

# T.E. LAWRENCE DESERT

In the burning sands of Arabia, a young British officer fought a pioneering guerrilla war in the name of Arab independence, but against a backdrop of imperial treachery

*Left: Lawrence often adopted Arabic dress which made travelling through the desert much more comfortable*

**W**orld War I is a conflict largely seen through a muddy prism of barbed wire, trenches and the sodden killing fields of No Man's Land. The Western Front has had such a pervading influence on modern perceptions of the war that it is often forgotten it was fought in many different parts of the globe, including the Eastern Front, Africa and even the Pacific Ocean. In fact, one of the most famous figures to emerge from the war fought in the Middle East, and has since become a legend of 20th century history: TE Lawrence.



# REBEL

WORDS TOM GARNER

Lawrence's story is one of the most unlikely to have emerged from the war. An Oxford-educated archaeologist, his expert knowledge of Arabian culture led him to become a liaison officer between the British and Arabs, who in 1916 rebelled against the rule of the Turkish Ottoman Empire.

He played a large part in unifying the Arab tribes who then pushed the Turks out of the Arabian Peninsula, Palestine, Syria and Iraq. However, Lawrence's dream of a unified Arab state were dashed by the backroom ambitions of Britain and France, who subsequently carved the Middle East into imperial 'mandates'.

The Allied betrayal of the Arabs, and Lawrence's own tortured role in the complex political fallout of the Revolt, has largely dominated histories of his life, but his actual military career between 1917-18 is fascinating in its own right. Lawrence the soldier was a military innovator who became a pioneer of modern guerrilla warfare, despite his complete lack of experience.

In 1916, the Ottoman Empire was in trouble. For centuries it had ruled a multicultural society made up of numerous nationalities and religions under an Islamic sultanate. Gradually though, it had begun to impose Turkish language and culture on all its subjects, an approach that was deeply resented by many in its majority Arab population.

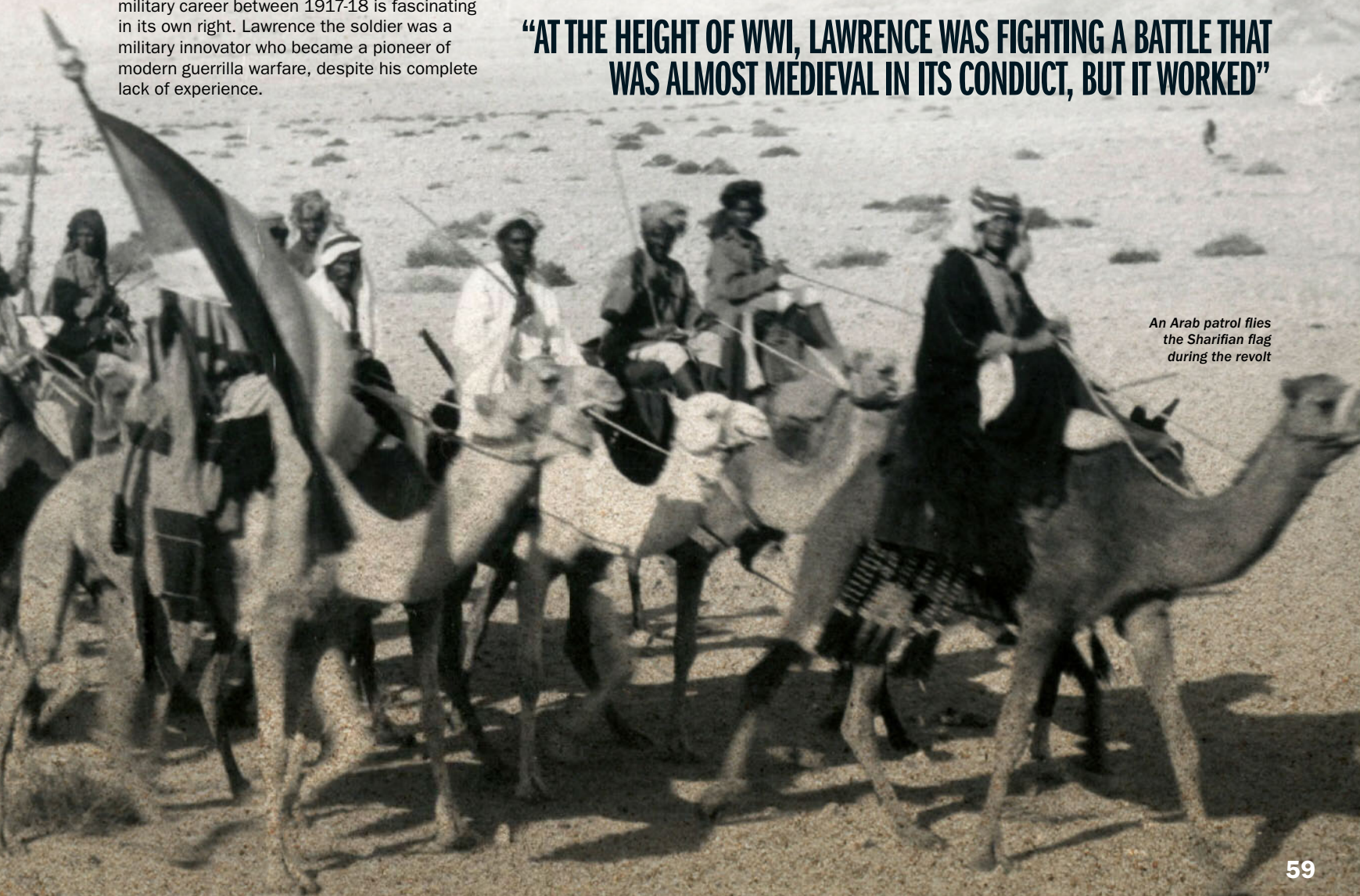
On 5 June 1916, the spiritual figurehead of Islam, Sharif Hussein of Mecca, declared a revolt against the Empire. Hussein was a descendent of the Prophet Mohammed, which gave his uprising an immediate prestige that the Ottomans couldn't ignore. However, the Empire had recently defeated the Allies at Gallipoli and was now busy committing genocide against its largely Christian Armenian subjects. This meant that any Ottoman

