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Myth in the Desert, or Not the Great Arab Revolt

EFRAIM KARSH and INARI KARSH

There is probably no more potent a myth in the annals of the modern Middle East than the so-called 'Great Arab Revolt' of the First World War. In Arab historiography, parroted by generations of unquestioning Western students, the revolt signifies the culmination of an 'Arab Awakening' which had long been in the making.¹ Even those few critical observers who reckon the non-existence of such a national awakening prior to the war do not question the revolt's nationalist credentials, viewing it as an offspring of Sharif Hussein's sudden conversion from 'Ottomanism' to 'Arabism'.² No wonder that the desert revolt has given rise to a litany of Arab recriminations against the then imperial powers, Britain and France, for allegedly talking a naïve and well-intentioned national movement into an uprising, only to cheat it of its fruits once it had outlived its utility for great-power interests. Replicated by such guilt-ridden intellectual imperialists as T.E. Lawrence and Arnold Toynbee, this claim, too, has become an accepted orthodoxy of Western historiography of the modern Middle East, challenged only by a handful of critical scholars.³

However intriguing, such views are totally misconceived. This was no 'Great Arab Revolt': it was Hussein's personal bid for an empire. The sharif was no champion of national liberation seeking to unshackle the 'Arab Nation' from the chains of Ottoman captivity: he was an imperialist aspirant anxious to exploit a unique window of opportunity for substituting his own empire for that of the Ottomans. If he had ever truly subscribed to the notion of 'Ottomanism', which he certainly had not, he discarded it for the self-serving cause of 'Hashemism' – not 'Arabism'.

Nor did Hussein represent the wishes of the 8–10 million Arabic-speaking subjects of the Ottoman Empire, most of whom remained loyal to their suzerain virtually to the end of the war and viewed the desert revolt with total indifference or even hostility. Even in his own home town of Mecca, not to speak of his Arabian homeland, the sharif's authority was far from accepted; not least, the rebel forces themselves lacked a corporate identity and were saddled with schisms and enmities: among the Arabian tribes, among Arabians and non-Arabians, most of whom were prisoners of war supplied by Britain, and among the non-Arabian participants in the revolt (e.g., Syrians, Iraqis).

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Moreover, the sharif was no innocent by-stander drawn into the whirlpool of war by devious British machinations. He had sought British support for his personal ambitions well before the outbreak of war, and his decision to collaborate with this Christian Power against his Muslim suzerain was exclusively motivated by considerations of personal gain. Fantastically inflating his political standing and military strength, and skilfully harping on British anxieties and vulnerabilities, he manipulated the largest empire on earth into surrendering his family substantial parts of the collapsing Ottoman Empire.

What makes the sharif's achievement all the more extraordinary is that his gains were only matched by his puny resources. His pretence to speak on behalf of the 'whole of the Arab Nation without exception'⁴ was patently false, as were his pretensions of military and political prowess. Had he not been fully armed and fed by Britain, and to a lesser extent France, as well as provided with troops, military guidance and lavish shipments of gold – which performed miracles in buying bedouin loyalty – Hussein would never have been able to launch his revolt, let alone sustain it. As things were, the sharif's ambitions did not materialize in their full territorial scope; yet he managed to seat his family on vast territories, several times the size of the British Isles, and to have a profound impact on the making of the modern Middle East.

Hussein's first overture to Britain dates back to the summer of 1908, when he sought the support of the British Ambassador to Constantinople, Sir Augustus Lowther, in his bid for the Emirate of Mecca; he was then in luxurious exile in the Ottoman capital, where he had been brought some fifteen years earlier by the paranoid Sultan Abdul Hamid, together with other contenders for the Emirate. This privileged post of custody over Islam's two Holy Cities and *de facto* rule over the Hijaz, the westernmost part of the Arabian Peninsula, had been traditionally manned by a *sharif*, or a member of the Hashemite clan of the tribe of Quraish, to which Hussein, like Prophet Muhammad himself, belonged.

It is not clear whether Hussein's courtship of Lowther helped him win the sharifate, though the ambassador was duly impressed.⁵ The other contender to the post, Ali Haidar, was backed by the Young Turks, who had just seized power in Istanbul, but Abdul Hamid, then in the death throes of his long reign, preferred Hussein to his rival.⁶ Yet the episode reflected the extent of Hussein's ambition and the lengths to which he would travel to achieve his personal aims: he did not shun 'infidel' support for winning one of Islam's most lucrative posts, and he would have no qualms about repeating this experience whenever his needs so required.

Indeed, in February 1914 the sharif's second son and right-hand man, Abdullah, passed through Egypt on his way to Constantinople, where he sat for Mecca in the parliament, and called on Lord Herbert Horatio Kitchener, the British Agent and Consul General, whose acquaintance he had reportedly made a year or two earlier.⁷ A new and assertive *vali*, Wahib Bey, had just arrived in the Hijaz with the explicit aim of tightening central control over the province, and Abdullah was anxious to rally British support behind his father in the impending confrontation with the Ottoman authorities. He claimed that the situation in the Hijaz was deteriorating due to Wahib's arrival and asked that Britain use its good offices in Istanbul to prevent the dismissal of his father. He stated emphatically that any such move would trigger a general rising in the Hijaz against the Ottoman Empire and expressed the hope that in such circumstances 'the British Government would not allow reinforcements to be sent by sea for the purpose of preventing the Arabs from exercising the rights which they have enjoyed from time immemorial in their own country round the holy places'. In a follow-up meeting with Ronald Storrs, the Oriental Secretary at the Agency, a few days later, Abdullah was far more forthright: 'Should the CUP force us to defend our country, and should you prevent them from shelling our shores and landing troops, and allow us to use Port Sudan for transport and communications, we would facilitate your trade and prefer you to all other Powers'; in the meantime, could the sharif have a dozen, or even a half-dozen machine-guns for 'defence against attack from the Turks'?⁸

The evasive British response failed to discourage Abdullah. Two months later he stopped in Egypt once more on his way back to Mecca and reiterated his seditious proposal. This time, however, he was not given an audience with Kitchener due to growing Turkish sensitivities and had to content himself with a meeting with Storrs. Having treated his host to a lengthy discussion of pre-Islamic poetry, Abdullah laid the cards on the table. The Turkish authorities would not listen to the voice of reason, he said; they were bent on pushing the Hijaz railway on to Mecca, which would ring the economic death-knell for the camel-owning population of Arabia. Would Britain be prepared to give his father 'an agreement similar to that existing between the Emir of Afghanistan and the government of India, in order to maintain the status quo in the Arabian peninsula and to do away with the danger of wanton Turkish aggression'?

After a brief consultation with Kitchener, Storrs returned to Abdullah. 'The Arabs of the Hijaz should expect no encouragement from the British Government, [which] could never entertain the idea of supplying arms to be used against a Friendly Power [i.e., the Ottoman government],' he said. Their sole interest in Arabia was the safety and comfort of the Indian

pilgrims, and they 'had in principle not the smallest wish to interfere in the government or the administration of the Holy Cities'.⁹

Even by the most liberal interpretation this was no bid for national liberation by a nationalistically minded ruler, but rather an opportunistic attempt by a subject to prevent his centralizing suzerain from encroaching on his 'quasi-independent status, his armed following, or his autocratic powers over the population of the Hijaz'.¹⁰ For Sharif Hussein the Ottoman Empire had never been 'the best hope of defending Islam from political and intellectual encroachments of Christian Europe';¹¹ it had been the natural order of things which had existed for as long as he could remember and within which he had to cut the best possible deal for himself. So long as this empire put him in a position of authority and gave him the legal, political and military muscle to subdue his local rivals, as he had done in Asir and Najd in 1910–11, he was more than happy to acknowledge its suzerainty; once it attempted to encroach on his prerogatives in a meaningful way the sharif was prepared to shift his loyalty to another imperial master – and an infidel one!

As Britain remained impervious to his overtures, Hussein had to bide his time in anticipation of the right moment to outwit his Ottoman suzerain; but not for long. The outbreak of war in August 1914 and its extension to the Middle East some three months later generated unprecedented opportunities for self-aggrandizement, which even the ambitious sharif could have never entertained before. Britain, hitherto the champion of Ottoman territorial integrity, seemed increasingly resigned to weakening the Muslim empire through the fomenting of internal dissension. Already in mid-October 1914 Abdullah received a message from Kitchener, now Secretary of State for War, inquiring with whom the sharif would side 'should present armed German influence at Constantinople coerce Caliph against his will and Sublime Porte to acts of aggression and war against Great Britain'.¹² This was followed by yet another message from Kitchener in early November, shortly after Turkey's entry into the war, offering Hussein a defence alliance: 'If the Emir and the Arabs in general assist Great Britain in this conflict that has been forced upon us by Turkey, Great Britain ... recognizing and respecting the sacred and unique office of the Emir Hussein ... will guarantee the independence, rights and privileges of the Sharifate against all external foreign aggression, in particular that of the Ottomans.' And to clinch the deal an attractive icing on the cake was on offer:

Till now we have defended and befriended Islam in the person of the Turks; henceforward it shall be in that of the noble Arab. It may be

that an Arab of the true race will assume the Caliphate at Mecca or Medina and so good may come by the help of God out of all evil which is now occurring.¹³

This was no mean achievement for Hussein. Six months earlier he was refused half-a-dozen machine-guns from Britain; now all of a sudden he was offered not only a defence pact with the largest empire on earth but also the highest Islamic post world-wide: the caliphate. Yet the sharif preferred to chart his options carefully. Turkey was now a fully fledged war ally of Germany, whose military prowess was held in great awe in the Near East, and Hussein, whose ambitions were aptly matched by his caution, would not take the plunge before ensuring which way the current went. He therefore reassured Kitchener of his benign neutrality and expressed regret for being unable to break with the Turks immediately due 'to his position in the world of Islam and the present political situation in the Hijaz' while promising to wait for 'a colorable pretext' to do so.¹⁴

It would not be before the summer of 1915 that the sharif would feel confident enough to make his move. In December 1914 a major offensive in the Transcaucasus, commanded by War Minister Enver Paşa, the most powerful member of the Turkish leadership, was defeated by the Russians at a horrendous human and material cost; some three months later a Turkish attack on the Suez Canal, under the direction of Djemal Paşa, commander of the Fourth Army and absolute ruler of the Levant, broke against the British defences; finally, in spring 1915 the Allies began landing forces on the Gallipoli Peninsula, the southernmost European shore of the Dardanelles, in an attempt to knock Turkey out of the war. All this seemed to have allowed Abdullah, who had already been goading his father into rising against the Ottomans before the war, to argue that the moment was ripe for a serious exploration of the feasibility of an Anglo-sharifian alliance.¹⁵ He was aided in this by communications from two Arab secret societies – *al-Fatat* and *al-Ahd* – which promised to stir a revolt by Arab officers and troops in Syria and urged Hussein to demand, in any negotiations with Britain, the establishment of a vast Arab empire stretching from Asia Minor to the Indian Ocean and from the Persian frontier to the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁶

On 12 July 1915, shortly after a delegation of the secret societies had visited Arabia and swore allegiance to the sharif, a personal envoy of Abdullah arrived in the Sudan to explore the possibility of British military assistance to the sharif 'and his Arab supporters'.¹⁷ Two days later Abdullah sent a letter on his father's behalf to Ronald Storrs, which was to inaugurate a long-drawn-out and controversial correspondence between the Sharif of Mecca and the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Arthur Henry

McMahon, whose echoes would reverberate in Middle Eastern politics and historiography for many years to come.¹⁸

The letter reflected the sea change in the sharif's worldview since the beginning of the Great War. The vast Arab empire envisaged by the secret societies coalesced with Kitchener's allusion to the caliphate to wet Hussein's appetite. He no longer spoke just for himself and his family, or even for the whole of the Hijaz; styling himself as champion of 'the whole of the Arab nation without any exception' he presented a long list of conditions for an Anglo-Arab alliance, including first and foremost British recognition of

the independence of the Arab state,¹⁹ bounded on the north by Mersina and Adana up to the 37 degree of latitude, on which degree fall Birijik, Urfa, Mardin, Midiat, Jezirat (Ibn Umar), Amadia, upto the borders of Persia up to the Gulf of Basra; on the south by the Indian Ocean, with the exception of the position of Aden to remain as it is; on the west by the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea upto Mersina. England to approve of the proclamation of an Arab Caliphate of Islam.²⁰

Reaching Cairo on 18 August, the sharif's letter struck the British like a bolt from the blue.²¹ An inter-departmental committee under the chairmanship of Sir Maurice de Bunsen of the Foreign Office had just submitted its recommendations on the future of Turkey in Europe which regarded the preservation of a decentralized and largely intact Ottoman Empire as the most desirable option;²² and although Britain and France had grudgingly agreed to give Russia control over Constantinople after the war, they were still greatly reluctant to entertain the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire, not least at the suggestion of a junior subject of that very empire.²³

But even if such an undesirable event were to occur, the idea of a unified Arab state was inconceivable to British officialdom. For all their bitter inter-departmental rivalries and widely divergent perspectives and interests, officials and policy-makers in London, India, and the Middle East were keenly aware of the diversity and fragmentation of the Arabic-speaking peoples of the Ottoman Empire, with whom they had interacted for quite some time; even the tightly-knit official group in Cairo, and its Khartoum extension, which, more than any other part of British bureaucracy, would champion the sharif's cause, largely subscribed to this view.

