

Lawrence of Judea

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TE. Lawrence—better known in Britain and throughout the Middle East as Lawrence of Arabia—was a lifelong friend of Arab national aspirations. In 1917 and 1918 he participated as a British officer in the Arab revolt against the Turks, a revolt led by Sharif Hussein, later King of the Hedjaz. He was also an adviser to Hussein’s son Feisal, whom he hoped to see on the throne of Syria. For generations of British Arabists, Lawrence was and remains a symbol of British understanding of and support for the Arab cause. Virtually unknown, however, is his understanding of and support for Jewish national aspirations in the same era.

In mid-December 1918, a month after the end of World War I, Lawrence was instrumental in securing an agreement between Emir Feisal and the Zionist leader Dr. Chaim Weizmann. The meeting was held at the Carlton Hotel in London (a building subsequently destroyed in the London Blitz). At this meeting, Lawrence acted as the interpreter. Weizmann assured Feisal that the Zionists in Palestine should be able “to carry out public works of a far-reaching character” and that the country “could be so improved that it would have room for four or five million Jews, without encroaching on the ownership rights of Arab peasantry.”¹

As Weizmann wrote in his notes on the meeting, Feisal explained that “it was curious there should be friction between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. There was no friction in any other country where Jews lived together with Arabs.... He [Feisal] did not think for a moment that there was any scarcity of land in Palestine. The population would always have enough, especially if the country were developed. Besides, there was plenty of land in his district.”²

On January 3, 1919, Feisal and Weizmann met again in London, to sign an “Agreement between the King of the Hedjaz and the Zionists.” Lawrence, who was once again the guiding hand in this agreement, hoped that it would ensure what he, Lawrence, termed “the lines of Arab and Zionist policy converging in the not distant future.”³

On March 1, 1919 Lawrence, while in Paris as the senior British representative with the Hedjaz Delegation, drafted and then wrote out in his own hand a letter from Feisal to the American Zionist Felix Frankfurter. In this letter, Feisal declared, “We Arabs, especially the educated among us, look with the deepest sympathy on the Zionist movement.” Feisal went on to say that Weizmann “has been a great helper of our cause, and I hope the Arabs may soon be in a position to make the Jews some return for their kindness. We are working together for a reformed and revived Near East, and our two movements complete one another.” The Jewish movement, Feisal continued, “is national, and not imperialist: our movement is national and not imperialist, and there is room in Syria for us both. Indeed I think that neither can be a real success without the other.” Feisal then added, in strong, optimistic words: “I look forward, and my people with me look forward to a future in which we will help you and you will help us, so that the countries in which we are mutually interested may once again take their place in the community of the civilized peoples of the world.”⁴

If Lawrence’s support for Jewish national aspirations was not known to his contemporaries, it was perhaps suspected. In early 1920, as Lawrence prepared his wartime experiences of the Arab Revolt for publication,

he wrote to the author Rudyard Kipling to ask if he would read the proofs of his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Kipling replied that he would be glad to see the proofs, but that, if it emerged from them that Lawrence was “pro-Yid,” he would send the proofs back to him untouched.⁵

Kipling was distressed at the thought that Lawrence might be pro-Jewish. And indeed, Lawrence’s view of the potential evolution of the Jewish National Home in British Mandate Palestine was far from hostile to Jewish hopes. In an article entitled “The Changing East,” published in the influential *Round Table* magazine in 1920, Lawrence wrote of “the Jewish experiment” in Palestine that it was “a conscious effort, on the part of the least European people in Europe, to make head against the drift of the ages, and return once more to the Orient from which they came.”⁶

Lawrence noted of the new Jewish immigrants: “The colonists will take back with them to the land which they occupied for some centuries before the Christian era samples of all the knowledge and technique of Europe. They propose to settle down amongst the existing Arabic-speaking population of the country, a people of kindred origin, but far different social condition. They hope to adjust their mode of life to the climate of Palestine, and by the exercise of their skill and capital to make it as highly organized as a European state.”⁷

As Lawrence envisaged it in his *Round Table* article, this settlement would be done in a way that would be beneficial to the Arabs. “The success of their scheme,” he wrote of the Zionists, “will involve inevitably the raising of the present Arab population to their own material level, only a little after themselves in point of time, and the consequences might be of the highest importance for the future of the Arab world. It might well prove a source of technical supply rendering them independent of industrial Europe, and in that case the new confederation might become a formidable element of world power.”⁸

It seemed to Lawrence—as it did to Winston Churchill when he discussed the question of eventual Jewish sovereignty with the Peel Commissioners in 1937, shortly after Lawrence’s death—that it would take a long

time before a Jewish majority would come into being. Such a contingency, Lawrence had written in his *Round Table* article, “will not be for the first or even for the second generation, but it must be borne in mind in any laying out of foundations of empire in Western Asia.” These, to a very large extent, “must stand or fall by the course of the Zionist effort.”⁹

When Churchill became colonial secretary in January 1921, he appointed Lawrence to be his Arab affairs adviser. At the outset of his appointment, Lawrence held talks with Feisal about Britain’s Balfour-Declaration promise of a Jewish National Home in Palestine. Reporting on these talks to Churchill in a letter dated January 17, 1921, Lawrence was able to assure the new colonial secretary—responsible for finalizing the terms of the Palestine Mandate—that in return for Arab sovereignty in Baghdad, Amman, and Damascus, Feisal “agreed to abandon all claims of his father to Palestine.”¹⁰