suppression of Hussein's Revolt would be swift and brutal – for the Arab rebels, the stakes couldn't have been higher.

Britain's main concern in the region was protecting the Suez Canal and Egypt from the advancing Turks. In October 1914, Lawrence had been plucked away from his archaeological work in Syria and transformed into a British intelligence officer, based in the newly formed Arab Bureau. When the Revolt erupted two years later, he was sent to negotiate a tentative alliance with the Arab rebels and to pick a leader to unite them. This would prove to be a seemingly impossible task. Sharif Hussein may have been a spiritual leader, but the elderly theologian was not a warrior or tactician that could co-ordinate a military campaign. Even more challenging were the rebels themselves,

**“AT THE HEIGHT OF WWI, LAWRENCE WAS FIGHTING A BATTLE THAT WAS ALMOST MEDIEVAL IN ITS CONDUCT, BUT IT WORKED”**

*An Arab patrol flies the Sharifian flag during the revolt*



who held disparate tribal allegiances and frequently fought among themselves.

Despite this, the rebels initially managed to capture small towns bordering the Red Sea. It was during these attacks that Lieutenant Lawrence noticed that Hussein's third son – Emir Faisal, a patient, tactful and determined fighter – was the perfect candidate for the Revolt's leadership. Once Lawrence reported his suitability to his British superiors, he was sent back to act as Faisal's adviser. The pair bribed tribal chiefs and resolved many long feuds in order to raise a substantial, if undisciplined, army. To ease negotiations, Faisal gave Lawrence expensive robes, which were a visible sign of his status. Once the preparations were complete, the rebels were ready to fight the Turks with renewed gusto.