'Arab unity and brotherhood has been discussed for a long time, reported Aubry Herbert, MP, himself a one-time intelligence officer in Cairo, from the Egyptian capital at the end of October 1915. 'Till recently it seemed as remote as the accomplishment of the Young Turkish organization appeared ten years ago. The character of the people and the

geography of the country are insuperable obstacles to any real unity for years and perhaps generations to come.'²⁴ A lengthy analysis of the internal conditions in Syria, written early in 1915 by Lieutenant T.E. Lawrence of the intelligence department in Cairo, pointed to a string of geographical, cultural, racial, linguistic and religious divergencies and 'no national feeling' at all, and complimented 'the suggestion – thrown in the teeth of geography and economics – of putting the littoral under one government, and the interior under another'.²⁵ Years later Lawrence would still subscribe to this scepticism. 'Arab unity is a madman's notion – for this century or next, probably,' he told Robert Graves, one of his biographers. 'English-speaking unity is a fair parallel. I am sure I never dreamed of uniting even the Hijaz and Syria. My conception was of a number of small states.'²⁶

For his part McMahon believed that 'the idea of an Arabian unity under one ruler recognized as supreme by other Arab chiefs is as yet inconceivable to Arab mind',²⁷ while David Hogarth, Lawrence's mentor and Director of the Arab Bureau, established in Cairo early in 1916, was no less scathing than his protégé over the prospects of a unified Arab empire. 'When we look back over the history of the early Chaliphates,' he wrote in April 1917

and we must do so, since the present hopes and pretensions of the Arabs, and the popular belief in their coming Renaissance rest equally on ancient history – we find the period of genuine Arab Empire extraordinarily short. Arabs governed Arabs, through Arabs on an imperial scale much less than a century. It is just the Omayyad Caliphate – the Damascus period and no more ... The brevity of purely Arab Empire was determined less by the force of non-Arab elements than by the inability of Arabs themselves to develop any system of imperial administration more adequate than the Patriarchal. They made no other contribution to the science of government.²⁸

Even Reginald Wingate, Governor-General of the Sudan and Sirdar of the Egyptian Army, who felt 'increasingly drawn to an attempted solution on Pan-Arabian lines ... which might wean Sunni Islam from the aggressive Pan-Islamism of the Ottoman school', envisaged not a unified Arab empire but rather 'a federation of semi-independent Arab states ... linked together by racial and religious bonds, owing spiritual allegiance to a single Arab Primate, and looking to Great Britain as its Patron and Protector'.²⁹

Indeed, the idea that Ottoman collapse would give rise to an Arab caliphate of sorts with its centre in the Muslim Holy Places was deeply embedded in the minds of Kitchener and his Cairo disciples. Given their keen awareness of the colourful mosaic that was the Arabic-speaking world, and in line with standard contemporary European perceptions of the caliphate, they viewed this institution as 'a kind of spiritual headship of the

[Sunni] Muslim world, a papacy of Islam, and the “Arab of true race” who was to be Caliph in Mecca or Medina, was to be a supreme theological and ecclesiastical authority for Muslims, an arbiter of the dogma, reigning over the Holy Places, the recipient of spiritual veneration, but certainly not of temporal allegiance’.³⁰

This perception was reinforced by occasional messages passed to Britain by certain Muslim circles who sought to harness its support to their own ends. In December 1914, for example, Izzet Pasha al-Abid, a former secretary of Abdul Hamid’s now exiled in Paris, offered that Britain help Sharif Hussein be proclaimed a caliph. Some six months later, while on a mission to the East for the Intelligence Department of the War Office, Sir Mark Sykes was informed that in the event of Ottoman defeat some Turkish clerics would strive to separate the caliphate from the Ottoman sultanate and to elect the *Naqib al-Ashraf* of Constantinople as a spiritual caliph, based either in that city or in Damascus. A few days later Sykes was told by Prince Sabah el-Din, leader of the liberal League for Private Initiative and Decentralization, that if his party gained power in the Ottoman Empire he would support the transfer of the caliphate from the sultan, who would then remain a purely temporal ruler, to an Arab member of the Quraish tribe, preferably the Sharif of Mecca, whose independence in the Hijaz would be recognized.³¹

Enthusiasm for an Arabian caliphate, to be sure, was not unanimous among British policy-makers. Foreign Secretary Grey, for one, was a reluctant convert to Kitchener’s tireless preaching of the idea; the Government of India would rather not convert at all. ‘Unlike the Papacy’, warned Permanent Under-Secretary Sir Thomas Holderness, ‘[the caliphate] must, if it is to be more than a mere empty claim, have substance of an extensive temporal empire. The Sharif of Mecca could not, I imagine, make good a title to the Caliphate unless he established temporal ascendancy over the states and chiefdoms of Arabia ... If we are to hold out hopes of the latter, we should have to help him in a career of conquest: and I am sure that this is not intended’.³²

Yet these objections were brushed aside by Kitchener and the Cairo officials. In their imperialist mindset, the spiritual caliphate offered a magic formula that could bring together the disparate elements of the Arabic-speaking world, under British tutelage, without creating a unified empire that would endanger Britain’s own imperial interests. They were therefore prepared to guarantee that in any postwar agreement ‘the Arabian Peninsula and its Muslim Holy Places should remain in the hands of a Sovereign Muslim State’; and if this was to be headed by a spiritual caliph all the better, though it was up for Muslims to settle this issue among themselves without interference by the European great powers. Yet this caliph was to

yield no temporal powers, and the promised sovereignty was interpreted 'in a generic sense' due to scepticism regarding the feasibility of Arab unity. In short, Sharif Hussein was to be given hereditary rule over the Hijaz – not even the entire Arabian Peninsula – and if he managed to 'conciliate his powerful neighbours of Najd, Yemen, and Asir, and to impress upon them that he has no idea of pretending to any temporal rights within their territories, his chances of a general – though hardly yet of a universal – recognition as Caliph will be very good'.³³

Given this restrictive vision, it was scarcely surprising that Cairo officialdom responded to Hussein's demands with indignant disbelief, and none more so than Ronald Storrs, this cultivated Englishman who held himself as a great expert on Arab affairs. 'While it is clear that the [sharif] endeavours to reconcile local Arabian interests, it may be regarded as certain that he has received no sort of mandate from other potentates,' he thought to himself while translating Hussein's letter. 'He knows he is demanding possibly as a basis of negotiation, far more than he has the right, the hope or power to expect. Like his co-religionists elsewhere, he will probably modify his tone upon the fall of Constantinople.' In the circumstances, there was little that could be done to encourage the sharif apart from sending him some foodstuffs and money:

The question of the Arabian Caliphate has already been left to the decision of Islam; the British government having been especially precise upon that point. That of the limits and boundaries could be reserved for subsequent discussion: the chief point for immediate decision being the expulsion of the Turks and the Germans and the maintenance of tranquility in Arabia.³⁴

In his memoirs, published some two decades later, Storrs was even more forthright. 'It was at the time and still is my opinion that the Sharif opened his mouth and the British Government their purse a good deal too wide,' he wrote:

It seemed to me that having been little more than a sort of Erastian Administrator for the Turks, the Sharif and his people would be well treated and amply rewarded if they were gratuitously enabled to defeat and evict their traditional enemy, and were guaranteed immunity from external aggression in their permanent possession of the two Holy Cities, together with the independent sovereignty of their country of origin, the Hijaz. If to this a sufficient majority of Muslims chose to add the Caliphate, that was their business, and not

ours ... But Hussein, who had indeed through Faisal been in touch with the Syrian revolutionaries, claimed to wield a general mandate as King of the Arabs for Spiritual Pan-Araby, to which he knew better than we that he could lay no kind of genuine claim ... We could not conceal from ourselves (and with difficulty from him) that his pretensions bordered upon the tragi-comic.³⁵

Sir Henry McMahon took his cue from Storrs. A lacklustre middle-aged civil servant of a legendary slowness of mind, he became High Commissioner of Egypt in January 1915 after having served as foreign secretary to the Government of India. Hand-picked for this post by Kitchener, who wished to reserve the Egyptian vacancy for himself for the postwar era, McMahon never forgot who had buttered his bread; he showed little interest in state affairs, leaving the daily running of the country to his aides and keeping Kitchener constantly informed.³⁶ His suggested response to the sharif's letter, thus, was a near-verbatim replication of Storrs' comments: 'Gratification at his declaration of identity of British and Arab interests; confirmation of His Majesty's Government's friendly sentiments and interests; and promises as expressed in Lord Kitchener's communication of last November.' And like Storrs he deemed discussion of boundary details during the war as premature: 'Turks not having yet been expelled from much of the area in question, and His Majesty's Government having observed with surprise and regret that Arabs in some parts are still neglecting their supreme opportunity and working for Turks and Germans'.³⁷

The newly appointed Secretary of State for India, Austen Chamberlain, thought that this recommendation did not go far enough. He agreed with Storrs and McMahon that 'the sharif's conditions which appear to be dictated by extreme pan-Arab aspirations are obviously unacceptable as they stand, and probably incompatible with the rights and interests of other Arab chiefs with whom His Majesty's Government have engagements'; yet he considered the opening worth exploring and suggested to offer Hussein negotiations 'on preliminary agreement for securing the independent rights and privileges of the Sharifate, if he sent his son Abdullah – or some other plenipotentiary – to Egypt'. Were such talks to ensue, it might be possible to reduce the sharif's demands to reasonable dimensions.³⁸

McMahon dissented. 'The moment, in my opinion, has not arrived when we can usefully discuss even a preliminary agreement,' he wrote to Grey, 'and it might at this stage injure the Sharif's chances of the Caliphate to advertise his dealings with us by sending a son or other notable to treat with us.'³⁹ In his reply to Hussein, dated 30 August, he reaffirmed Kitchener's support for 'the independence of Arabia and its inhabitants, together with

our approval of the Arab Caliphate when it should be proclaimed', but rejected the sharif's territorial demands:

With regard to the questions of limits and boundaries, it would appear to be premature to consume our time in discussing such details in the heat of war, and while, in many portions of them, the Turk is up to now in effective occupation; especially as we have learned, with surprise and regret, that some of the Arabs in those very parts, far from assisting us, are neglecting this supreme opportunity and are lending their arms to the German and the Turk, to the new despoiler and the old oppressor.

Ending on a positive note, McMahon offered to send Hussein 'whatever quantities of grain and other charitable gifts may be owed by Egypt to the Holy Land of Arabia'.⁴⁰

Hussein was enraged. He cared not for such charitable gestures, though the supply of grain would have doubtlessly relieved the acute food shortages in the Hijaz caused by the war. Nor would he settle for a local fiefdom in the Hijaz or even for the government of the whole of Arabia; his mind had been set on a far more ambitious objective – the establishment of his own empire on the ruins of that of the Ottomans – and as far as he was concerned McMahon had totally evaded this issue.

The spiritual caliph offered by McMahon meant nothing to the sharif: he viewed this function as both the temporal and the religious headship of the Muslim community; and, if anything, he was interested in the temporal power bestowed by this supreme post. He had used the Sharifate of Mecca as a springboard for political aggrandizement, not for religious piety; and just as he had sought 'infidel' support to obtain this revered Muslim post and to defy the wishes of his lawful Muslim suzerain, the Ottoman sultan-caliph, he now used a Christian power to sponsor his quest for the caliphate. From a religious point of view this was sheer blasphemy, and it would have made no sense for Hussein to do so unless the caliphate was a code-word for the vast Arab empire demanded in his first letter.

Indeed, in his reply to McMahon, dated 9 September, Hussein merely paid lip service to the notion of the caliphate, 'God have mercy on its soul and comfort the Muslims for their loss', concentrating instead on his real task of securing the territories he had set his sights upon. 'For our aim, O respected Minister,' he argued, 'is to ensure that the conditions which are essential to our future shall be secured on a foundation of reality, and not on highly decorated phrases and titles.' And the sharif left no doubt as to what this 'foundation of reality' meant:

the limits and boundaries demanded are not those of one individual whose claim might well await the conclusion of the war, but are those of our people who have decided that those frontiers are as a minimum vitally necessary to their new life, and whose resolution is final on this point.

And again,

I am confident that your Excellency will not doubt that it is not I personally who am demanding of these limits which include only our race, but that they are all proposals of the people, who, in short, believe that they are necessary for economic life.

Yet for all his feigned concern for the future of the Arab race and the finality of his territorial demands, Hussein left the door open for further bargaining: 'Whatever the illustrious Government of Great Britain finds comfortable to its policy on this subject, communicate it to us and specify to us the course we should follow'.⁴¹

To the sharif's great relief, McMahon took no notice of this alluded climbdown. In his second letter, dated 24 October, the High Commissioner made a sudden u-turn from his early position. Dropping the question of the caliphate altogether, he not only agreed to discuss the boundaries of the envisaged Arab empire but effectively delineated its territorial extent:

The two districts of Mersina and Alexandretta and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo cannot be said to be purely Arab, and should be excluded from the limits demanded. With the above modification, and without prejudice to our existing treaties with Arab chiefs, we accept those limits.

As for those regions lying within these frontiers wherein Great Britain is free to act without detriment to the interests of her ally, France, I am empowered in the name of the Government of Great Britain to give the following assurances and make the following reply to your letter:

- (1) Subject to the above modifications, Great Britain is ready to recognize and support the independence of the Arabs in all the regions within the limits demanded by the Sharif of Mecca.
- (2) Great Britain will guarantee the Holy Places against all external aggression and will recognize their inviolability.
- (3) 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 in those various territories.
- (4) 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.

(5) With regard to the *velayets* of Baghdad and Basra, the Arabs will recognize 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.⁴²

In one critical respect McMahon was not telling the whole truth: he had not been empowered to make these promises 'in the name of the Government of Great Britain'. To the contrary, he had been strictly instructed by Grey to avoid any specific pledges beyond the Arabian Peninsula and its Holy Places unless this was absolutely imperative: 'The simplest plan would be to give an assurance of Arab independence saying that we will proceed at once to discuss boundaries if they will send representatives for that purpose.'⁴³

For Hussein, nevertheless, McMahon's letter was manna from heaven. It of course fell short of his maximum demands and was wrapped with a thick layer of qualifications and ambiguities; yet it accepted his claim for an empire of his own, as opposed to the notional caliphate, and a very substantial empire indeed; and the sharif lost no time in seizing the lifebelt that had been thrown to him just as he was beginning to question the feasibility of his grandiose dream. He therefore agreed, in his letter of 5 November, not to include the two *velayets* of Mersina and Adana in the Arab Kingdom, but insisted that 'the two *velayets* of Aleppo and Beirut and their sea coasts are purely Arab *velayets*'. He likewise argued that the Iraqi *velayets* were 'part of the pure Arab Kingdom, and were in fact the seat of its Government in the time of Ali Ibn-Abu-Talib, and in the time of all the Caliphs who succeeded him', yet expressed readiness for a temporary arrangement that would leave under the British administration for a short time 'those [Mesopotamian] districts now occupied by the British troops without the rights of either party being prejudiced thereby (especially those of the Arab nation; which interests are to it economic and vital), and against a suitable sum paid as compensation to the Arab Kingdom for the period of occupation ... at the same time respecting your agreements with the Sheikhs of those districts'.

