

The Legacy of Lawrence and the New Arab Awakening

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The legacy of Col. Thomas Edward Lawrence (a.k.a. Lawrence of Arabia), who died in a motorcycle accident in England in 1935, is still felt—and in myriad spheres, be they political, military, literary, artistic, or academic. The very fact that ever since his death at the age of 47 there is an average annual “crop” of some six new books (and many new editions of his own writings) is indicative of the great interest in that extraordinary figure. Nor can we ignore the fact that older works are continuously republished in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Arabic and other languages. Today, with the Arab world in ferment, we find ourselves turning to the writings of Lawrence—if not for answers, then for guidance.

Whatever one may think of Lawrence, time and again he and his ideas keep popping up. The question is: What did he do in his life that perpetuates his fame still today? And the more important question is whether his legacy is still relevant, and if so, why.

Lawrence's life and writings are well known and his authorized biographer, Jeremy Wilson, runs a website that contains a wealth of information.¹ However, those of us who are practitioners of diplomacy in the Middle East do not always realize the enormous impact that Lawrence had on this part of the world and the evolution of events—let alone that much of what he did is still relevant to the present time.

Lawrence was a scholar. He studied history at Jesus College, Oxford (1906–1909), and in 1910 earned a BA for his remarkable thesis on the architecture of the Crusader Castles. To collect material for that work, Lawrence toured in France by bicycle and later took long walking tours in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. His thesis was published only after his death and until the mid-1970s was considered a primary source in the field, mainly because of his excellent drawings and

photographs. Through his studies and tours he gained a thorough knowledge of French, Greek, Latin, and Arabic and could understand Turkish and German. After graduating, Lawrence joined a British archeological mission in Northern Syria on the Upper Euphrates (Carcemish). Prior to the outbreak of World War I, he was a member of an archeological team surveying Sinai, which was a cover for a British intelligence mapping effort.

At the outbreak of the war, Lawrence joined the geographical section of the British Intelligence Headquarters in Cairo that prepared maps and terrain reports. In due time, mainly because of his previous acquaintance with the area and Arab tribal affairs, Lawrence was drawn into political intelligence and assessment. His reports from the war years reflect his precision and the depth of his understanding of the terrain upon which he was operating.

Lawrence's moment of glory came in October 1916, when he accompanied Ronald Storrs on a visit to the Hijaz, where he met the Hashemite leadership. He immediately "clicked" with Emir Faisal and in due time became the British liaison officer to the Arabs who started their revolt against the Ottoman Empire. This meeting was the beginning of two intensive years that culminated in the British and Arab forces entering Damascus in early October 1918.

In his 1926 magnum opus, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*—considered one of the masterpieces of English literature in the twentieth century—Lawrence described his experiences during the Arab Revolt in an impressionistic manner. During his two years in Arabia, Lawrence laid the foundation, and even established several standards, criteria, and principles for Middle East intelligence gathering which were marginalized and almost forgotten in subsequent decades—only to be revived after 9/11 and the Western intervention in Iraq in 2003. Succinctly put, Lawrence taught that the first step is to map as soon as possible the tribal composition in one's theater of operations. One should be acquainted as closely as possible with the intricate and delicate interrelations between the various tribal confederations. It is no less important than being acquainted with the order of battle of the enemy on the other side.

The second step is to assess the combat capabilities of the tribal irregulars on your side. Lawrence found out quite early that Arab tribal warriors were very mobile, fearless, and ready to attack. However, static warfare and defending the positions captured from the Turks was a completely different matter altogether. This led him to introduce the concept of asymmetric warfare, whereby a relatively small mobile force could disrupt or rather distract a much bigger adversary from its main tasks and duties. The repeated attacks on the Hijazi Railway, sabotaging the transport of soldiers, ammunition, and supplies from Damascus to Medina,

basically paralyzed the rather significant Turkish garrison in the city until the end of World War I. In addition to attacks on the railway itself, the Arab irregulars also took down the telegraph poles along the tracks, thus compelling the Turkish headquarters in Damascus to communicate with the garrison in Medina by wireless—a coup for British Intelligence.