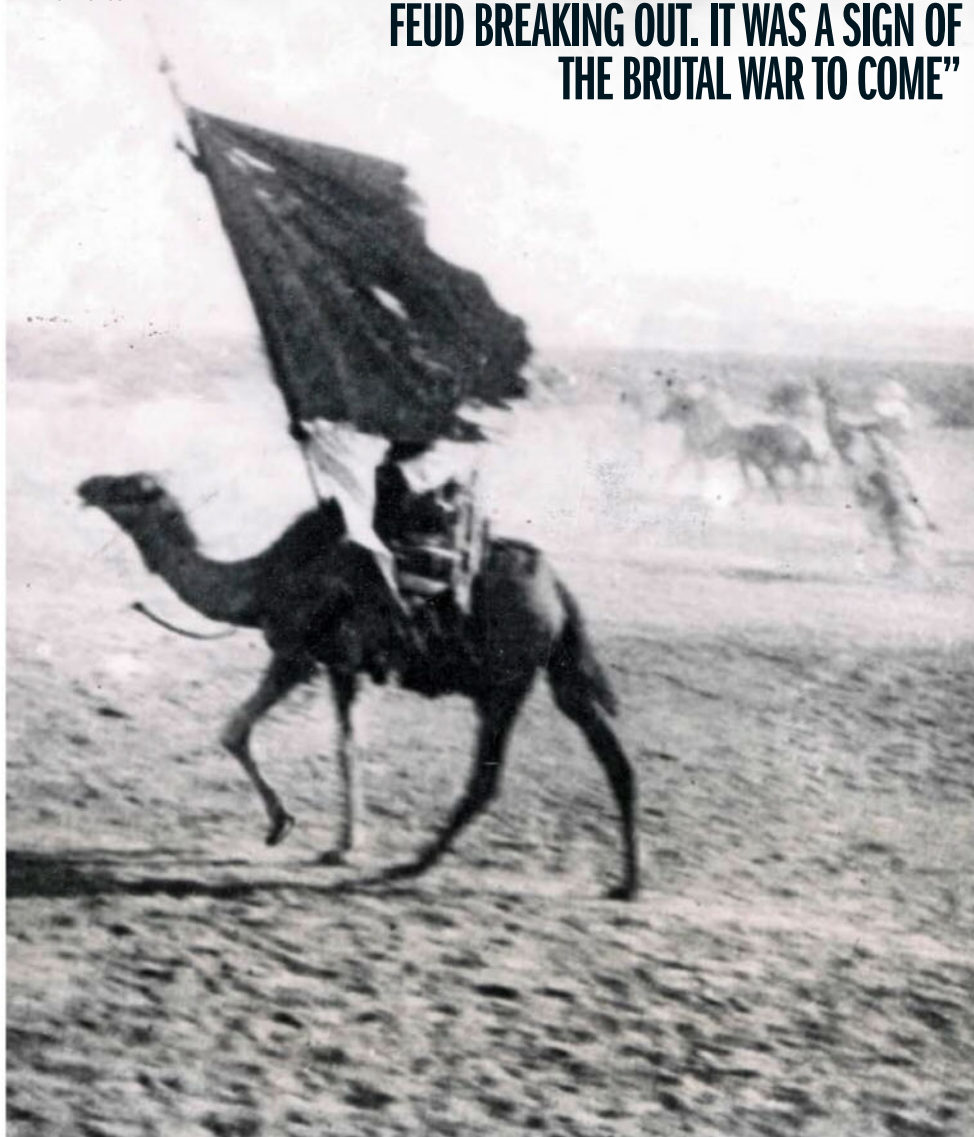
### Derailing Ottoman power

Lawrence saw his first action on 3 January 1917, when he and a group of 35 tribesmen attacked an enemy encampment, which they peppered with rifle fire before being driven away. They returned and captured two Turks for questioning, but Lawrence's small victory ended when he had to personally execute one of the tribesmen to prevent a feud breaking out. It was a sign of the brutal war to come.

Soon afterwards, Lawrence rode out with Faisal and his army to attack the coastal town of Wejh on the Red Sea. The town was captured and the surrounding coast cleared of Turks – a success that convinced the British to supply the rebels with weapons, equipment and money. The Arab rebels now concentrated on guerrilla tactics to disrupt the symbol of Ottoman power in the Middle East: the Hejaz Railway. This formidable network was a single-track railway that stretched 800 miles between Damascus and Medina.