This said, Hussein ended the letter on a pious tone. 'Had it not been for the determination which I see in the Arabs for the attainment of their objects, I would have preferred to seclude myself on one of the heights of a mountain', he wrote. 'But they, the Arabs, have insisted that I should guide the movement to this end'.⁴⁴

McMahon tried to set the record straight. In a letter to the sharif on 14 December, he complimented him for recognizing Britain's agreements with the Arab chiefs but rejected his ideas on the future of both Syria and Mesopotamia. In the former case he argued that as the *velayets* of Aleppo and Beirut involved the interests of Britain's ally, France, 'the question will require careful consideration and a further communication on the subject will be addressed to you in due course'. With regard to the Mesopotamian provinces, including the *velayet* of Baghdad, he claimed that the adequate safeguarding of British interests 'calls for a much fuller and more detailed consideration than the present situation and the urgency of these negotiations permit'. He reassured Hussein that Britain would not conclude 'any peace in terms of which the freedom of the Arab peoples from German and Turkish domination does not form an essential condition', yet reminded him of the reciprocity of their relationship:

It is most essential that you should spare no effort to attach all the Arab peoples to our united cause and urge them to afford no assistance to our enemies. It is on the success of these efforts and on the more active measures which the Arabs may hereafter take in support of our cause when the time for action comes, that the permanence and strength of our agreement must depend.⁴⁵

Hussein stayed his course. 'I do not find it necessary to draw your attention to the fact that our plan is of greater security to the interests and protection of the rights of Great Britain than it is to us, and will necessarily be so whatever may happen,' he reprimanded McMahon, as if he were the representative of the largest empire on earth and not the other way round. 'Consequently, it is impossible to allow any derogation that gives France, or any other Power, a span of land in those regions.' Were such an adverse development to occur, the Arabs might be forced 'to undertake new measures which may exercise Great Britain, certainly not less than her present troubles'. As a show of goodwill, he was prepared to defer his claim to 'the northern parts and their coasts' so as not to rock the Anglo-French war alliance; but let there be no doubt of his determination to retain them in the future.⁴⁶

Ignoring this patronizing snub from a junior would-be ally who had yet to prove his ability to deliver the goods he had so ostentatiously promised, McMahon preferred to look on the bright side in the sharif's reply. 'As regards the northern parts', ran his letter to Hussein on 25 January, the last one to deal with the territorial issue,

We note with satisfaction your desire to avoid anything which might possibly injure the alliance of Great Britain and France. It is, as you

know, our fixed determination that nothing shall be permitted to interfere in the slightest degree with our united prosecution of this war to a victorious conclusion. Moreover, when the victory has been won, the friendship of Great Britain and France will become yet more firm and enduring, cemented by the blood of Englishmen and Frenchmen who have died side by side fighting for the cause of right and liberty.⁴⁷

The question that begs an answer at this juncture is what caused the turn-about in McMahon's position, from bemused indignation to qualified acquiescence in the main thrust of the sharif's demands. Part of the explanation doubtless lies in the uttermost conviction of McMahon, and his superiors in London, that the assurances to Hussein were part of a bargaining process that had yet to come to fruition rather than its end result; hence they were far from final and subject to future revision in accordance with the vicissitudes in the negotiations, which in turn were expected to be influenced by wider developments such as the course of the Great War and the state of the Anglo-French alliance. As things were, the Hussein-McMahon correspondence never culminated in an official agreement, like those concluded with Britain's other Arabian allies such as Sheikh Mubarak of Kuwait (1899), Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud of Najd (1915), or Muhammad al-Idrisi of Asir (1915); in fact, it did not even result in an informal agreement beyond the general understanding that the sharif would rise against the Turks and would be generously rewarded in territorial, economic, and military terms. This inconclusive outcome imparted to the correspondence an air of finality, albeit ambiguous, which Britain had never intended, and sowed the seeds of future grievances and recriminations.

An interrelated reason which drove McMahon to make territorial promises, despite his superior's instruction to the contrary, was his belief that they were sufficiently equivocal and convoluted as to make them amenable to the sharif while leaving 'as free hand as possible to His Majesty's Government in the future'. As he wrote Grey in explanation of his letter of 24 October,

I have been definite enough in stating that Great Britain will recognize the principle of Arab independence in purely Arab territory, but have been equally definite in excluding Mersina, Alexandretta and those districts on the northern coast of Syria, which cannot be said to be Arab, and where I understand that French interests have been recognized. I am not aware of the extent of French claims in Syria, nor of how far His Majesty's Government have agreed to recognize them. Hence, while recognizing the towns of Damascus, Hama, Homs and Aleppo as being within the circle of Arab countries, I have endeavoured to provide for possible French pretensions for those

places by a general modification to the effect that His Majesty's Government can only give assurances in regard to these territories 'in which she can act without detriment to the interests of her ally France'.⁴⁸

But above all, McMahon's volte-face was a reflection of a wider attitudinal change that took place in Cairo during the summer of 1915. It was Cairo officialdom, notably Storrs, Wingate, and Gilbert Clayton, Director of Military Intelligence, who, together with their former master-turned-secretary-of-war, Lord Kitchener, had conceived of separating the Arabic-speaking subjects of the Ottoman Empire from their Turkish suzerain as a means of winning the war in the East; and who was a better candidate for such a venture than the Sharif of Mecca, whose unique combination of 'the strongest religious and weakest material power'⁴⁹ was deemed sufficiently attractive for weaning away the Arabs from Turkey without endangering Britain's imperial interests through the creation of a new powerful empire.

Given this mindset, Cairo officialdom used every shred of evidence of the sharif's prominence in order to win over the sceptical minds in London and India to their grand design; and their trump card was found, wholly inadvertantly, in September 1915, in the form of an obscure twenty-four-year-old Arab officer, Lieutenant Muhammad Sharif al-Faruqi, who deserted to the Allied lines in Gallipoli. A native of the town of Mosul, in northern Mesopotamia, Faruqi was a member of *al-Ahd* Arab secret society, who, together with his fellow members, all of them military officers, joined forces with *al-Fatat* secret society after the outbreak of the war. In his debriefing by the Cairo intelligence department he painted a grandiose picture of the two secret societies: they had a branch in 'every improtant town or station', commanded the loyalty of 'the natives, sedentary and nomads, and all sects including the Nuseiria', and their treasury had accumulated the impressive sum of £T100,000 from membership subscriptions; 90 per cent of the Arab officers in the Turkish army and a part of the Kurdish officers were *al-Ahd* members and they had already stirred up a number of local revolts; so formidable was the societies' power throughout the Ottoman dominions that the Turks and the Germans had not only foregone any attempts to suppress them but had actually offered to fulfill their demands, but both societies 'would sooner have a promise of half from England than of the whole from Turkey and Germany'.

The overriding goal of both societies, in Faruqi's account, was to establish an Arab empire comprising Arabia, Mesopotamia and the Levant, though they realized that the attainment of this objective in its entirety 'is probably outside the region of practical realities at present, and he at any rate appreciates the fact that England is bound by obligations to its Allies in

this war'. To this end, both societies had pledged their allegiance to Sharif Hussein, who, in their understanding, had been promised British military support and sanctioned to establish an Arab Empire, the precise limits of which had yet to be determined; in the view of the societies, the empire's northern border should run along the Mersina-Diarbekir line.⁵⁰

Faruqi's account of the prowess of the secret societies owed more to fiction than to reality. The combined strength of both societies was about 100 activists, half of whom were military officers. This in turn meant that their political influence in Mesopotamia and the Levant was negligible; their financial resources – a far cry from Faruqi's fantastic figures; and their military power of no real consequence: the forty-odd *al-Ahd* officers in the Turkish army constituted about half-a-per cent of the Arab officer corps rather than the fantastic 90 per cent noted by Faruqi.⁵¹ Nor is there any evidence of German or Turkish courtship of these tiny societies; to the contrary, as narrated by Faruqi himself, from mid-1915 onwards the Turks adopted harsh measures to suppress all traces of anti-Turkish activity, real or imaginary, which virtually incapacitated the secret societies operating in the Levant.⁵²

But Cairo officialdom would not be troubled by any prickings of self-doubt. Having long advocated the merits of an Anglo-Sharifian alliance they had no intention of questioning the authenticity of the 'ultimate proof' that had unexpectedly fallen into their lap; it just fitted too neatly with their preconceptions. Did Faruqi not reveal that the sharif had won the allegiance of the 'Young Arab Party'? And did he not say that this Party commanded the loyalty of the Arabic-speaking masses? Hence, as Clayton put it in his official report on Faruqi's debriefing: 'That the attitude of the Shariff is that of the majority of the Arab peoples can be little doubt'.

If anything, Clayton's memorandum epitomized the pervasive self-deception in which Cairo officialdom immersed itself. Taking the incredible claims of the deserter at face value, the intelligence director cautioned that Britain was rapidly approaching the eleventh hour in its relations with the sharif, who, as leader of the Young Arab Party, represented the general Arab will. Hussein's second letter complaining about McMahon's evasion of the boundaries question had just arrived in Cairo, and Clayton urged his superiors to move an extra mile towards the sharif:

A favourable reply to the Arab proposals, even though it did not satisfy their aspirations entirely, would probably put the seal on their friendship. The influential leaders appear open to reason and ready to accept a considerably less ambitious scheme than that which they have formulated, which the mere enlightened allow to be beyond their hopes at present. The Committee would at once begin to work actively

and their operations, begun in the Hijaz where the sharif is a great power, would soon extend to Syria and Palestine where the Turkish forces are much reduced, and to Baghdad and Mosul where the Committee's influence is perhaps greatest.

On the other hand [he continued in an alarmist tone] to reject the Arab proposals entirely, or even to seek to evade the issues, will be to throw the Young Arab party definitely into the arms of the enemy. Their machinery will at once be employed against us throughout the Arab countries, and the various Arab chiefs, who are almost to a man members of or connected with the Young Arab party, will be undoubtedly won over. Moreover, the religious element will come into play and the 'Jihad', so far a failure, may become a grim reality, the effects of which would certainly be far-reaching and at the present crisis might well be disastrous.⁵³

In no time this panicky prognosis was relayed to London through several simultaneous channels. 'A powerful organization with considerable influence in the army and among Arab Chiefs viz:- the Young Arab Committee appears to have made up its mind that the moment for action has arrived', General Sir John Maxwell, GOC of the British forces in Egypt, telegraphed Lord Kitchener on 12 October, one day after Clayton had written his memorandum,

The Turks and Germans are already in negotiation with them and spending money to win their support. The Arab party, however, is strongly inclined towards England but what they ask is a definite statement of sympathy and support even if their complete programme cannot be accepted.

[The] Sharif [of] Mecca, who is in communication with the Arab party, also seems uneasy and is pressing for declaration of policy on the part of England.

If their overtures are rejected or replies delayed any longer the Arab party will go over to the enemy and work with them, which would mean stirring up religious feeling at once and might well result in a genuine Jihad. On the other hand the active assistance which the Arabs would render in return for our support would be of the greatest value in Arabia, Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine.

Four days later he was even more alarmist:

We are up against a big question of the future of Islam, and if we can make the French realize this fact they may be more inclined to agree to settlement. I feel certain that time is of the greatest importance, and

that, unless we make definite and agreeable proposal to the Sharif at once, we may have a united Islam against us.⁵⁴

McMahon struck an equally alarmist course. Like Clayton and Maxwell he erroneously construed Faruqi's account as vindicating the sharif's claim to represent the general Arab will; and like the two he believed that Britain's moment of truth had come. 'From further conversation with Faruqi it appears evident that Arab party are at parting of the ways', he wrote Grey on 20 October,

and unless we can give them immediate assurance of nature to satisfy them they will throw themselves into the hands of Germany who he says has furnished them fulfilment of all their demands. In the one case they seem ready to work actively with us which will greatly influence the course of Mesopotamiam and Syrian campaign while in the other Arabs will throw in their lot against us and we may have all Islam in the East united against the Allies.⁵⁵

Even the more stoical Storrs, hitherto so dismissive of the sharif's wider pretensions seemed to have been infected by his peers' alarm. In a letter to Kitchener's military secretary, Lt.-Colonel Oswald Fitzgerald, on 12 October, he implored that Maxwell's message be given 'all possible prominence', since the sand was running out:

I gather from the Sharif, as does Clayton from Faruqi that they feel, rightly or wrongly, that their time has come to choose between us and Germany. The latter promises all thing, but is mistrusted: the Arabs have more confidence in, and would accept much less from, us.⁵⁶

These alarmist messages were received with mixed feelings in London. Whole-heartedly endorsing his disciples' prognosis, Kitchener informed Maxwell that 'the government are most desirous of dealing with the Arab question in a manner satisfactory to the Arabs' and ordered him to do his best 'to prevent any alienation of the Arabs' traditional friendship towards Britain'.⁵⁷ The Foreign Office took a more cautious approach. 'We are told that not only the Arabs in Arabia, but also the Arab officers and men in the Turkish army are ready to work against the CUP and the Turks if we will accept their pretensions, which if we cannot come to terms they will definitely side with the Germans and Turks against us', commented George Clerk, head of the newly-established war department at the foreign office, on Maxwell's telegrams. 'The advantages of the one are as obvious as the dangers of the the other, and I would venture to suggest that no time should be lost in getting officers from Egypt and the Dardanelles, with broad

knowledge and experience, and a representative of the French military authorities, to come to London to discuss the position and work out plans'.

But before any such discussion could take place, Britain had to make up her mind whether she was prepared 'to accept in principle the idea of Arabia – even an exaggerated Arabia such as the Sharif proposes – for the Arabs'. In Clerk's opinion, the best solution would be 'an independent Arabia, looking to Great Britain as its founder and protector, and provided with territory rich and wide enough to furnish adequate resources'; yet he saw three major obstacles to the creation of such a state: French claims and ambitions in the Levant, British interests in Mesopotamia, and last but not least – the identity of the future ruler of the Arab Empire: 'Ibn Saud can rule Najd, Sharif Hussein can govern the Hijaz, the Idrisi or Imam Yahya may be master of the Yemen, but no one is indicated as Emir of Damascus or Caliph of Baghdad ... the real difficulty will be to make sure that the Sharif speaks for all the Arabs'.