The third, and perhaps most important element of all, is the nature of the relations between the British liaison officer and the local tribal forces and their chieftains and leaders. Lawrence had previous exposure to Arab customs, habits, and etiquette; therefore, it was easier for him to interact with his Hashemite counterparts than it was for others. However, as the scope of operations in Arabia increased, more British military liaison officers were attached to the Arab forces. Most of those military officers had no clue as to Arab affairs and culture; therefore, the potential for misunderstandings, offenses, and insults was enormous. This brought Lawrence to compose, in August 1917, either of his own initiative or of his superiors, his almost immortal Twenty-Seven Articles, which is a classic “guide for the perplexed” for British liaison officers on how to interact with Arab armies. That work contains advice that is still relevant.

A few quotations from Lawrence’s writings might illustrate the depth of his analytical observations which are so very valid even today:

A first difficulty of the Arab movement was to say who the Arabs were.²

If tribesman and townsman in Arabic-speaking Asia were not different races, but just men in different social and economic stages, a family resemblance might be expected in the working of their minds, and so it was only reasonable that common elements should appear in the product of all these peoples.³

Arab townsmen and Arab tribesmen regard each other mutually as poor relations—and poor relations are much more objectionable than poor strangers”(Article 24).⁴

It is no wonder then, that prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, American and British officers were advised to become acquainted with Lawrence’s writings. This, in turn, precipitated rage in the Arab world, with critics pointing to what they saw as the continued implementation of “Lawrence’s Doctrine” in the Middle East—which was perceived as part and parcel of the legacy of colonialism.

However, when one notices the paucity of current information (not just in the media) about tribal structures and composition, whether in Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya,

or Syria (and to a lesser degree in Iraq), the absence of present-day Lawrences is keenly felt. Indeed, can anyone hope to understand the conflict in Libya without a thorough appreciation of the tribes that make up Libyan society?

The second domain in which Lawrence made his mark, and which is of particular relevance today, is in the field of advocacy of the Arab cause. After the liberation of Damascus from Turkish rule, Lawrence made his way back to Cairo and then returned to England—physically and emotionally exhausted. But within a few months time, Lawrence bounced back and served at the Peace Conference in Versailles as an advisor to the Arab delegation headed by Emir Faisal Bin al-Hussein (who later became king of Iraq).

What people remember from Versailles, and what some of them noted in their memoirs and recollections, is Lawrence roaming through the conference's corridors in Arab dress. Here we discover another unique facet of Lawrence—his panache for publicity and exposure all while pretending to avoid the limelight. After the terrible trench warfare in Flanders that claimed millions of young lives, this young Englishman in his white robes was undoubtedly the best PR gimmick the Arab cause could have hoped for. As late as 1989, an Iraqi author who wrote a book about Lawrence paid tribute to the Englishman's relentless and enthusiastic efforts to promote the Arab cause at the Versailles Peace Conference, implying that without his presence the Arab case would have been ignored.⁵ We must remember that back in 1919, terms or concepts such as public diplomacy, political lobbying, and media exposure were still in their infancy.

In 1921 Winston Churchill was appointed Colonial Secretary and he, in turn, appointed Lawrence as his adviser on Arab affairs. Churchill had to swiftly deal with several "hot potato" issues in the Middle East—mainly in Transjordan and Iraq—which threatened to embroil Britain in a conflict with France. Lawrence was charged with brokering a solution in Transjordan. With considerable diplomacy, patience and tact he managed to defuse the dangerous situation that had emerged in Amman. During the Cairo Conference and its finale in Jerusalem on March 28, 1921, he was able to present to Churchill a durable arrangement. In contemporary political terms, Lawrence's personal and direct role in the formation of Transjordan within the Mandate of Palestine might be regarded as his most significant achievement.

