had firsthand knowledge of the Ottoman Empire, which sprawled from southern Arabia to the Black Sea, Lawrence was assigned to army intelligence and posted to Cairo. For two years he drafted reports on the political situation inside the empire, which had allied with Germany in November 1914. Despite his lack of military experience, Lawrence advanced Britain's war strategy while gaining a reputation for something of a loose cannon. Sloppy in uniform and too cheeky for his own good, Lawrence conducted himself with a detached air of authority that made some of his superiors bristle.

Others, including Ronald Storrs, the powerful Oriental Secretary of the British Agency in Cairo, respected his judgement and thought his irreverence refreshing. In the autumn of 1916 Lawrence was assigned to accompany Storrs on a sensitive diplomatic mission to Arabia—a journey that would change his life.

In the Southern provinces of the Ottoman Empire, an Arab revolt against Constantinople had been launched in June. It was led by Grand Sharif Hussein, descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and ruler of the mountain province called the Hejaz, which included Mecca, Islam's holiest city. For several years British diplomats had been communicating secretly with Hussein, giving assurances that the crown shared his dream of an independent Arab nation with its capital in Damascus. Unknown to Hussein (and to Lawrence at first), Britain at the same time was making a secret pact with France, known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement. If the Allies won the war, they would divide the lands of the Ottoman Empire among themselves.

Hussein's army, largely made up of Bedouin tribesmen and commanded by his four grown sons, had won some early victories. But the ultimate goal, Damascus, was still 850 miles to the north. And by October, when Ronald Storrs visited to discuss Britain's role in the campaign, Hussein's forces were already running short of supplies, money, and manpower. Storrs promised to continue supplying the Arab revolt with funds and material from Cairo; he would also have Lieutenant Lawrence stay behind to assess the situation.

Though he admired the Arabs and believed in their drive for independence, Lawrence understood the Bedouin well enough to know that they would not be moved to heroism by some abstract Western ideal like nationhood. What they needed, he and his superiors believed, was an Arab military leader of unquestioned stature and charisma. And of Hussein's four sons only Feisal seemed to him cut out for such a role.

In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* Lawrence describes their first meeting in Feisal's tent: "I felt at first glance that this was the man I had come to Arabia to seek—the leader who would bring the Arab Revolt to full glory. Feisal looked very tall and pillar-like, very slender, in his long white silk robes and his brown headcloth . . . His eyelids were dropped; and his black beard and colourless face were like a mask against the strange, still watchfulness of his body. His hands were crossed in front of him on his dagger."

He and Feisal took measure of one another.

"How do you like our place in Wadi Safra?" Feisal asked, watching him intently.

"Well," Lawrence replied. Then without missing a beat, he tweaked his host's pride: "But it is far from Damascus."

Feisal's advisors stiffened. No one dared to speak to a prince of Mecca so bluntly. But Feisal was amused by this brash newcomer and impressed by his reply. Thus began a partnership that propelled the Arabs northward; two years later Feisal and Lawrence would march the Damascus streets in triumph, joining forces with the British under Gen. Edmund Allenby.

During this period, 1916-18, Lawrence served the Arabs as Feisal's adviser and Britain as General Allenby's liaison in the Arab camp. Besides managing the flow of British military and financial aid to the Arabs, Lawrence also led a campaign of guerrilla-style attacks on the Hejaz Railway, using dynamite to cripple the enemy and immobilize Turkish troops and equipment—no small feat, given that his own "troops" were often unruly tribesmen.

Lawrence studied his men relentlessly and never let a challenge pass unanswered. He also led by example, charging in with the others in his Arab robes, dodging the same bullets and blades; in camp, like them, he nursed his wounds—though he never let down his guard.

In Al Jafr, a desert village in Jordan, I met 67-year-old Khalaf Abu Tayi, whose father, Zaal, had been one of Lawrence's chief lieutenants on these raids. "My father always said that Lawrence was very clever, very tough, and expert with explosives," he told me. "He also had a bad, bad temper."

In Feisal's camp Lawrence usually kept a lower profile. Yet because he belonged to no tribe and was thus seen as impartial, he was sometimes called in to settle petty disputes. In one six-day raid, "there came to a head, and were settled, twelve cases of assault with weapons, four camel-liftings, one marriage, two thefts, a divorce, fourteen feuds, two evil eyes, and a bewitchment," he reports in *Seven Pillars*.

At first Lawrence relished his role at the center of history in the making. This was the kind of epic crusade he'd been fantasizing about, and perfecting himself for, since he was nine years old. But as the fighting wore on, the realities of war hacked away at his illusions. Friends perished before his eyes; innocent civilians suffered savagery beyond his imagining. He killed people. On reconnaissance south of Damascus, he was captured by the Turks, flogged, and raped. Though he escaped, Lawrence—who recoiled from a simple handshake and abhorred the thought of sex—was shattered by the experience. "The citadel of my integrity," he wrote, "had been irrevocably lost."

His noble cause—Arab independence—took another blow in October 1918, when the terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement were revealed. By then Lawrence and many British

officials considered Sykes-Picot obsolete, or at least negotiable. The unexpected success of the Arab Revolt, Lawrence hoped and led Feisal to believe, would surely nullify the agreement.