This was welcome news for Churchill, but there was a problem. Since the French were already installed in Damascus, and were not willing to make way for Feisal or any Arab leader, Churchill proposed giving Feisal, instead of the throne of Syria, the throne of Iraq, and at the same time giving Feisal’s brother Abdullah the throne of Transjordan, that part of Britain’s Palestine Mandate lying to the east of the River Jordan. Installing an Arab ruler in Transjordan would enable Western Palestine—the area from the Mediterranean Sea to the River Jordan, which now comprises both Israel and the West Bank—to become the location of the Jewish National Home under British control, in which, in Churchill’s words, the Jews were to go “of right, and not on sufferance.”¹¹

Briefed by Lawrence at the March 17, 1921, Cairo Conference, Churchill explained to the senior officials gathered there that the presence of an Arab ruler under British control east of the Jordan would enable Britain to prevent anti-Zionist agitation from the Arab side of the river. In support of this view, Lawrence himself told the conference, as the secret minutes

recorded: “He [Churchill] trusted that in four or five years, under the influence of a just policy,” Arab opposition to Zionism “would have decreased, if it had not entirely disappeared.”¹²

Lawrence went on to explain to the conference that “it would be preferable to use Trans-Jordania as a safety valve, by appointing a ruler on whom we could bring pressure to bear, to check anti-Zionism.” The “ideal” ruler 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.”¹³ That ruler, Lawrence believed, would best be Emir Abdullah, Feisal’s brother.

The presence of Lawrence of Arabia at the Cairo Conference was of inestimable benefit to Churchill in his desire to help establish a Jewish National Home in Palestine. Lawrence’s friendship with the Arab leaders, with whom he had fought during the Arab Revolt, and his knowledge of their weaknesses as well as their strengths, was paralleled by his understanding of Zionist aspirations. In November 1918, on the first anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, Lawrence had told a British Jewish newspaper, “Speaking entirely as a non-Jew, I look on the Jews as the natural importers of Western leaven so necessary for countries of the Near East.”¹⁴

On March 27, 1921, ten days after Lawrence’s suggestions in Cairo, Churchill sent him from Jerusalem to Transjordan to explain to Abdullah that his authority would end at the eastern bank of the River Jordan; that the Jews were to be established in the lands between the Mediterranean and the Jordan (“Western Palestine”); and that he, Abdullah, must curb all anti-Zionist activity and agitation among his followers.

The next day, in Jerusalem, Lawrence, Churchill, and Abdullah were photographed at British Government House: Churchill bundled up against the cold, Lawrence in a dark suit and tie, Abdullah in army uniform with Arab headdress. At their meeting that day, Abdullah agreed to limit the area of his control to Transjordan and to refrain from any action

against the Jewish National Home provisions of the Palestine Mandate west of the Jordan.

Lawrence had thus helped ensure that the building up of the Jewish National Home could continue. He already knew that national home's potential: Twelve years before the Cairo Conference, while traveling through the Galilee around Tiberias, he reflected on the glory days of the region in Roman times, and on the Jewish farm settlements he saw on his travels. Writing home on August 2, 1909, he explained, "Galilee was the most Romanized province of Palestine. Also the country was well peopled, and well watered artificially: There were not twenty miles of thistles behind Capernaum! And on the way round the lake they did not come upon dirty, dilapidated Bedouin tents, with the people calling to them to come in and talk, while miserable curs came snapping at their heels: Palestine was a decent country then, and could so easily be made so again. The sooner the Jews farm it all the better: Their colonies are bright spots in a desert."¹⁵

The rest is well known: The "bright spots in a desert" evolved into a thriving state on the basis of the skill and capital Lawrence marveled at decades prior. It is hard to know how he would have responded to the Arab world's growing intransigence toward the Jewish presence in the British Mandate, let alone to its violent attempts to destroy the Jewish State while still in its birth pangs—the same State that he believed held such promise for the Arabs of the region. T.E. Lawrence died in May 1935 of fatal injuries sustained in a motorcycle accident near his cottage in Dorset, at the age of only forty-seven. The accomplishments of his short life have assured his place in the pantheon of modern Arab history. Perhaps it is now time that modern Jewish history paid him homage as well.

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Notes

1. From Chaim Weizmann's interview with Emir Feisal at the Carlton Hotel, December 11, 1918, archives of the British Foreign Office in the Public Record Office, London, 371/3420.
2. Text reprinted in David Hunter Miller, *My Diaries of the Conference of Paris* (New York: Appeal, 1924), vol. 3, pp. 188-189.
3. T.E. Lawrence Papers, quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews: A Lifelong Friendship* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007), p. 51.
4. Letter from Feisal to Frankfurter, March 1, 1919, reprinted in the *New York Times* on March 5, 1919, the *Times* (London) on March 6, 1919, and the *Jewish Chronicle* (London) on March 7, 1919. See Isaiah Friedman, *Palestine, a Twice-Promised Land?: The British, Arabs, and Zionism, 1915-1920* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2000), p. 228.
5. Kipling to Lawrence, July 20, 1920, *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling*, vol. 5, 1920-1930, ed. Thomas Pinney (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2004), p. 126.
6. T.E. Lawrence, "The Changing East," *The Round Table*, September 1920. Available at http://telawrence.net/telawrencenet/works/articles_essays/1920_changing_east.htm.
7. Lawrence, "The Changing East."
8. Lawrence, "The Changing East."
9. Lawrence, "The Changing East."
10. Letters from T.E. Lawrence to Churchill's private secretary, January 17, 1921. Churchill Papers, 17/14.
11. British White Paper of June 1922, cited in Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews*, p. 46.
12. Colonial Office Papers 935/1/1, cited in Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews*, p. 51.
13. Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 4, 1917-1922 *The Stricken World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 553.
14. Message to the *Jewish Guardian*, November 28, 1918, cited in Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews*, p. 51.
15. David Garnett, ed., *The Letters of T.E. Lawrence* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1938), p. 71.