Parallel to his participation in the Versailles Conference, Lawrence discreetly cooperated with the American journalist Lowell Thomas (later known as one of the "founding fathers" of American TV) on a war travelogue entitled "With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia." It was first projected at the Royal Opera House in London in August 1919 and became an instant hit, granting Lawrence

eternal fame. Later, in 1924, Thomas wrote his famous book, *With Lawrence in Arabia*, which has been continuously republished, most recently in 2011. That creative manipulation of the media to advance his cause is an excellent example of the skillful use of public relations even nowadays.

Following the success of Thomas' travelogue, another film, *The Sheik*, starring Rudolf Valentino, hit the screens. These two early audiovisual productions shaped the romantic/mystical perception of the Arabs in the early 1920s. This was enhanced later in the decade, from 1924 onward, with the publication of the first biographies of Lawrence. In 1927, following the enormous popularity of *With Lawrence in Arabia*, Thomas wrote *The Boy's Life of Colonel Lawrence*, which targeted younger audiences. Knowingly or unknowingly, Thomas invented a new genre — juvenile literature about Lawrence. This genre flourished in the 1930s, '40s, '50s and '60s with a vast number of popular, inexpensive editions. I was exposed to this phenomenon in the UK in the mid-1970s when I realized that most of those who attended my lectures had read at least one of those Lawrence adventure books during their adolescence. At that time, these were a favorite birthday present. Most of those juvenile books (published all over the English-speaking world and beyond) that I came across had a handwritten dedication inscribed in them. Searching through commercial second-hand book websites (Amazon, Alibris, Abebooks, Bookfinder etc.), one may get a fair idea about the geographic distribution of those books, and quickly reach the conclusion that they are read all over the world. It is impossible to quantify the effect that those publications have had on their readers and the enormous sympathy that has been generated for the Arab world.

In 1962 came the Oscar-winning film *Lawrence of Arabia* with Peter O'Toole. That film, with an all-male cast, is ranked fifth on the American Film Institute's list of the 100 best films of the twentieth century. With its colorful promotion posters (a most desired collectors item), the film gave rise to yet another generation of people (including researchers) interested both in Lawrence and the Arab world. More important, it again established, or at least perpetuated, a certain positive perception about the Arab world. Many new books published since then were illustrated with pictures from the film and *Lawrence of Arabia* is still regularly shown on TV all over the world.

Lawrence's talents and uniqueness were recognized during his lifetime and after his death. Churchill wrote: "King George V wrote to Lawrence's brother, 'His name will live in history.' That is true. It will live in English letters; it will live in the traditions of the Royal Air Force; it will live in the annals of war and in the legends of Arabia." Churchill and King George V were not wrong. Lawrence's

name has lived on in history and it would certainly behoove those attempting to understand the Middle East—and to operate in it—to closely study his legacy.

Notes

- ¹ www.telawrencestudies.org.
- ² T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (London, 1964), p. 31.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ⁴ John E. Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder* (Boston, 1976), p. 467.
- ⁵ Abd Elmunim Mustafa, *Lorens, Qissat Hayatibi* (Baghdad, 1989), p. 277.



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This book examines the changes in representing collaboration, during the Holocaust, especially in the destruction of European Jewry, in the public discourse and the historiography of various countries in Europe that were occupied by the Germans, or were considered, at least during part of the war, as Germany's allies or satellites. In particular, it shows how representations and responses have been conditioned by national and political trends and constraints. As historical background to the issues of postwar collective memory and public discourse, it includes references to and short descriptions of major manifestations of collaboration, chiefly in regards to the Jews, in each of these countries during the war. Whether they were Communist or democratic regimes, the book shows how the sudden burden of the past was suppressed, denied or distorted in various periods. Covering a wide area of both Eastern and Western Europe from different specialist perspectives, this comprehensive study of collaboration in the Holocaust and its aftermath will be a valuable tool for teachers and students in the field of modern European history and Holocaust studies.