The line had been constructed between 1900-08 to transport Muslim pilgrims to Mecca and reduced the journey time from a month to three days, but it also projected Ottoman military force into Arabia. There were 79 stations along the line, which meant an average of one station every ten miles and many were fortified. As the Revolt progressed, blockhouses and miniature forts were

Arab camels riding towards Aqaba, July 1917. The rider is bearing a flag in triumph. Aqaba was a turning point during the Arab Revolt and was largely masterminded by TE Lawrence



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## WHO'S WHO OF THE REVOLT

THE SUCCESS OF THE ARAB REVOLT WAS AIDED BY A MOTLEY COLLECTION OF GENERALS, TRIBESMEN, ARCHAEOLOGISTS & DEFECTORS

### PRINCE FAISAL



Faisal was the third son of Sharif Hussein and led the Arab Revolt. Lawrence

worked closely with him and was greatly impressed with the prince, “I felt at first glance that this was the man I had come to seek – the leader who would bring the Arab Revolt to full glory.”

### AUDA ABU TAYI



Auda was the head of the Howeitat tribe and was described by Lawrence as, “the greatest fighting man in northern

Arabia”. His tribesmen were some of the best fighters of the region and significantly contributed to the revolt's success, particularly at Aqaba. Auda had reputedly killed 75 Arabs with his own hand and didn't bother to count the Turks.

### EDMUND ALLENBY



As commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force Allenby was one of the most successful British commanders of WWI. He led a

successful campaign against the Turks, capturing Jerusalem and winning a great victory at Megiddo. He was also shrewd and gave Lawrence a free hand to develop the Arabs as effective allies during the march to Damascus.

### GERTRUDE BELL



Like Lawrence, Bell was an adventurous archaeologist and adviser on Arabian

affairs to the British government. She was a passionate supporter of Arab independence and helped to create the borders of modern Iraq, installing Faisal as its first king in 1921.

### MUHAMMED SHARIF AL-FARUQI



Al-Faruqi was a shadowy Arab officer in the Ottoman army who defected to the British claiming to have vital information. He made

distorted claims that it was in their best interests to support an independent Arab state while also influencing Mark Sykes to formulate the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which undermined Arab sovereignty. His lies sowed the seeds for regional chaos.

# T. E. LAWRENCE & THE ARAB REVOLT 1916-18

THE REVOLT WAS AN EPIC JOURNEY FROM TENTATIVE BEGINNINGS IN SOUTHERN ARABIA TO THE TRIUMPHANT LIBERATION OF DAMASCUS

Unlike the stalemates of the Western Front, the campaign in the Middle East was highly mobile, with Arab rebels playing a crucial role as part of their revolt against the Ottoman Empire. It began

as a relatively small-scale uprising in and around Mecca but soon grew into a full-scale revolution that was aided by the British largely under the sympathetic guidance of TE Lawrence.

It was a peculiarly old-fashioned but also highly modern campaign that blended traditional cavalry charges and battlefield tactics with innovative air attacks and guerrilla warfare. This included destroying railways and communication networks, as well as combining the highly mechanised Allied armies with nomadic tribesmen.

**“THE CAMPAIGN IN THE MIDDLE EAST WAS HIGHLY MOBILE”**



## 1 JUNE-JULY 1916

Sharif Hussein declares the Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule. Rebels attack Medina, take control of Mecca and capture the Red Sea ports of Jeddah, Yanbu and Rabigh.

## 2 JANUARY-MAY 1917

The rebels capture Wejh and are accompanied by TE Lawrence. Guerrilla attacks on the Hejaz Railway intensify over the next few months.

## 3 MAY-JULY 1917

Lawrence and Arab leaders travel over 600 miles through the desert to recruit tribesmen for an assault on the strategic port of Aqaba, which is subsequently captured on 6 July.

## 4 JULY-DECEMBER 1917

The rebels continue their attacks on the Hejaz Railway with increased British support and achieve considerable success, pinning down thousands of Turkish troops.

## 5 11 DECEMBER 1917

The Egyptian Expeditionary Force under General Edmund Allenby captures Jerusalem. Allenby and Lawrence walk into the city on foot as a sign of respect for its religious importance.