Since this latter question could be clarified only when discussions with the Arabs were more advanced, Clerk recommended to inform the sharif that 'H.M.G. agree in principle to the establishment of an independent Arabia and that we are ready to discuss the boundaries of such a State, and the measures to be taken to call into being, with qualified Arabian representatives without delay.'⁵⁸ A message in this spirit was telegraphed by Grey to McMahon on 20 October, but the High Commissioner chose to ignore his superior's wishes. Anxious to seal a deal without delay, on 24 October he sent the most fateful letter in the entire correspondence recognizing, albeit reservedly, the sharif's territorial demands. 'In view of the urgency of the matter I seized a suitable opportunity which occurred today of sending a reply to the Sharif of Mecca,' he reported to Grey two days later.⁵⁹

The importance of McMahon's letter cannot be overstated. It signified a break with the established British position, based on the quite accurate reading of the diversity and fragmentation of the Arabic-speaking world, that a unified Arab Empire was a chimera. Now all of a sudden, on the basis of no more than the fanciful account of an obscure member of two tiny secret societies, Cairo officials had committed His Majesty's Government to creating a vast empire for the sake of a local potentate, whom they had hitherto deemed to represent none other than himself, and who, in the view of significant sections of British officialdom, did not command the loyalty and empathy of most of his would-be diverse subjects. 'I am not in a position to estimate the value of information as to Arab feeling collected in Egypt,' commented Austen Chamberlain on McMahon's pledges,

but I learn from my sources of information that the Sharif is a nonentity – powerless to carry out his proposals – that unity or possibility of unity are entirely lacking in the Arabs; and the hopes of the suggested Arab revolt in the Army and elsewhere seem to me to be groundless and its efficacy doubtful. It must be remembered that friendly chieftains like Ibn Saud and the Idrisi are said to be anti-Sharif, while pro-Sharif chiefs like Ibn Rashid and the Imam are also pro-Turkish.⁶⁰

It is clear from the vague formulation of McMahon's territorial promises that these were seen not as a final commitment but rather as a basis for future negotiation. It may also be the case that Cairo remained sceptical of the viability of the empire whose formation it now advocated, viewing the idea as a mere tactical ploy to get the sharif onto the Allies' bandwagon. As Wingate told Clayton shortly after McMahon had sent his 24 October letter to the sharif: 'After all what harm can our acceptance of his proposals do? If the embryonic Arab State comes to nothing, all our promises vanish and we are absolved from them – if the Arab State becomes a reality, we have quite sufficient safeguards to control it'.⁶¹

What these officials failed to comprehend in their short-sighted frenzy was that once the genie of the Arab empire was set free, it could not be bottled again. Had Britain adhered to her original position of recognizing Hussein as ruler of the Hijaz, with or without the flashy title of the caliphate – a solution that corresponded to the delicate balance of power and loyalties in the Arabian Peninsula – the sharif's imperialist ambitions might have died peacefully. As things were, the promise of an empire was to excite the imagination of generations of pan-Arabists and to create a lasting source of friction and acrimony, both among the Arabs themselves and between them and the West.⁶²

But if there was a measure of disingenuousness in the deeds and misdeeds of Cairo officialdom, the sharif himself was anything but a *bona fide* negotiator. He had initiated the negotiations under totally false pretences and maintained his phoney cover to the end knowing full well that only through such bluff would he be able to blackmail Britain into acquiescence in his hegemonic ambitions.

Already in his meetings with Storrs in spring 1914 Abdullah sought to sell his father for what he was not by claiming 'that the Arabs were concentrating and solidifying, that Ibn Saud, the Idrisi, and even Imam Yahya would before long be in complete unity with each other and with the Sharifate'.⁶³ This was of course a blatant lie. The mutual rivalries and

animosities among the Arabian potentates had been a long-time open secret; and far from 'concentrating and solidifying' each of them was charting his own separate way: Imam Yahya and Ibn Rashid would stick with their Ottoman suzerain throughout the war while the rest would individually throw their lot with Britain. Moreover, Ibn Saud and the Idrisi had a bitter score to settle with Sharif Hussein who had exploited his position as an Ottoman official to wage war on them under the blessing of the Turkish government and with its active support.

Yet in the make-believe world of Cairo officialdom there were always those who were prepared to take these lies for the truth, or at least to present them as such to sceptical superiors. 'There seems little doubt that there has been a distinct tendency towards combination on the part of the more powerful chiefs ... with a view of throwing off the Turkish domination and working towards an Arabia for the Arabs,' an intelligence report from 6 September affirmed Abdullah's five-months-old concoction in an attempt to convince Kitchener to initiate a dialogue with the Sharif of Mecca. And a report on 'The Politics of Mecca', written by T.E. Lawrence in January 1916, recycled the same falsehoods regarding the sharif's Arabian prowess, in a transparent ploy to justify the territorial promises made by McMahon three months earlier.⁶⁴

But Abdullah's bluff pales into insignificance in comparison with the sharif's fantastic pretence, made already in his first letter to McMahon, to speak on behalf of 'the whole of the Arab nation without any exception'. It is true that he had secured the allegiance of al-Fatat and al-Ahd; but then these societies, while including a few urban notables and tribal chiefs of some significance, represented little more than themselves. And even if the sharif may have initially overestimated the strength of these societies, by the end of 1915 or the beginning of 1916 he was fully aware that no support could be expected from these quarters: this he heard from his third son, Faisal, who had been sent to Damascus, only to learn that the conspiring officers and their units had been moved elsewhere and that there was no infrastructure whatsoever for an anti-Ottoman revolt in the Levant.⁶⁵

This, nevertheless, did nothing to deflect the sharif from exploiting all available means to sustain his elaborate game of deceit. 'Your honour will have realized, after the arrival of Muhammad (Faruqi) Sharif and his interview with you, that all our procedure up to the present was for no personal inclination or the like,' he wrote to McMahon after receiving the first communication from Faruqi, of whose existence he had been completely ignorant until then, 'which would have been wholly unintelligible, but that everything was the result of the decisions and desires of our peoples, and that we are but transmitters and executants of such decisions and desires in the position they (our people) have pressed upon us'.⁶⁶

The absurdity of this claim must not have been lost on the sharif. Not only could he expect no support for his seditious plans beyond the Arabian Peninsula, and certainly not from his Arabian neighbors, but he could not even count on the unanimous support of his own constituents in the Hijaz. He had established himself as the regional strongman and reduced the Ottoman vali to virtual insignificance alright; yet his position was by no means unassailable, not among the many local tribes and certainly not among the urban population. Medina (and to a lesser extent Taif) had been in a fairly regular interaction with the central Ottoman government and their people were 'accustomed to take the part of the Turks against the Arabs'; Mecca and Jeddah were better disposed toward the sharif but even there his authority was widely disputed, not least by the Dhawu-Zaid branch of the Hashemite clan (Hussein belonged to the Dhawu-Awn branch), which claimed the sharifate for itself. In October 1915, for example, McMahon's agent reported upon returning from the Hijaz 'that the merchants of Jeddah instigated by the Turks have sent to the Porte a petition against the Sharif, that all troops thereupon had been transferred to Mecca and Taif and that the Sharif was in considerable danger of assassination'. As late as December 1916, six months after the outbreak of the sharifian revolt, 'the people of Mecca were almost pro-Turks', and it would not be before the winter of 1917 that the pendulum would start swinging in the sharif's direction:

Many of the leading families dependent on Turkish pensions, doubted how long the Sharif could go on paying them, now that the Turks had gone; others feared that the Sharif's military power, exhausted in fighting the Turks, might soon be insufficient to protect them from tribal raids and forays; others again calculated the situation that might follow upon the death or murder of the Sharif, and the internal inter-family feuds that might disturb Mecca in consequence of rival claims to the Emirate. To this must be added an emotion common probably to all in varying degrees, namely, a half-conscious regret in assisting at what might be a fatal blow to the unity of Muslim power so long represented before the world by Turkey.⁶⁷

Much play has been made with the sharif's abstention from publicly endorsing the Ottoman declaration of Jihad, and the severe damage it allegedly caused the Turkish war effort. Hussein harped on this theme in his courtship of Britain, while the willing officials in Cairo amplified this message to win approval of their schemes; disgruntled Ottomans used the issue to justify their failures, and Arab historians – to glorify the so-called

Arab Revolt. Yet this fanciful idea has little to do with reality. The truth of the matter is that the sharif's religious credentials had never been prodigious enough to influence Muslim behavior one way or the other. Between 100,000 and 300,000 Arabs fought in the ranks of the Ottoman army during the First World War⁶⁸ regardless of Hussein's non-declaration of Jihad, and this substantial number would not have swelled any further had the sharif added his voice to his suzerain's call for Jihad.

If anything, the notion of the Sharif of Mecca wresting the caliphate from their Ottoman sultan, with whom their loyalty had rested for centuries, was anathema to most Arabs and Muslims. Even the grand qadi of the Sudan, Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi, himself no enemy of the sharif and his grandiose dreams, took the trouble of pointing out that,

Universal acknowledgement of Muslims throughout the world of the Sultans of Turkey as Caliphs is a sufficient proof that they respect the latter's opinion, i.e., that it is not necessary for the Caliph to be a Quraishi ... If the Muslims insist on the title [Quraish] they would be showing a dangerously poor knowledge of the true principles of the religion.⁶⁹

Opposition to the sharif's seizure of the caliphate was particularly intense among Indian Muslims. In a meeting with Foreign Secretary Grey in November 1915, Aga Khan, leader of the Ismaili Muslims, warned that any British attempt to substitute an Arab for the Ottoman caliphate 'would cause great trouble in India'; similar messages were relayed to Britain by several Muslim societies.⁷⁰ Once the sharif declared his revolt, the Indian Muslims responded with wholesale condemnation of this 'detestable conduct of the Arab rebels', which put the safety and sanctity of the Holy Places of the Hijaz and Mesopotamia at peril; divided Islam at a time when unity was a vital necessity; and, above all, weakened the largest independent Muslim state on earth. Similar furore was vented in Afghanistan, forcing the Emir to suppress all news of the revolt and prevent all discussion of it, in an attempt to maintain his country's traditional neutrality.⁷¹

They were far from alone in their opposition. The general response in the Arabic-speaking provinces to the sharif's rising ranged from indifference to outright hostility, thus underscoring the hollowness of his pretence to represent 'the whole of the Arab nation without any exception'. Most Egyptians received the news from the Hijaz with deep skepticism if not utter incredulity. 'Is the call of the Sharif of Mecca an appeal to the principles of nationality?', the Cairo newspaper *al-Ahram* pondered rhetorically. 'The correct answer is No! for the Turkish people as a whole have not tried to deprive other races of their birthright.'⁷² The prevailing theory among all walks of Egyptian society maintained that the revolt was

a Turco-Sharifian conspiracy, aimed at deceiving the British, through an apparent loyalty, into generous financial contributions to Hussein, as the Sanussi was believed to have done earlier; another popular conspiracy theory claimed that the revolt was a fiction, in agreement with Turkey, contrived with a view of reopening the naval routes between the Hijaz and Turkey; yet another theory, spread by nationalist circles, condemned the revolt as a British attempt to deceive the populace in order to discredit the Turks; the more Anglophobe among the nationalists were busy trying 'to throw discredit on the Sharif by presenting him as a rebel against the Caliph, and the servile instrument of the English'. Even when the reality of the revolt began to sink in, public opinion continued to swing between hostility and aloofness and the *ulama* refused to recognize the sharif as Caliph for as long as the Ottoman Empire remained intact. A distinctly hostile attitude was displayed by the Syrian-Lebanese émigré community, despite its pro-British orientation, which shuddered at the very thought that its rich and cultivated territories would be ruled by the 'undisciplined riffraff' from the Hijaz.⁷³

Native opinion in French-occupied North Africa was similarly unsavory. Some condemned the revolt as an unlawful rising by an audacious subject against his lawful Muslim suzerain, others dismissed it as 'one of the habitual Arab revolts'. Among the better educated classes it was widely believed that the sharif had been 'egged on by Great Britain with the secret intention of getting the Holy Places within her influence'. In the Persian Gulf principalities, where the general feeling was pro-Turkish, the revolt was received with indifference. Even the sheikhs of Kuwait and Muhammara, who sent hearty congratulations to the sharif, did so only in deference to British wishes, their real attitude being 'one of expectancy, combined with some sympathy for the Turks, in that the Sharif has taken advantage of the difficulties in which the war has involved them'.⁷⁴ The powerful pro-British Arabian potentates, Ibn Saud and the Idrisi, were similarly inclined to defer to their patron and to express sympathy with the revolt; but they lent it no material support and were bitterly resentful of the sharif's pretended championship of the Arab cause lest this suggest some control on his part in the future. Ibn Saud, in particular, was 'consumed with jealousy of Sharif Hussein, King of the Hijaz, and this jealousy has been ... fanned to a white heat by the latter's assumption of the title of King of Arabia'; he repeatedly demanded equality of treatment with the sharif and left no doubt that 'not only will [he] never accept a position of vassalage to the Sherif but that he aspires to a status in Najd not inferior to that of King Hussein in Hijaz'.⁷⁵

Nor did the revolt win popular support in the Levant, let alone whip up nationalist sentiments there. In Syria the urban political leadership remained

loyal to their Ottoman suzerain: 'Many retained their administrative posts throughout the War and viewed the rebellion to the south with alarm and disdain, and even as treason.' And though Hussein made his call to revolt in the strongest religious terms, 'the strength of Islam as the supreme integrating force of Empire drowned out the call to holy war by Arab tribes which were considered culturally inferior, socially backward and only nominally pious.'⁷⁶

The same applied to Palestine where the Ottoman proclamation of Jihad was met with great enthusiasm. Not even the repressive measures in the Levant, taken by Djemal Paşa from the autumn of 1915 onwards, turned the local population against the sultan.⁷⁷ It would not be before the summer of 1917, after the capture of Aqaba by the sharifian forces and the British advance from Egypt into Palestine had driven home the reality of allied successes to the Levant, that mutterings of discontent began to surface; but these were exclusively due to the serious shortages of food, fodder, and wood caused by the Ottoman setbacks rather than identification with the sharif. Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen, director of the intelligence section of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, recounts in his memoirs that on 1 December 1917, when British forces entered Ramleh, some twenty miles south of Jaffa,

a large batch of Turkish prisoners were being marched through the village but they were not preceded by their British Guard. The Arabs, thinking that it was the return of the Turkish Army, turned out in force, yelling with delight and waving Turkish flags; it was not till the end of the column appeared and they saw the British soldiers with fixed bayonets that they realized their mistake and great was their confusion. Their faces fell with a bump and they slunk disconsolate to their hovels.⁷⁸

As late as the end of August 1918, less than a month to the end of hostilities in the Middle East, a British report stated that

the Muslim population of Judea took little or no interest in the Arab national movement. Even now the Effendi class, and particularly the educated Muslim-Levantine population of Jaffa, evince a feeling somewhat akin to hostility toward the Arab movement very similar to the feeling so prevalent in Cairo and Alexandria. This Muslim-Effendi class which has no real political cohesion, and above all no power of organization, is either pro-Turkish or pro-British.⁷⁹

In Mesopotamia aloofness ran even deeper and wider. There was no expectancy of national liberation, not even in the British-occupied areas. The sharif's grandiose pretences were of little consequence to the

overwhelmingly Shiite population, which abhorred his desire to incorporate their lands into his future empire: many individuals served in the Ottoman army and numerous tribal chiefs collaborated with the central authorities. The British even had great difficulties in persuading Mesopotamian prisoners of war, detained in India, to join the sharif's revolt: most of them remained loyal to their Ottoman sultan-caliph; others were concerned for their families' safety; still others were simply indifferent to the developments in the Hijaz. When in December 1916 two British ships brought some 2,100 soldiers and 90 officers to the Hijaz, only six officers and 27 soldiers agreed to disembark; the rest were shipped to prisoners' camps in Egypt.