They were wrong, General Allenby informed them in Damascus. Allenby's orders were to enforce the agreement, in effect turning Syria over to France. Feisal was furious. Lawrence felt betrayed by his own government—and ashamed for having misled his friend and his many thousands of followers.

Lawrence was exhausted, depressed, and suffering from dozens of bullet and shrapnel wounds. He hadn't had more than a day's rest in more than two years. And then there was this news from Carchemish: His friend Dahoum, whose freedom he had dreamed of winning with this war, had died of typhus the previous winter.

"I wrought for him freedom to lighten his sad eyes: but he died waiting for me," Lawrence later wrote on the flyleaf of a book in his library. "So I threw my gift away and now not anywhere will I find rest and peace."

**BY THE TIME** Lawrence had returned to England in 1918, tales of his exploits had spread by word of mouth from the War Office to the cabinet to Parliament, and beyond. Soon the public knew his story too.

Earlier that year Lowell Thomas, an American correspondent, had spent eight days with Lawrence and the Arab forces gathering material for a war travelogue. Based on raids he heard about, Thomas later prepared an illustrated lecture series and wrote several rather breathless accounts for magazines. These stories focused on the romanticized figure of Lawrence, whom Thomas dubbed the "uncrowned King of Arabia"—and provided welcome relief for a public steeped in blood-stained reports from the trenches of Europe. Thomas's travelogue thrilled packed houses in America, Britain, and around the world.

So at a time when Lawrence was grieving for his lost illusions—and loathing himself for complicity in Britain's deception—he was also being hoisted onto the world's shoulders and given a ticker-tape parade. Lawrence was an honorable man caught in dishonorable circumstances, and when he discovered, to his dismay, that a small corner of him actually relished the limelight, he was characteristically honest: "There was a craving to be famous; and a horror of being known to like being known," he confessed in *Seven Pillars*. "Contempt for my passion for distinction made me refuse every offered honour."

Lawrence did see a way, though, to use his growing influence to fight one last round for Arab independence. He mustered the will to lobby cabinet ministers, testify before high committees, write letters to the *Times*, and represent Britain—and the Arabs—at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. In a ceremony at Buckingham Palace he even went so far as to decline the military decorations about to be pinned on him by King George V, citing Britain's shabby treatment of its friends in Arabia. The public was scandalized—and mesmerized—by this enigmatic war hero who seemed to be playing by a different set of rules.

At this point Lawrence could have run for office and won by a landslide. If he'd turned to diplomacy, as Churchill urged him to do, he could have represented the British government at a very high level. With his background in history and antiquities, he could have found work as a teacher, writer, or archaeologist. Instead he chose to vanish. In August 1922, with help from well-placed friends, he enlisted in the Royal Air Force under an assumed name, "John Hume Ross," and began the strange final chapter of his life.

Bearing the rank of air-craftsman, lowest in the service—and the burdens of a body that had survived two years of combat and still bore the bright scars of flogging—"Ross" entered basic training and sought to pass into oblivion. Predictably the press, which had been clamoring after him since 1919, soon got wind of his disappearance. Within weeks John Hume Ross had been found out by a reporter, exposed as Lawrence, and discharged from the RAF.

Two months later Lawrence was back in the military—the Tank Corps of the army—and again he used an alias, "T. E. Shaw." This time the ruse worked. Blending into the ranks, Shaw served in the Tank Corps for two years, until his standing request for transfer back to the RAF was granted in 1925.

**DESPITE HIS BEST EFFORTS** to live the rest of his life as an ordinary airman, Lawrence's genius shone through. He kept up one of the most intriguing correspondences of the modern age, writing long, impeccably honest letters to a legion of friends as varied as his background—from George Bernard Shaw and Churchill to his former mates in service. He had "one of the most intensely real minds in my experience," noted Siegfried Sassoon, the poet, who especially admired "the way he hacks his way down to reality, never sparing himself."

Supplementing his meager income, Lawrence translated *The Odyssey* for an American publisher and wrote *The Mint*, a critically acclaimed book about his experiences in the RAF. All this was done quietly, in his spare time, and then folded neatly away into the world of barrack rooms and mess halls.

“He wasn’t a bit toffee-nosed,” remembered Alfred “Tony” Headon, who bunked 18 inches away from Air-craftsman Shaw for three and a half years at a base near Plymouth. “He was regular, just like one of the fellows. We all knew he was Lawrence, but we figured it was his business and kept our noses out of it.”

A retired aviator pushing 90, Headon is a gentle, bright-eyed soul who lives in Bedfordshire, England, with his wife of 59 years, Katie. Like Lawrence, Tony was a war hero who makes a point of never taking about it. He usually doesn’t talk about Lawrence either. But that afternoon I got lucky, and as Katie hovered nearby to fill our cups with steaming tea, Headon sat in his sky-blue Spitfire Society sweater and remembered his soft-spoken friend in Hut Number 6.

Shaw was the hut’s early riser, and every morning just before reveille he’d give Tony’s bunk a little wake-up kick as he returned from the bathhouse. “He was thoughtful that way, though he didn’t have a lot to say. I was shy too, and I think that’s why we hit it off.”