## 6 24 JANUARY 1918

Lawrence wins a small-scale, but well-executed, pitched battle at Tafila in modern day Jordan. Arab riflemen and cavalry beat off a superior Turkish force.

## 7 SEPTEMBER 1918

Allenby wins a decisive victory at Megiddo, which virtually destroys an Ottoman Army. In the aftermath, Lawrence and the Arabs destroy a Turkish brigade in revenge for a civilian massacre in Tafas.

## 8 1 OCTOBER 1918

Damascus is liberated after Australian cavalymen clear the way for the Arab Northern Army to enter the city. Lawrence reorganises the administration in four days before departing to Britain.

*Auda ibn Tayi was considered to be one of the finest Arab warriors of his time*

constructed in-between these stations and all were garrisoned by Ottoman soldiers. This pinned down thousands of men across a huge desert, but in theory this meant that the railway was untouchable. At Medina alone there were 15-16,000 troops, but the Ottomans had failed to reckon with a traditional, but effective vehicle of the desert: the camel.

The Arab Revolt was largely defined by successful guerrilla attacks against the Hejaz Railway and aided by the durability of the camel. Nomadic Arab tribes had travelled on camels for centuries and the rebels used them to good effect. Water and grazing were found en route and each man could carry food for six weeks in his saddlebag. Lawrence later wrote, "This gave us a range of over a thousand miles out and home and that was more than ever we needed, even in so large a country as Arabia."

During 1917-18 the rebels struck everywhere, with every station on the railway being under the threat of attack. They were also armed with long-range rifles, machine guns and mortars, which enabled them to disappear into the desert. The Ottomans found themselves fighting an insurgency that was everywhere and nowhere, and could not defend the entire line. In this way, 100 rebels could often pin down thousands of Ottoman soldiers.

Lawrence took part in his first railway raid in March 1917 when he helped to attack a Turkish station at Abu el-Naam. After reconnoitring the area he planted a mine under the tracks at night and cut telegraph wires. The next morning the rebels overran the station with the help of a howitzer and a mountain gun, which set several rail wagons on fire. As the train left the station, Lawrence detonated the mine under the front of the engine, knocking it off the rails. Although the Ottomans got the train rolling again, the operation was a huge success.

Railway smashing became Lawrence and the rebels' speciality, although the raids were by no means easy to achieve. There were constant shortages of food and water as the camels rode at top speeds to get to different strike points and Arab brigands would often rob or kill any stragglers. The rebels themselves were also obsessed with plunder from the raids and would often leave when they collected enough loot. They also bitterly fought among themselves in tribal feuds and Lawrence had difficulty maintaining discipline.

During one six-day ride, he had to settle 12 cases of armed assault, several thefts, a marriage and divorce, 14 feuds and even a bewitchment. Although destroying the railway was a very useful strategy, Lawrence had a romantic vision that the rebels could achieve great victories off their own backs and thereby make their claims for Arab independence become a reality. To that end he conceived a

**"THE TURKS WERE SURPRISED BUT THE REBEL FIRE WAS INEFFECTUAL. LAWRENCE GOADED AUDA BY SAYING THE ARABS, 'SHOOT A LOT AND HIT LITTLE'"**

plan for the rebels to attack a vital strategic port on the Red Sea: Aqaba.

### Into the path of terror

Without authorisation from his British superiors, Lawrence proposed that a troop of Arabs could make their way across the desert and assault the city of Aqaba, not from the heavily fortified coast, but from inland. An Arab victory would mean the British could ship supplies to the rebels and put additional pressure on the Turks. Faisal approved the plan and, on 9 May 1917, Lawrence left Wejh with 50 men, led by Sharif Nasir of Syria, and the renowned warrior leader of the Howeitat tribe, Auda abu Tayi. Lawrence himself rode a camel in his Arab robes, carried 22,000 gold sovereigns and was the only British representative on the journey.

He used the gold to bribe local tribesmen to join his band and their numbers swelled to 700 fighters who assisted in blowing up railway lines on the way. However, this was a hazardous 600-mile round journey through inhospitable terrain that even the Bedouin called 'al-houl' ('the Terror'). Lawrence broke away and travelled a further 300 miles north to recruit

## "RAILWAY SMASHING BECAME LAWRENCE AND THE REBELS' SPECIALITY, ALTHOUGH THE RAIDS WERE BY NO MEANS EASY TO ACHIEVE"

more support, even reaching the outskirts of Damascus before reuniting with the main force who finally fell on Aqaba from behind.