Moreover, even those Mesopotamian prisoners of war who joined the sharif's army were greatly reluctant to fight their Ottoman co-religionists. Time and again they obstructed British plans for the capture of Medina, and proved highly resourceful in manufacturing colorful pretexts for non-participation in military operations; one such pretext being that their duty was to guard the sharif, not to fight; another – that their animals were too exhausted to participate in fighting. Mesopotamian officers incited Muslim soldiers sent by the French not to fight their Turkish Muslim brethren, some of them going so far as to laud the Ottomans killed in combat as martyrs.

Nor did Mesopotamians feel any greater empathy towards the non-Arabian participants in the revolt, who, too, were shipped to Arabia by the British; relations with Syrian officers were especially acrimonious, as both groups vied for greater power and influence in the sharifian armies.⁸⁰ Indeed, disharmony among the revolt's constituent elements was a reflection of the wider attitude of the Arabic-speaking peoples towards the sharifian venture: 'The Syrian, from the height of his education and "refinement" looks down on the bedouin in his "dirt and sand" as being beyond real consideration, while the bedouin in turn despises the effeminacy of the Syrian.'⁸¹ Egyptians were particularly loathed by the Arabians. On several occasions the sharif and his sons expressed their preference for Sudanese over Egyptian troops; and the Egyptian forces sent to the Hijaz were given a rough and humiliating treatment by the bedouins: they were denied basic foodstuffs, were occasionally fired at, and their military preparations were often obstructed (a popular bedouin pastime, for example, was to empty sandbags filled by the Egyptians and to steal the sacks). 'Most of the Egyptians are left to the mercy of the Arabs who are doubtful allies and putting up the rottenest fighting and making us responsible for the result,' Lt.-Colonel Pierce Joyce, who served with the sharif's forces throughout much of the war, pleaded for greater British involvement in the revolt.⁸²

If the sharif's false political pretences constituted the legitimation for his inflated territorial demands, exaggerated descriptions of his military prowess served as an important catalyst in securing British acceptance of these demands.

Already in his above-mentioned meetings with Storrs before the war, Abdullah presented the Hijaz as 'perfectly capable of defending itself from Turks and non-Turks on its own' and boasted that 'we are masters of our country and will drive out all foreigners from her territory'.⁸³ More ostentatious claims were made by Hussein himself. In his letter to McMahon on 18 February 1916 he alluded to the possibility of harnessing some 100,000 Arab troops in the Ottoman army to his revolt, apart from his own Hijaz forces, despite his keen awareness that this was not to be. He would later give consistently fantastic figures of his military potential, claiming at times to have raised as many as 250,000 men;⁸⁴ and as if to add insult to injury the Hashemites would also accuse Britain of failing to meet her financial and material commitments to the revolt, thus preventing the Arab forces from materializing their full military potential.⁸⁵

These claims had of course nothing to do with reality. The sharif's military capabilities were a far cry from the boisterous picture he painted to his British interlocutors. His poorly-trained and ill-equipped puny force, of some 10,000–15,000 tribesmen of shifty loyalty, was in no position to take on the Turks without British support; and the latter not only did not renege on their promises to the sharif but actually saved his revolt from immediate collapse and sustained it for as long as it lasted – and at a far higher financial and material cost than Cairo officialdom had ever imagined when embarking on their Arabian adventure.

As early as July 1916, a month after proclaiming his revolt, the sharif was panicking. He had managed to capture his home town of Mecca, and, with the help of British naval and air bombardments, the port town of Jeddah; but other urban centers, notably Taif and Medina remained impregnable to bedouin assaults (the former falling to the sharif on 23 September 1916; the latter holding out till the end of the war). The carriage of supplies to the sharif's army had broken down and his men were deserting him in droves for the Turks, who could feed them. In a meeting with Colonel Cyril Wilson, the British representative with the sharif, at the end of August 1916, Faisal, the sharif's third son, was in a dark mood. He blamed his father for failing to grasp the severity of the situation and revealed that he had cautioned against starting the revolt before July–August 1916 at the earliest, only to be ignored by the sharif. He then warned that he would be 'quite unable to hold up the Turks if they made an effort on a large scale to break through to Mecca' and pleaded that 'Great Britain would help quickly and to the utmost limit'. A week later Faisal was more specific:

could Britain land forces in the port town of Rabigh, whose sheikh, Hussein Ibn Mubarak, remained loyal to the Turks?⁸⁶

The British were not unduly alarmed by the spreading panic in the sharif's camp. 'So long as this does not go too far there would be no harm in the Sharif suffering a mild check', assessed the *Arab Bulletin*, the Arab Bureau's confidential intelligence bulletin, probably reflecting some mild prickings of conscience over the excessive pledges to the sharif. 'He will be more modest and accommodating if he realizes more closely that he is dependent on our aid for success'.⁸⁷ This proved to be wishful thinking, not unlike earlier fanciful dreams of Cairo. Just as the sharif's perennial weakness had not prevented him from extracting extravagant territorial concessions from McMahon before launching his revolt, so it was not to stand in his way to materializing them now: on 31 October 1916, he faced Britain with a *fait accompli* by proclaiming himself King of the Arabs.

This was a preposterous claim. The revolt not only failed to elicit any support in the Arabic-speaking world: it was on the verge of total collapse. At the time when Hussein chose to give his grandiose ambitions a regal expression, he was pleading for the dispatch of a British brigade to the Hijaz to prevent a Turkish advance on Mecca. His second son, Abdullah, went so far as to threaten to defect to the Turks, who in his contention were prepared to accept all the sharif's demands, unless the brigade was immediately sent.⁸⁸

Though the British did not give in to this extortionism, they were forced to take a firmer control over the conduct of the revolt and to accelerate the influx of funds and equipment to the bottomless pit of the sharifian enterprise. By way of deceiving the British into the belief in the revolt's cost-effectiveness, in February 1916 the sharif pitched his material needs at the 'modest' level of 5,000 rifles and £50,000 in gold to pay his troops. Within three months, before fighting had even begun, this substantial sum had been already spent and the sharif came back for an additional £50,000 for himself, as well as £10,000 for Abdullah (who had already received £3,000 in gold); and more was to come. In a meeting with a British delegation to the Hijaz on 6 June, a day after the outbreak of the revolt, Zeid, the sharif's youngest son, raised his father's demands much further: he now needed a monthly subsidy of £130,000 'in order that the nations may be attracted to us and cherish good feelings towards us'; three weeks later this figure was adjusted to £125,000.

The Foreign Office found this demand 'somewhat excessive'; but since considerable British resources had already been committed to the sharifian cause, they relented and decided to approve the requested sum 'for the present'. By November 1916 the sharif had already received some 35,000 rifles (in addition to heavier military equipment operated by Egyptian

soldiers), over 4,000 tons of foodstuffs, and £773,000 worth of gold; within the first year of the revolt the sharif received some 170,000 rifles, far more than his forces could ever use, and about £2 million worth of gold, with his monthly subsidy shooting from £125,000 to £200,000 (forty times the size of Ibn Saud's subsidy and one hundred times that of Idrisi!).⁸⁹

Indeed, it was the glitter of British gold and the promise of booty that rallied the Hijaz bedouins behind the sharif, not the lofty ideals of freedom or national liberation; many would disappear once remunerated, or forget everything about fighting once falling upon a caravan. Lengthy negotiations between the sharif's sons and some of even the smaller tribes on the terms of remuneration caused long delays in military operations; widespread desertions of tribes over the issue of material gain remained a common phenomenon up to the latest stages of the revolt.⁹⁰ 'In this part of the world, gold is now so plentiful that the British sovereign may almost be said to be the unit of coinage', observed Major Herbert Garland, a military adviser to the sharif's army; and T.E. Lawrence echoed this assertion. 'The Sharif is feeding not only his fighting men but their families, and this is the fattest time the tribes have ever known,' he reported in November 1916. 'Nothing else would have maintained a nomad force for five months in the field.' He knew what he was talking about: nearly half-a-century later he would still be remembered by bedouins as 'the man with the gold'.⁹¹ Even the sharif's own sons were not blind to the shine of gold. 'The King has promised £100,000 to Faisal whenever he shall definitely have broken the railway between Maan and Medina', reported Lawrence in October 1917. 'And Faisal intends to make an effort very soon to earn this reward once and for all.'⁹² And the British advisers resorted to similar techniques in enticing the sharif's sons into action. 'Sharif Faisal was justly pleased with your letter', wrote Joyce, the most senior British officer in Faisal's army, to Clayton in September 1917,

only Lawrence and I did a dreadful thing and only gave him £10,000 instead of £50,000. The other £40,000 remains on the humber to be given to him as occasion arises. We have been through so many of these critical moments when we have been told success or failure depends on a few thousands that we know the absolute necessity of a certain amount at short call and therefore dared to keep back the above amount.⁹³

Yet for all their exorbitant material investments and the exertions of their military advisers the British (and the French, who sent a military mission to the Hijaz under the command of Colonel Edouard Brémont) failed to build the sharifian forces into an orderly and coherent army capable to conducting large scale operations. The tribesmen proved hopelessly immune to any

concept of orderly warfare, taking fighting in their own leisurely stride. They would break for coffee in the middle of an operation; would drop off occasionally to see their families; often a whole clan would tire of fighting and take a rest. They would attack small and lightly armed Turkish garrisons but would disperse in panic when confronted with a significant force, or even upon hearing gun thunder.

This cavalier style, to be sure, did not make the bedouins anything like the formidable guerrilla fighters portrayed in Lawrence's romanticized *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. To the contrary, the numerous reports by British advisers attached to the sharifian forces – including Lawrence himself! – reveal a distinct lack of appreciation for their trainees' guerrilla credentials. The bedouins managed to rip off considerable stretches of the Hijaz railroad (which were quickly repaired in most instances) and to derail a number of Turkish locomotives; but this meant little beyond 'the melodramatic advertisement of Faisal's cause', to use the words of General Sir Edmund Allenby, Commander-in Chief of the Egyptian Expedition force;⁹⁴ and in any event, a more professional and technically capable commando force could have inflicted far greater damage with the same amount of resources.

Thus, for example, during a six-day raid in the autumn of 1917, Lawrence had 'to adjudicate in twelve cases of assault with weapons, four camel-thefts, one marriage-settlement, fourteen feuds, two evil eyes, and a bewitchment. These affairs take up all one's time.' Once the train was derailed, 'the plundering occupied all the energies of our Bedouins, and Turkish counter-attacks came up unopposed from N. and S'.⁹⁵ And Herbert Garland, a versatile professional soldier who taught the rebels the art of guerrilla warfare – from musketry to explosives, to signalling, to digging trenches – was far less tolerant of bedouin operational incompetence than his romantic compatriot. 'Military work of any kind is difficult even with the best of Arabs,' he reported after a raid on the Hijaz railway line in February 1917. 'They continually incur unnecessary risks by their stupid conduct, such as singing and shouting within hearing of the enemy, and approaching enemy positions (as the party did on the railway line) up the middle of the broad wadis that could be overlooked for miles by any outpost on the top of a hill'.

And again:

The Arabs carry out only such parts of his schemes and ideas as suit them and often flatly refuse to make alterations when one points out that they are doing something in the wrong way.

In addition to the tactical errors the parties make in approaching the line and which cause the British Officer worry as to the ultimate success, the Ageyl or others have neglected to tie on their charge in

spite of specially cut twine being given them, have been found to throw away some of their explosives so as to have less to do, to put several slabs on one rail and to light only a portion of the charges they fix.⁹⁶

Lt.-Colonel Stewart Newcombe and Major Charles Vickery, who joined the British military mission early in 1917, identified the same operational problems with the bedouins: total lack of punctuality, slow pace of movement, considerable incompetence in the use of explosives, tactical carelessness and haphazard completion of tasks. 'As irregular armies confining themselves to guerrilla operations they are a force of some potential value,' reported Vickery, but only so; in the meantime, Faisal's army 'only embarked on a four days' march, due north, parallel to the coast line, and within twenty miles of it, a great part ... lost its way and arrived at the rendezvous two days late'.⁹⁷ And Newcombe's personal experience in leading bedouin demolition raids did not differ from that of his colleagues. 'On arrival the 40 Ageyl, each man with 8 lbs (320 charges) bolted off to the line,' he reported on one occasion,

At 4.45 am the first charges went off, followed by 48 others, and back came the Ageyl in great glee and not a man had a charge left. This means that 271 lbs of explosive have been left on the line, simply wasted. Enough ... to have kept the line out for 10 days.⁹⁸

Nor were the sharif's sons endowed with the necessary military leadership to effect this necessary transformation of their tribal fighters. Abdullah, by far the brightest, best educated, and most political among them, had no penchant for the art of war. In the account of T.E. Lawrence, who spent some time in his camp early in 1917, Abdullah took 'little interest in the war in the Hijaz' instead spending his time 'in reading the Arabic newspapers, in eating, and sleeping, and especially in jesting with one Muhammad Hassan, an old Yemeni from Taif'. This jesting did actually occupy much of Abdullah's day and all his evening hours. With his friends he 'stabbed [Hassan] with thorns, stoned him, dropped sun-heated pebbles down his back, set him on fire ... Once Abdullah shot a coffee-pot off his head thrice from twenty yards, and then rewarded his long-suffering servility with three months' pay'.⁹⁹

The military credentials of Ali, the sharif's eldest son, did not win the admiration of his British advisers either. Lawrence found him 'too clean ... much the prey of any constant companion', and Joyce thought him a weak commander led by his own officers.¹⁰⁰ Even Faisal, who took the main brunt of the sharifian campaign, and Lawrence's fancy, was 'a timid man, [who] hated running into danger' and who was 'swayed by his surroundings'.¹⁰¹ 'I

see that all of you ... are urging me to advance quickly for destroying the railway between Tabuq and Madain Saleh while I did not fulfill the promise which I gave to three tribes which will join my army and help me against the common enemy,' he pleaded with Colonel Wilson at the end of March 1917. 'Therefore I beg you to assist me to get rid of this difficulty as you did several times before. I am sure that your Excellency does not wish me to be exposed to abuse etc., in case my promise is not fulfilled.' At the same time he rushed a desperate plea to Lawrence, then in Abdullah's camp: 'My dear affectionate friend, May God protect you. I am waiting for your coming back ... You are much needed' here ... I am in a very great complication which I had never experienced.'¹⁰²

Had the sharifian forces been orchestrated into a coherent regular army, they could have swiftly evicted the Ottoman forces from the Hijaz. The two armies were not dissimilar in size at the beginning of the rising, but the former enjoyed the marked advantage of regular British supplies of arms, provisions and fighting personnel from among the prisoners of war captured in Mesopotamia and Gallipoli, while the latter were increasingly severed from all sources of supply. Moreover, the Turkish forces were concentrated in several isolated strongholds, which precluded the possibility of a coordinated military effort and gave the mobile sharifian forces the opportunity to achieve overwhelming local superiority in men and firepower in places of their choice. As things were, the rebels failed to capture the strategic holy city of Medina, which held out to the end of the war as a monument of sharifian impotence, and it would be only in July 1917, more than a year after the start of the revolt, that they would overcome the meager Ottoman resistance and capture the port town of Aqaba, on the extreme north-westerly point of the Arabian Peninsula. Their subsequent advances, which brought them to Damascus at the end of the war, were a mere offspring of Allenby's brilliant Palestine offensive; and even they were achieved by the semi-regular forces, built by the British from among the prisoners of war shipped to Arabia, which by then had become the mainstay of Faisal's army.¹⁰³ All in all, contemporary British intelligence reports of Arab combat performance remained scathing up to the final days of the revolt:

The Bedouin forces have been proved incapable of either attacking, or withstanding an attack from disciplined troops, and the successes they have so far achieved [by mid-June 1917], if we except the capture of Taif, which was completely isolated and starved into submission, have been those of a guerrilla nature; and although the

military situation has frequently demanded decisive action, this has not been forthcoming through lack of the most elementary disciplined behavior ...