Though Shaw went out of his way to avoid command and refused all promotions, Headon and the others did get one unforgettable glimpse of the leader in their midst. One day a military seaplane crash-landed just beyond the RAF breakwater, and the base mounted an emergency rescue. Headon and Shaw, among the first on the scene, found the situation dire—the plane was sinking fast under the waves. Any survivors would soon perish.

Amid the panic, Shaw quietly assumed control of the operation from his commanding officer, who was wise enough to let him. “Not only did Lawrence take charge,” said Headon, “but he peeled off his shirt and dived down to the wreck.” Six of the airmen survived, and from that day on Shaw devoted himself to developing faster rescue boats for the RAF, which he often tested himself.

“He was mad about speed, you know,” said Headon. “He was always racing about on his motorbike. I used to go to the airstrip and watch him race it against planes taking off.”

Motorcycles were one of the few indulgences Lawrence ever permitted himself.

Years before, he had become friends with George Brough, who manufactured the fastest motorcycles in the U.K. Whenever Brough came out with a faster model, Lawrence would scrape together the money to buy it, trading in his old one. He owned seven Broughs in the last 12 years of his life, each one better than the last.

I asked Tony if he ever went for a ride with him. "Hoooo, no!" he answered. "It would have been like riding with the devil himself."

The day Lawrence dreaded arrived February 25, 1935, when he took mandatory retirement from the RAF at age 46. He knew where he would live: Years before he had bought a little cottage in the Dorset countryside named Clouds Hill, where he lived on weekends. What he didn't know is what he would do there.

To his disgust, the press was hounding him again. In mid-March he opened the door to a group of photographers who'd managed to find Clouds Hill. When they refused to leave, Lawrence punched one and fled on his bicycle.

A few weeks later he described himself in a letter, "sitting in my cottage rather puzzled to find out what has happened to me...I imagine leaves must feel like this after they have fallen from their tree and until they die."

On the morning of May 13, Lawrence rode his motorcycle to the post office to send a telegram. On his way back, doing about 40 miles an hour, he crested a hill and came across two boys on bicycles. He swerved to avoid them, lost control, slammed into the ground, and massively fractured his skull. He never regained consciousness and died six days later.

In Dorset, an hour or so from St. Nicholas' Church in Moreton where Lawrence is buried, I met the man who owns what is thought to be one of Lawrence's fastest Broughs, and after a while he let me ride it. On this machine Lawrence would often hook his thumb over the throttle to hold it wide open—until he hit the bike's top speed, 108 miles an hour, which others considered crazy.

But blasting down the narrow roads of Dorset that day, I did get a taste of what Lawrence found on his bike at the end. It was a kind of surrender, I think—a speed-induced state of bliss in which things go empty and white, as they sometimes do in the desert, and where a hero's struggle might be briefly forgotten, or somehow resolved, and penance no longer seems necessary.

*The End*

*Historical footnote:*

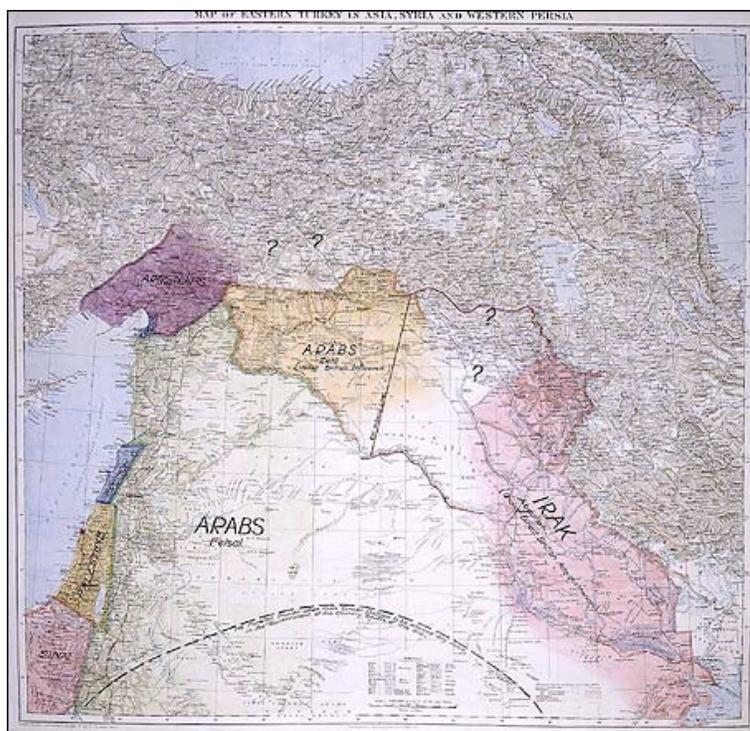
## LAWRENCE'S WAR *and the Making of the Modern Middle East*

“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, 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.



*A map with notations made by T.E. Lawrence in 1918, proposing a post-war Middle East that would have empowered the Arabs.*

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," noted Suleiman Mousa, an Arab historian. "What I don't admire is the 'peace' he and his country imposed on us."