The Arab regular troops, on whose recruitment, equipment, and training so much has been expended, remain an inefficient and unreliable element of both armies [i.e., Faisal's and Abdullah's]. Their material is in great part bad, because it is drawn from unwarlike settled populations like the Meccans, or from races with little sense of discipline, like the Hijaz *fellahin*, or from former constituents of the Ottoman army, serving voluntarily after being prisoners of war, but mostly of indifferent morale, insubordinate, or influenced by divergent political aims. The old antagonism of Syria versus Iraq is rife in the army, and both elements disagree with the Hijazis. Officers are more seriously affected by this partisan spirit than their men, and, with a few exceptions, they have proved an almost worthless lot, under whom troops have little chance of being either trained or led to any good military purpose.¹⁰⁴

Negotiating under false political and military pretences was not the only act of commission by the sharif and his sons; flirtation with the Ottoman authorities in tandem with their negotiations with Britain was equally illustrative of their ruthless opportunism. Thus, for example, when in November 1914 Abdullah informed Kitchener of his father's 'awaiting a colorable pretext' to break with the Ottoman Empire, Hussein was showering his Turkish masters with enthusiastic pledges of support. In January 1915 he even sent a military force headed by his eldest son, Ali, to participate in the attack on the Suez Canal; and had it not been for the last-moment withdrawal of this force following Ali's accidental discovery of a Turkish plot to assassinate the sharif and his sons, Hussein might have well found himself involved in fighting against Britain.¹⁰⁵

Nor did the sharif stop his dealings with the Turks once engaged in elaborate negotiations with MacMahon; to the contrary, the more he extracted from the High Commissioner, the bolder his demands from his Turkish suzerain became. Ibn Saud's claim that the sharif was trying 'to play off Britain against Turkey and to get the Turks to grant him independence which would be guaranteed by Germany' goes probably one step too far, since Hussein took great care to conceal his secret dealings from his Ottoman masters;¹⁰⁶ yet the sharif's conduct leaves no doubt as to his determination to secure himself the best possible bargain, from either side, come what may.

In mid-March 1916, he sent a telegram to Minister of War Enver Pasha, the most powerful member of the Turkish leadership. Styling himself as

champion of the 'Arab nation', a habit that had by now become second nature, he argued that Arab participation in the war was vital for Ottoman success and stated three conditions for bringing about such an eventuality: general amnesty for all political prisoners arrested and tried in Syria; autonomy for Syria; and, last but not least, the making of the Sharifate of Mecca hereditary in his family. 'Were these demands to be met', Hussein promised, 'the Arab nation will dutifully fulfil its obligations; and I undertake to gather the Arab tribes for Jihad, under the command of my sons, in the territories of Iraq and Palestine'. Otherwise, he would content himself with wishing the Empire the best of luck in her war.¹⁰⁷

Since the sharif was at the time a party to a principal understanding with Britain to launch a revolt, on account of which he had been promised far-reaching material and territorial gains, his overture to Enver was nothing but an unscrupulous act of double-dealing. Had his demands been accepted, Hussein would have had no further use for his British interlocutors: his Hijaz base would have been secured indefinitely and he would have become at a stroke the most prominent figure in the Arabic-speaking world;¹⁰⁸ and all this without firing a single shot, let alone running the risks attending the collusion with Britain.

Indeed, in March 1916 Hussein was apparently having second thoughts regarding his ability to deliver the promised revolt. Shortly before approaching Enver, he had written to McMahon to ask that Britain parallel the proclamation of the desert revolt with 'an attack on some parts of the Syrian coast in order to encourage the people and destroy the hostile forces there'.¹⁰⁹ He must have been aware of the absurdity of his proposition. Had Britain been capable of executing this gambit on its own, which could have delivered the knock-out blow to the Ottoman Empire, it would not have needed the sharifian revolt in the first place: the latter's foremost attraction being its (false) promise of setting the Levant ablaze; and it was precisely this gnawing uncertainty about the British response to his escalating demands that made the Turkish option so appealing to the sharif.

In the event, Hussein's mind was made up for him in Istanbul and Cairo. Ignoring his incredible demand, the British continued their preparations for the revolt as if nothing had happened: on 1 May 1916, the first consignment of arms and supplies left Suez on its way to the Hijaz via Port Sudan. The Turks, by contrast, were infuriated. Enver told Hussein that he had no business to advise his suzerain on questions of grand strategy and instructed him peremptorily to send his tribesmen to the front, as he had promised, or face the consequences;¹¹⁰ and as if to underscore the seriousness of Enver's intentions Hussein was informed of the imminent arrival of a 3,000-strong Turkish force in the Hijaz on its way to the Yemen. This was the final straw for the sharif. Fearful of Turkish retaliation he opted for the spectacular, if

somewhat precarious gains offered by the British alliance: on 5 June 1916, without completing his war preparations or giving his British allies an early notice the sharif launched his revolt.

This, nevertheless, was not the last Hashemite bid for a separate deal behind the back of their British ally; far more intricate negotiations with the Ottoman authorities were to take place during the revolt itself. Only this time it was the Ottomans who approached the Hashemites and not the other way round, and their primary interlocutor was Faisal, who led the sharifian thrust into the Levant, rather than Hussein himself.

Ottoman attempts to detach the Hashemites from the Allied side were apparently made within months from the start of the revolt, gaining momentum in the winter of 1917 following a string of military setbacks in Palestine, culminating in the loss of Jerusalem in December. Already in April 1917 the Allies received unconfirmed reports that the Turks were willing to offer Hussein a spiritual caliphate without temporal power.¹¹¹ Then in December the sharif passed to the British three letters, of one-month old, from Djemal Pasha to Abdullah, to Faisal, and to Faisal's military commander, Jaafar al-Askari, a former Ottoman officer who deserted to the sharif after being captured by the British in February 1916. Invoking the Anglo-French-Russian agreement on the partition of the Ottoman Empire (the Sykes-Picot Agreement), whose substance the newly established Soviet Government had just disclosed, Djemal sought to convince the three of their ally's perfidy. 'There is only one standpoint from which your revolt can be justified in the interests of the Arabs,' he wrote to Faisal,

and that is the possibility of establishing an independent Arab Government, which would secure the independence, dignity and splendour of Islam under its influence. But what sort of an independence can you conceive in an Arab Government to be established [he continued], after Palestine has become an international country, as the Allied Governments have openly and officially declared, with Syria completely under French domination and with Iraq and the whole of Mesopotamia forming part and parcel of British possessions?¹¹²

Why Hussein chose to pass Djemal's letters to the British is not entirely clear. It was certainly not due to his shock and disgust at the invocation of the Sykes-Picot agreement, the existence and general gist of which he had known for several months.¹¹³ Perhaps he wanted to demonstrate his loyalty so as to strengthen his hand in the debate over the postwar territorial

arrangements, which he knew was bound to ensue; perhaps he was signalling that he now had the option of making a separate peace with Turkey; or perhaps the sharif was using the British to bridle the burgeoning ambitions of Faisal, which threatened his own dream of a great Arab empire.

Indeed, as the revolt rolled northward, relations between father and son became increasingly strained. Placed under Allenby's command in the autumn of 1917, and thus less susceptible to his father's influence; spellbound by the charismatic Lawrence and his megalomaniacal dreams of creating a new Arab empire; and agitated by his Syrian and Iraqi officers, Faisal began toying with the idea of winning his own separate Syrian kingdom. He repeatedly complained that 'his father and brothers are taking no interest in the Syrian movement',¹¹⁴ and lost no opportunity to spread his personal influence among the Transjordanian and Syrian tribes.

In these circumstances, it was quite natural for Faisal to pick up the gauntlet thrown by Djemal. In late December he sent a draft reply to his father for approval suggesting that Hussein mediate a separate Anglo-Turkish peace, 'provided the Turks would agree to evacuate certain places (to be specified by His Majesty's Government)'; when his proposal was thrown back at him by his father and Reginald Wingate, now High Commissioner in Egypt, Faisal established secret contacts not only with Djemal but also with Mustafa Kemal, hero of Gallipoli and some time commander of the Turkish 7th army;¹¹⁵ neither the sharif nor the British were informed. In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* Lawrence put a typically romantic gloss on these contacts, portraying them as a clever ploy to widen the rift between the 'nationalist' and 'Islamist' factions of the Turkish leadership; and in his account the trick worked brilliantly: 'At first we were offered autonomy for Hijaz. Then Syria was admitted to the benefit: then Mesopotamia. Faisal seemed still not content; so Djemal's deputy (while his master was in Constantinople) boldly added a Crown to the offered share of Hussein of Mecca. Lastly, they told us they saw logic in the claim of the prophet's family to the spiritual leadership of Islam!'¹¹⁶

The truth was of course far less savory. Faisal was not engaged in a brilliant feat of divisive diplomacy but rather in a shadowy exercise in duplicity; and none knew this better than Lawrence, who whole-heartedly endorsed this illicit adventure and kept most of its contours hidden from his own superiors. As he would tell one of biographers years later, reluctantly admitting that Faisal had hidden much of his double-dealing even from him, the latter was 'definitely 'selling us''.¹¹⁷ There was no rift to widen between Djemal and Kemal: the two were at the time aligned in opposition to the military strategy of Enver and his German advisers; besides, Kemal had not yet evolved into the type of Turkish 'nationalist' described by Lawrence;

this attitudinal change would come only later in the day. Nor were the wholesale Turkish concessions recounted by Lawrence actually made; had they been – Faisal might have well seized them, as he had occasionally intimated to his British advisers. Thus a letter to the German Ambassador at Constantinople from Franz Papen, a latter-day chancellor and then staff officer with the Ottoman forces in Syria, indicates that as late as 24 May 1918, the Turks still expected a ‘cheap’ bargain with the Hashemites: ‘Djemal Pasha, my Army commander, like Tessim Bey, is convinced that an understanding could be reached even without a settlement of the caliphate question. It would be enough to provide the Sharif with an autonomous position in Mecca and Medina; the Syrian question would not be disturbed by such a settlement;’ so, no sweeping concessions had as yet been made.¹¹⁸

Djemal’s optimism is not difficult to understand. On 21 March, Germany had launched a major offensive in France, forcing Allenby to send some of his formations to Europe and to inform Faisal that he could not ‘look for British cooperation east of the Jordan, beyond, possibly, an occasional and rapid raid’.¹¹⁹ Then two British attacks in north-western Transjordan were decisively beaten at the end of March and in late April respectively, leading to a sharp surge in Turkish morale. ‘At the present day, the Ottoman government, the mightiest representative of Islam, over the greatest enemies of the Muhammadan religion’, Djemal wrote Faisal. ‘I am persuaded that I am honouring the Prophet’s name by inviting His most excellent and noble grandson to participate in the protection of Islam ... I feel sure that we shall be able to fulfil the wishes of all Arabs’.¹²⁰ On 10 June, without informing Lawrence, Faisal sent his conditions for peace with Turkey:

- a. Withdrawal of all Turkish forces in Medina and south of Amman to Amman;
- b. the return of all Arab officers and men serving in the Turkish army in Anatolia and Rumelia to Syria and their enlistment in the Arab army;
- c. should the Arab and Turkish army fight side by side against the common enemy, the Arab Army would be under its own commander;
- d. Syria’s future relationship with Turkey would be modelled on the relationship between Prussia, Austria, and Hungary;
- e. all supplies and foodstuffs in Syria should remain there and placed under the control of the Arab Army.¹²¹

Why Faisal lumped together Prussia and Austria-Hungary? The secret societies, with which he had maintained contacts in 1915–16, had long toyed with the notion of Turco-Arab dualism on the lines of the Austro-Hungarian model, and Faisal was probably recycling their idea, with his

own (irrelevant) addition of Prussia. It is clear, however, that in limiting his proposed arrangement to Syria, which he had doubtlessly earmarked for himself, Faisal was effectively accepting qualified Turkish sovereignty in his own domain, and unqualified such rule in other Arabic-speaking territories, such as Mesopotamia. Indeed, as Djemal continued to push toward a *rapprochement*, in August 1918 Faisal scaled down his envisaged Turco-Arab political framework: now he was talking in terms of decentralization rather than full independence, something akin to Bavaria's existence as a separate kingdom within the German Empire. The Turks declined the proposal; the talks advanced no further.¹²²

Even if one accepts Lawrence's handy quip that 'all is fair in love, war and alliance',¹²³ the Hashemite negotiations with their Turkish masters, both prior to the revolt and in its course, were incredible for no other reason than that they exposed the falsehood of their own nationalist pretensions. Had the sharif's demands from Enver in the spring of 1916 been met, the revolt might have been averted altogether;¹²⁴ had Faisal had his way with the Turkish leadership two years later, the revolt might have well ended at that point; either way, the Turks would have maintained their rule over most of their Arabic-speaking subjects in one form or another, though the Hashemites would have risen to dynastic prominence.

For all the high rhetoric of Arab independence in which Hussein couched his correspondence with McMahon, his behavior throughout the revolt showed a far smaller interest in Arab liberation than in the establishment of his own kingdom, which was to extend well beyond the predominantly Arabic-speaking territories; as the sharif told Lawrence in the summer of 1917: 'If advisable we will pursue the Turks to Constantinople and Erzurum – so why talk about Beiruth, Aleppo and Hailo?'¹²⁵

Hussein had demonstrated no nationalist sentiments prior to the war, when he had been considered a loyal Ottoman *apparatchik* both by his immediate Arabian neighbours and by the Arab secret societies operating in the Levant and Mesopotamia; and neither he nor his sons changed their stand during the revolt. They did not regard themselves as part of a wider 'Arab nation', bound together by a shared language, religion, history, or culture; like other imperialists before them, they held themselves superior to those whom they were 'destined' to rule and educate: it was the 'white man's burden', Hijaz style.

Faisal, for one, was disparaging of nearly all other Arabic-speaking communities. Yemenites in his view were the most docile and easy to hold and to rule among Arabs: 'To imprison an officer his Sheikh had only to

knot a thin string about his neck, and state his sentence, and the man would henceforward follow him about, with pretensions of innocence and appeals to be set at liberty.' Egyptians were 'weather cocks, with no political principle except dissatisfaction, and intent only on pleasure and money getting; Sudanese – 'ignorant negroes, armed with broad bladed spears, and bows, and shields'; Iraqis – 'unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities ... and prone to anarchy'.¹²⁶

The sharif was similarly contemptuous of non-Hijazis. By way of executing his revolt and running his nascent administrative system he had to rely on a steady influx of non-Arabian officers and soldiers from British prisoner camps, and to a lesser extent on Arab deserters from the Turkish army; but he liked it not a bit. He had no minimal trust in his 'Arab brethren', least of all the officers among them, and took great care to prevent their entrenchment in positions of influence. When in early 1918 he was asked to send a representative for negotiations in London, the sharif insisted on the latter being a Hijazi, even if he did not speak a single word of English;¹²⁷ similarly, when in August 1918 Jaafar al-Askari, commander-in-chief of Faisal's army, was decorated by the British for his military exploits, Hussein had the rebel newspaper, *al-Qibla*, publish a statement belittling the latter's military standing; this stirred a mini-rebellion in Faisal's army which was only defused with great effort and through British intervention.

These were the peoples the sharif had earmarked as his future subjects; and as far as he was concerned they were not being freed from Turkish imperial control to be left on their own but rather to be incorporated into a vast new empire: only this would be headed by a Hashemite rather than an Ottoman; hence his attempt to face ally and foe alike with a *fait accompli* by proclaiming himself 'King of the Arabs'; and hence his incessant pleas with Britain to goad his Arabian neighbors into becoming his subjects rather than seek full independence.¹²⁸ As David Hogarth of the Cairo Arab Bureau, who in January 1918 held ten extensive interviews with the sharif in the span of one week, put it: 'It is obvious that the King regards Arab Unity as synonymous with his own Kingship.'¹²⁹

Whether or not these imperial ambitions were amenable to the sharif's future subjects was immaterial. Their capacity to grasp their real political and social needs was deemed too limited to allow them to master their own destiny; only Hussein, scion of the Prophet, member of the noblest family in Arabia, could direct their new destinies. As he told David Hogarth in a rare moment of truthfulness, momentarily shedding the false pretences he had donned throughout his years of dealing with Britain,

Arabs as a whole have not asked him to be their King; but seeing how

ignorant and disunited they are, how can this be expected of them until he is called? ... Who else in Arabia, Syria, or Iraq stands enough above his fellows to be King of the whole? Indeed, in Syria and Iraq, who conceivably be elected even to local sovereignty? There is, in fact, no one.¹³⁰

NOTES

1. For the classic exposition of this view see George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (London, 1938); Amin Said, *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya al-Kubra* [The Great Arab Revolt] (Cairo, 1934); Suleiman Musa, *al-Haraka al-Arabiyya* [The Arab Movement] (Beirut, 1970); Abu Khaldun Sati al-Husri, *Yawm Maisalun: Safha min Tarikh al-Arab al-Hadith* [The Day of Maisalun: a Page from the Modern History of the Arabs] (revised edition, Beirut, 1964). See also Abdullah Ibn Hussein, *Mudhakkirati* [Memoirs] (Jerusalem, 1945) (and the abridged English version *Memoirs of King Abdullah*, Jerusalem, 1945); Zaki Hazem Nuseibeh, *The Ideas of Arab Nationalism* (Ithaca, 1956); Zeine N. Zeine, *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism with a Background Study of Arab-Turkish Relations in the Near East* (2nd. rev. ed., Beirut, 1966).
2. For Western subscription to this standard misconception see, for example, Mrs. Stuart [Beatrice Caroline] Erskine, *King Faisal of Iraq: an Authorised and Authentic Study* (London, 1933); Mary C. Wilson, 'The Hashemites, the Arab Revolt, and Arab Nationalism', in Rashid Khalidi, Lisa Anderson, Muhammad Muslih and Reeve Simon (eds.), *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York, 1991), pp.204–21 (see also articles by Khalidi and Ochsenwald in the same volume); George Lenczowski, *The Middle East in World Affairs* (Ithaca, 1980, 4th edition), pp.58–59, 79–87; George Kirk, *A Short History of the Middle East: from the Rise of Islam to Modern Times* (New York, 1963), Chapter 5.
3. The foremost exponent of this view is Ernest Dawn: *From Ottomanism to Arabism: Essays on the Origins of Arab Nationalism* (Urbana, 1973); and his 'The Origins of Arab Nationalism', in R. Khalidi et al. (eds.), *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, pp.3–31. For an uncritical acceptance of this position see, for example, Philip Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: the Politics of Damascus 1806–1920* (Cambridge, 1983), pp.76–8.
4. The most formidable critic of this mythologized historiography has been Elie Kedourie. See, for example, his: *England and the Middle East. The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire 1914 – 1921* (London, 1956); *The Chatham House Version and Other Middle Eastern Studies*, (London, 1970); and, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: The McMahon–Husayn Correspondence and Its Interpretations 1914–1939* (Cambridge, 1976).
5. *Correspondence between Sir Henry McMahon, His Majesty's High Commissioner at Cairo, and the Sherif of Mecca July 1915–March 1916*, Presented by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to Parliament by Command of His Majesty, Cmd. 5957, London, 1939, p.3 (hereafter Correspondence).
6. Lowther to Foreign Office, 24 Nov. 1908 FO 371/561.
7. Abdullah, *Mudhakkirati*, pp.18–20; Musbah Haidar, *Arabesque* (London, 1945), pp.59, 80; George Stitt, *A Prince of Arabia* (London, 1948), pp.115–16, 137.
8. 'Emir Abdullah's account of his conversations with Lord Kitchener, transmitted with notes by Mr. George Antonius', in G.P. Gooch and H. Temperley (eds.), *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898–1914* (London, 1936), Vol.X, Part 2, pp.831–32; Abdullah, *Mudhakkirati*, pp.71–72; Amin Said, *Asrar al-Thawra al-Arabiyya al-kubra wa Mas'at al-Sharif Hussein* [Secrets of the Great Arab Revolt and Sharif Hussein's Tragedy] (Beirut, n.d.), p.35; and his, *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya*, Vol.I, p.125.
9. Kitchener to Grey, 6 Feb. 1914, in Gooch and Temperley (eds.), *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, Vol.X, Part 2, p.827; Ronald Storrs, *Orientalism* (London, 1939), pp.129–30. For Abdullah's version see: Musa, *al-Haraka al-Arabiyya*, pp.66–72; and his edited volume, *al-Murasalat al-Tarikhiyya 1914–1918* [Historical Correspondence

- 1914–1918] (Beirut 1970), Vol.I, pp.21–22.
9. Ronald Storrs, 'Note', 19 April 1914, in Chetham's despatch on 13 Dec. 1914, FO 371/1973/87396; Storrs, *Orientations*, pp.129–30; Kitchener to Grey, 4 April 1914, and Kitchener to Tyrrell, 26 April 1914, in Gooch and Temperley, *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, Vol.X, Part 2, pp.830–31. See also: Abdullah, *Mudhakkirati*, pp.71–3; Said, *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya*, Vol.I, pp.125–7.
 10. Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*, p.5.
 11. Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism*, p.51.
 12. FO 371/2139/52598, 24 Sept. 1914.
 13. Cheetham to Foreign Office, 13 Dec. 1914, FO 371/1973/87396. For slightly different versions of the message see: Secretary of State to Viceroy, Foreign Department, 14 Dec. 1914, FO 371/2139/83620; Arab Bureau, 'Summary of Historical Documents from the Outbreak of the War between Great Britain and Turkey 1914 to the Outbreak of the Revolt of the Sharif of Mecca in June 1916', Cairo, 26 Nov. 1916, WO 58/624, p.24.
 14. Arab Bureau, 'Summary of Historical Documents', p.25; Storrs, *Orientations*, p.159.
 15. See, for example, report by Reginald Wingate to Foreign Office, 14 Aug. 1914, FO 371/2486/112369; T.E. Lawrence's Diary, Yanbo, 2–5 Dec. 1916, FO 882/12, Arab Bureau Papers, p.15.
 16. For various accounts of the contacts between Hussein and the two secret societies, see: Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, Chapter 8; Said, *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya*, Vol.I, pp.107–10; Ahmad Izzat al-Azami, *al-Qadiyya al-Arabiyya: Asbabuha, Muqaddimatuha, Tatawuruha wa-Nataijuha* [The Arab Question: Its Causes, Advent, Development and Results] (Baghdad 1931–34), Vol.IV, pp.100–1; Ahmad Qadri, *Mudhakkirati an al-Thawra al-Arabiyya al-Kubra* [My Memoirs of the Great Arab Revolt] (Damascus, 1956), pp.46; Suleiman Musa, *al-Hussein Ibn Ali wa-l-Thawra al-Arabiyya al-Kubra* [Hussein Ibn Ali and the Great Arab Revolt] (Amman, 1957), pp.76–7; Erskine, *King Faisal*, pp.42–4.
 17. Wingate to Clayton, 12 July 1915, FO 882/12, p.106; Intelligence Office, War Office, Cairo, 'Statement of Mulasim Awal (Lieutenant) Mohammed Sherif El Farugi', FO 371/2486/157740, 25 Oct. 1915, p.4.
 18. For conflicting interpretations of the correspondence see, for example, *Report of a Committee set up to consider Certain Correspondence Between Sir Henry McMahon and The Sharif of Mecca in 1915 and 1916*, Cmd 5974, London, 1939; *Statements made on behalf of His Majesty's Government during the year 1918 in regard to the Future Status of certain parts of the Ottoman Empire*, Presented by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to Parliament by Command of His Majesty, Cmd. 5964, London, 1939; Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*; A.L. Tibawi, *A Modern History of Syria, Including Lebanon and Palestine* (London, 1969); and his *Anglo-Arab Relations and the Question of Palestine, 1914–1921* (London, 1977); Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, Chapters IX–X; Isaiah Friedman, 'The McMahon-Hussein Correspondence and the Question of Palestine', with comments by Arnold Toynbee and a response by the author, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.V, No.2 (1970), pp.83–122, and Vol.V, No.4 (1970), pp.185–201; Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism*, Chapter IV.
 19. Thus a translation from the unofficial Arabic text in Said, *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya*, Vol.I, p.131. The official British text, as well as Antonius' translation (p.414), refer to 'the Arab countries'. Yet the nature of Hussein's ambitions, as expressed both in his correspondence with McMahon and in his activities throughout the war and in its aftermath, leave little doubt that what he had in mind was a unified 'Arab state', or more precisely, empire, under his sole rule, rather than a confederation of Arab states, let alone a string of independent Arab states.
 20. *Correspondence*, p.3.
 21. Lawrence to Liddell Hart, as cited in *T.E. Lawrence to his Biographer Liddell Hart* (London, 1938), p.59.
 22. For the recommendations of the de Bunsen committee see: 'Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey', 13 June 1915, CAB 27/1.
 23. See, for example, Viscount Grey of Fallodon, *Twenty-Five Years* (New York, 1925), Vol.II, p.188; Raymond Poincaré, *Au Service de la France* (Paris, 1926–33), Vol.VI, p.94.

24. Communication by W. Aubry Herbert, MP, to Lord Kitchener, 30 Oct. 1915, FO 371/2486/164659.
25. T.E. Lawrence, 'Syria: the Raw Material' (written early in 1915 but not circulated), *Arab Bulletin*, No.44, 12 March 1917, FO/882/26.
26. *T.E. Lawrence to his Biographers Robert Graves and Liddell Hart* (London, 1963), p.101.
27. McMahon to Grey, 14 May 1915, FO 371/2486/60357.
28. D.G. Hogarth, 'Arabs and Turks', *The Arab Bulletin*, No.48, 21 April 1917, FO 882/26.
29. Note by Reginald Wingate, 25 Aug. 1915, FO 371/2486/138500.
30. Kedourie, *England and the Middle East*, p.53.
31. Grey to McMahon, 12 Jan. 1915, 371/2154/1286; British Minister in Sofia to Director of Military Operations, 1 July 1915, FO 371/2486/87220; Letter from Sir Mark Sykes on a meeting with Prince Sabah ed-din, 13 July 1915, FO 371/2486/93937.
32. Memorandum by Sir Thomas Holderness, 5 Jan. 1915, India Office Records, L/P & S/10/523 p.53/15.
33. Storrs to Fitzgerald, 6 Sept. 1915, PRO 30/57/47, QQ38 (Kitchener Papers). See also: Grey to Bertie, 23 March 1915, FO 371/2486/34982; Grey to McMahon, 14 April 1915, FO 371/2486/44598; McMahon to Grey, 14 May 1915, FO 371/2486/60357; India Office to Foreign Office, 24 June 1915, FO 371/2486/83311.
34. Storrs' commentary on Hussein's first letter, 19 Aug. 1914, FO 371/2486/125293.
35. Storrs, *Orientalism*, pp.160–1.
36. Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*, pp.34–8.
37. McMahon to Grey, 23 Aug. 1915, FO 371/2486/117236.
38. India Office to Foreign Office, 25 Aug. 1915, FO 371/2486/118580.
39. McMahon to Grey, 26 Aug. 1915, FO 371/2486/125293.
40. *Correspondence*, pp.2–3; Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, Appendix A, No.2, pp.415–16.
41. *Correspondence*, pp.5–7.
42. *Ibid.*, pp.8–9.
43. Grey to McMahon, 20 Oct. 1915, FO 371/2486/155203.
44. *Correspondence*, pp.9–11.
45. *Ibid.*, pp.11–12.
46. *Ibid.*, p.13.
47. *Ibid.*, p.14.
48. McMahon to Grey, 26 Oct. 1915, FO 371/2486/163832.
49. Storrs, *Orientalism*, p.160.
50. Gilbert Clayton, 'Memorandum regarding various conversations held with a certain Mulasim Awal (Lieutenant) Mohammed Sherif El Farugi', 11 Oct. 1915, FO 371/2486/157740, and 'Statement of Mulasim Awal (Lieutenant) Mohammed Sherif El Farugi', *ibid.*
51. See, for example, Eliezer Tauber, *The Arab Movements in World War I* (London, 1993), p.76; and his article, 'The role of Lieutenant Muhammad Sharif al-Faruqi – New Light on Anglo-Arab Relations during the First World War', *Asian and African Studies*, Vol.24 (1990), p.27.
52. For an archival examination of contemporary German activities in the Levant see Friedman, 'The McMahon–Hussein Correspondence', p.90.
53. Clayton, 'Memorandum'.
54. Maxwell to Kitchener, 12, 16 Oct. 1915, FO 371/2486/150309/152729.
55. McMahon to Grey, 20 Oct. 1915, FO 371/2486/152901. See also his telegram on 18 Oct., *ibid.*
56. Storrs to Fitzgerald, 12 Oct. 1915, PRO 30/57/47, Kitchener papers, QQ/46.
57. Kitchener to Maxwell, 13 Oct. 1915, FO 371/2486/150309.
58. Minute by George Clerk, 19 Oct. 1915, FO 371/2486/152901; and his comments on 20 Oct. 1915, FO 371/2486/154423.
59. McMahon to Grey, 26 Oct. 1915, FO 371/2486/158561.
60. Arab Bureau, 'Summary of Historical Documents', p.78.
61. As quoted in Kedourie, *The Chatham House Version*, p.19.
62. A similar criticism of Cairo officialdom is offered by Kedourie's 'Cairo and Khartoum on

- the Arab Question, 1915–1918', *The Historical Journal*, Vol.VII (1964), pp.280–97, and *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*. The fundamental difference between Kedourie and us, however, is that he considers the caliphate to be Hussein's object of desire while we deem it a means to the sharif's real goal: a Hashemite empire.
63. Storrs, 'Note', 19 April 1914, FO 371/1973/87396.
 64. Intelligence Department, War Office, 'Appreciation of Situation in Arabia', enclosed with Cheetham's despatch to Foreign Office, 7 Sept. 1914, FO 371/2140/51344; 'The Politics of Mecca', Jan. 1916, FO 141/461/1198.
 65. Said, *Asrar*, pp.57–9; Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, p.188.
 66. *Correspondence*, p.13.
 67. *Arab Bulletin*, No.6, 23 June 1916, p.47, and No.41, 6 Feb. 1917, pp.57–58, FO 882/25; McMahon to Grey, 20 Oct. 1915, FO 371/2486/154423; 'Intelligence Report', 28 Dec. 1916, FO 686/6, p.176.
 68. Major Gabriel, 'Note on Arab Movement', 13 Nov. 1915, FO 371/2486/177016, p.402; Tauber, *The Arab Movements*, pp.58–9.
 69. Note by P.Z. Cox on interviews with Ibn Saud on 26 Dec., and with Sheikh Mubarak of Kuwait, 31 Dec. 1915', FO 882/8; Note by Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi to Wingate, 8, 25 Sept. 1915, FO 371/2486/127420 & 138500.
 70. Grey to McMahon, 2 Nov.1915, FO 371/2486/163235; a petition to Grey from the 'Islamic Society', 5 June 1915, FO 371/2486/72671.
 71. See, for example, *Arab Bulletin*, No.9, 9 July 1916, pp.77–8; No.15, 10 Aug. 1916, pp.162–5; No.17, 30 Aug. 1916, p.195; No.34, 11 Dec. 1916, pp.521–5.
 72. *Al-Ahram*, 25 June 1916, as brought in *The Arab Bulletin*, No.7, 30 June 1916, p.57.
 73. See, for example, *Arab Bulletin*, No.7, 30 June 1916, pp.57–8; No.9, 9 July 1916, pp.78–80; note by Captain G.S. Symes, 'Egypt and ther Arab Movement', 14 Aug. 1917, FO 141/783/5317.
 74. *Arab Bulletin*, No.15, 10 Aug. 1916, p.157; No.22, 19 Sept. 1916, pp.279–81; No.26, 16 Oct. 1916, p.373.
 75. *Arab Bulletin*, No.25, 7 Oct. 1916, pp.338–9; Colonel Hamilton (Political Agent in Kuwait), 'Ibn Saud and His Neighbours', *Arab Bulletin*, No.92, 11 June 1918, pp.187–92; Report by Sir Percy Cox, 23 Dec. 1917, IOR L/P & S/10/388 (P5140), p.14.
 76. Philip S. Khouri, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: the Politics of Damascus 1860–1920*, (Cambridge, 1983), p.78.
 77. Muhammad Izzat Darwaza, *Hawla al-Haraka al-Arabiyya al-Haditha* [On the Modern Arab Movement] (Sidon, 1950), Vol.I, p.65; Muhammad Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism* (New York, 1988), Chapter 4.
 78. Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen, *Middle East Diary, 1917–1956* (London, 1959), p.7.
 79. Report on the Existing Political Condition in Palestine and Contiguous Areas by the Political Officer in Charge of the Zionist Commission, Aug. 1918, 27 Aug. 1918, FO 371/3395/147225, p.5 (231).
 80. For an in-depth discussion of the relations between the various Arab participants in the revolt see, Tauber, *The Arab Movements*, pp.102–21.
 81. *Arab Bulletin*, No.53, 14 June 1917, p.263. For further description of Arabian hostility towards Syrians see: T.E. Lawrence, *Secret Despatches from Arabia* (London, 1939), pp.39–40.
 82. Joyce to Rees Mogg, 12 Dec. 1916, Joyce Collection, Liddell Hart Military Archives, King's College London.
 83. Musa, *al-Haraka al-Arabiyya*, p.71.
 84. See, for example, Walton to Secretary of Government of India, 29 May 1916, FO 371/2773/42233; 'The Sharif of Mecca and the Arab Movement', Memorandum prepared by the General Staff, 1 July 1916, CAB 42/16/1; FO 882/19, 16 May 1916 (Arab Bureau); Mark Sykes Papers DR 588, DS 244.4 (Oxford, St. Antony's College, Middle East Centre); David Hunter Miller, *My Diary at the Conference of Paris* (New York, 1924), Vol.14, p.230.
 85. See, for example, Said, *Asrar*, pp.307–310; Suleiman Musa, *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya al-Kubra, al-Harb fi-l-Urdun 1917–1918: Mudhakkarat al-Amir Zaid* [The Great Arab

- Revolt, the War in Jordan 1917–18: Memoirs of Emir Zaid] (Amman, 1976), p.202.
86. *Arab Bulletin*, No.9, 9 July 1916, pp.82–3; No.17, 30 Aug. 1916, pp.195–6; No.20, 13 Sept. 1916, pp.241–2; No.23, 26 Sept. 1916, p.302.
 87. *Arab Bulletin*, No.9, 9 July 1916, p.83.
 88. Abdullah, *Mudhakkirati*, pp.125–9; Storrs, *Orientations*, pp.182–7; ‘The Sharif’s visit to Mecca’, FO 686/6, Dec. 1916.
 89. Arab Bureau, ‘Summary of Historical Documents’, pp.163–7, 194–5, 238–46; Report by the War Office, London, 18 Dec. 1917, FO 371/3381/18476; Musa, *al-Murasalat*, pp.124, 135–6.
 90. *Arab Bulletin*, No.57, 24 July 1917, pp.307–8; No.67, 30 Oct. 1917, pp.428–9; No.70, 21 Nov. 1917, p.466.
 91. *Arab Bulletin*, No.45, 23 March 1917, p.128; Lawrence, *Secret Despatches*, p.23. See also his report in the *Arab Bulletin*, No.32, 11 Nov. 1916, pp.477–81; David Holden and Richard Johan, *The House of Saud: The Rise and Fall of the Most Powerful Dynasty in the Arab World* (New York, 1981), p.53.
 92. *Arab Bulletin*, No.66, 21 Oct. 1917, p.415.
 93. Joyce to Clayton, 27 Sept. 1917, Transcription from Aqaba/I/H/77-78, Joyce Collection, Liddell Hart Military Archives, King’s College London.
 94. Anthony Nutting, *Lawrence of Arabia* (London, 1961), p.99.
 95. *Arab Bulletin*, No.66, 21 Oct. 1917, pp.412–14.
 96. *Arab Bulletin*, No.45, 23 March 1917, pp.127–8; Bimbashi Garland, ‘General Report on Demolition Work with Sharif Abdullah’, 14 Aug. 1917, FO 686/6, pp.17–19, and 17 Aug. 1917, FO 686/6, pp.20–21.
 97. C.E. Vickery, ‘Memorandum on the general situation in Arabia (Hijaz) and the policy and organization of the British Mission to Grand Sharif, Feb. 2, 1917’, FO 882/6. See also his report from 26 Feb. 1917, FO 686/6.
 98. ‘Report by Lt.-Colonel Newcombe, D.S.O, R.E., Wejeh’, May 1917, FO 686/6.
 99. Report from Lawrence to Wilson, 16 Jan. 1917, FO 686/6; T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Garden City, 1935), p.212. Though there is no reason to question this particular description of Abdullah, it must be borne in mind that there was no love lost between Lawrence and Abdullah, who believed that ‘Lawrence appeared only to require people who had no views of their own, that he might impress his personal ideas upon them’. Abdullah Ibn Hussein, *Memoirs of King Abdullah*, p.171.
 100. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, p.77; Tauber, *The Arab Movements*, p.139.
 101. Liddell Hart, *T.E. Lawrence to his Biographer*, p.188; Joyce to Clayton, 27 Sept. 1917, Transcription from Aqaba/I/H/77-78, Joyce Collection, Liddell Hart Military Archives, King’s College London. When asked by Liddell Hart why he had portrayed Faisal as a heroic figure, despite his opinion to the contrary, Lawrence answered that ‘it was the only way to get the British to support the Arabs’.
 102. Faisal to His Excellency Wilson Pasha, 27 March 1917, FO 686/10; Faisal to T.E. Lawrence, March 1917, FO 686/6.
 103. See, for example, *Official History of the War: Military Operations in Egypt and Palestine from June 1917 to the end of the War*, by Cyril Falls (London, 1928–30), p.405.
 104. *Arab Bulletin*, No.53, 14 June 1917, p.263; No.80, 26 Feb. 1918, p.59. See also No.65, 8 Oct. 1917, p.398; No.72, 5 Dec. 1917, p.489.
 105. For this episode see: Said, *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya*, Vol.I, pp.105–6; Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, p.150. For the sharif’s own mellowed account see ‘Sharif’s Visit to Jedda’, Dec. 1916, FO 686/6, pp.149–50.
 106. *Arab Bulletin*, No.25, 7 Oct. 1916, pp.338–9.
 107. Musa, *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya*, pp.52–3; Said, *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya*, Vol.I, pp.110–11.
 108. Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*, p.131.
 109. Arab Bureau, ‘Summary of Historical Documents’, pp.145–6.
 110. Abdullah, *Mudhakkirati*, pp.105–7; Said, *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya*, Vol.I, p.111; and idem, *Asrar*, pp.52–3.
 111. *Arab Bulletin*, No.49, 30 April 1917, p.193.
 112. Djemal to Faisal, Nov. 1917, FO 371/3395/12077; see also David Hogarth’s comments in

- Arab Bulletin*, No.74, 24 Dec. 1917, pp.402–3. Djemal also sent a letter to the sharif himself, but this was apparently not passed to the British.
113. See, for example, Sykes to War Office, 30 April 1917, FO 882/16; Wingate to Foreign Office, May 7, 1917, FO 371/3054/93335; *Arab Bulletin*, No.50, 13 May 1917, p.207.
 114. Joyce to Clayton, 17 Sept. 1917, Joyce Papers, Liddell Hart Military Archives, King's College London.
 115. For Faisal's draft reply and Hussein's response see: Wingate to Balfour, 25 Dec. 1917, FO 371/3395/12077; Musa, *al-Murasalat*, pp.154, 156, 158–9; *Arab Bulletin*, No.75, 3 Jan. 1918, p.521.
 116. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, pp.554–5.
 117. Liddell Hart, *T.E. Lawrence to his Biographer*, p.142 (recording a conversation with Lawrence, 1 Aug. 1933).
 118. Count Bernstorff, *Memoirs* (Berlin, 1936), p.179.
 119. Dawnay to Joyce, 27 May 1918, Joyce Collection, M/20, Liddell Hart Military Archives, King's College London.
 120. Djemal to Faisal, translation enclosed with Joyce to General Staff, Hijaz Operations, 5 June 1918, WO 158/634. For the British setbacks in Salt, northwestern Transjordan see *Official History of the War*, Chapters XV, XVII.
 121. Faisal's to Djemal, 11 June 1918, FO 371/3881/146256.
 122. Bonn State Archives, IA Türkei 165 43 Pera Telgram 22.8. 1918 Secret: Report by the German Ambassador on a conversation with Talaat Pasha, as cited in Desmond Morris, *T.E. Lawrence* (London, 1977), pp.172, 324 fn 14. See also Musa, *al-Murasalat*, p.210. Arab historian Suleiman Musa vehemently denies any intention on Faisal's side to make separate peace with Turkey because the latter 'was known to be level-headed and prudent', though conceding his making several secret offers to Djemal. What would have happened had Djemal accepted these offers Musa does not say. Suleiman Musa, *T.E. Lawrence: an Arab View* (London, 1966), pp.179–82.
 123. T.E. Lawrence to W. Yale, 22 Oct. 1919, in David Garnett (ed.), *Letters of T.E. Lawrence* (London, 1938), p.672.
 124. This is also the view of Arab historian Suleiman Musa, 'The Role of Syrians and Iraqis in the Arab Revolt', *Middle East Forum*, Vol.43 (1967), p.11.
 125. Report by T.E. Lawrence, 30 July 1917, FO 686/8.
 126. 'Faisal's Table Talk', in a report to Colonel Wilson by T.E. Lawrence, 8 Jan. 1917, FO 686/6, pp.121, 123; H. Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, 1978), p.25.
 127. David Hogarth, 'Mission to King Hussein', *Arab Bulletin*, 27 Jan. 1918, pp.23–4.
 128. See, for example, *Arab Bulletin*, No.32, 26 Nov. 1916, pp.473–5; No.53, 14 June 1917, pp.267–9; No.57, 24 July 1917, pp.312–14; No.60, 20 Aug. 1917, pp.346–7; No.76, 13 Jan. 1918, pp.9–14.
 129. 'Statements made on behalf of His Majesty's Government during the year 1918 in regard to the Future Status of certain parts of the Ottoman Empire', Cmd. 5964 (London, 1939), p.4.
 130. Hogarth, 'Mission to King Hussein', pp.22–3.