On 2 July, a crucial battle was fought at a Turkish outpost at Aba el Lissan, just outside the city. The Turks were surprised but the rebel fire was ineffectual. Lawrence goaded Auda by saying the Arabs, "Shoot a lot and hit little." This spurred Auda to launch a cavalry charge at the Turks, who were then defeated and the rebels rode into Aqaba, virtually unopposed, on 6 July. However, Lawrence's adventures were not over, as there were thousands of troops to feed and no food, so he immediately travelled 150 miles across the Sinai Peninsula to inform the British and bring supplies.

The victory was remarkable. Lawrence was promoted to Major, received the Companionship of the Bath, and was recommended for the Victoria Cross. Nonetheless, dark political clouds were looming.

### Imperial betrayal

Unknown to the Arabs, the British and French had signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement that planned to divide Arabian lands among the imperial powers. Lawrence, who had told the rebels they were fighting for independence, was appalled and had to lie to the Arabs about Allied intentions. He complained to a British colleague: "We are calling on them to fight for us on a lie, and I can't stand it."

He later wrote, "Instead of being proud of what we did together, I was continually and bitterly ashamed." Even so, the revolt had to continue, especially as the Allies were gearing up for an advance into Palestine from Egypt. The rebels continued their attacks on the Hejaz Railway, largely without British assistance.

From July-September 1917, the railway was attacked once every three days and the results were impressive. 30 bridges, 17 locomotives and many more wagons were destroyed and

## AN HISTORIC BETRAYAL

THE FALLOUT OF THE ARAB REVOLT LED TO UNFULFILLED HOPES AND POLITICAL BUNGLING. THIS SHAPED THE BORDERS AND TENSIONS THAT STILL FUEL TURMOIL IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The impact of the Allied victory in the Middle East was far-reaching and had consequences that still reverberate in the present day. The Arabs had been led to believe that they had been fighting for independence with Allied help, but the opposite was true. The British and French had signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, which carved up the Ottoman Empire into European zones of occupation. The British would rule Palestine and Mesopotamia (Iraq) and the French were given Syria and the Lebanon. The Arabs themselves were denied full control in their own lands.

This act of blatant imperialism deeply angered Lawrence who was dedicated to the cause of Arab self-determination. He had proposed that the Middle East be divided into three kingdoms ruled by Sharif Hussein's sons: Faisal, Abdullah and Zeid and invited Faisal to accompany him to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 to promote the Arab cause. However, despite huge publicity and eloquent arguments, the Arabs were ignored and Sykes-Picot was upheld. The new imperial 'mandates' were given new, artificial borders by the European powers that still exist today and have contributed to the regions present instability.

There were other consequences that would have profound implications. The Ottoman Empire was reduced to its heartland in Anatolia and Turkish nationalists under Mustafa Kemal

launched a revolution that saw the establishment of a new Turkish republic, defeated an invading Greek army, deposed the sultan and brought over 700 years of Ottoman rule to an end.

Perhaps the most inflammatory imperial policy was the Balfour Declaration of 1917. In that year, British armies were in the process of occupying Palestine but over the previous decades a Zionist movement had grown with increasing calls for a Jewish homeland, in the wake of centuries of persecution. The declaration was a statement by the British government to leading Zionists and said, "His Majesty's Government view

with favour the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people."

The native Palestinians were given little thought. In 1917, Palestine only had a Jewish population of 50,000 but in the wake of the declaration the population rose to 600,000 by 1947, particularly after the Holocaust, with the eventual foundation of Israel in 1948, with dire consequences for regional stability in the Middle East. Of all the imperial policies of WWI, the unconsidered plans for Palestine have had the most enduring and bitter consequences that are still unresolved.

"THE ARABS HAD BEEN LED TO BELIEVE THAT THEY HAD BEEN FIGHTING FOR INDEPENDENCE WITH ALLIED HELP"



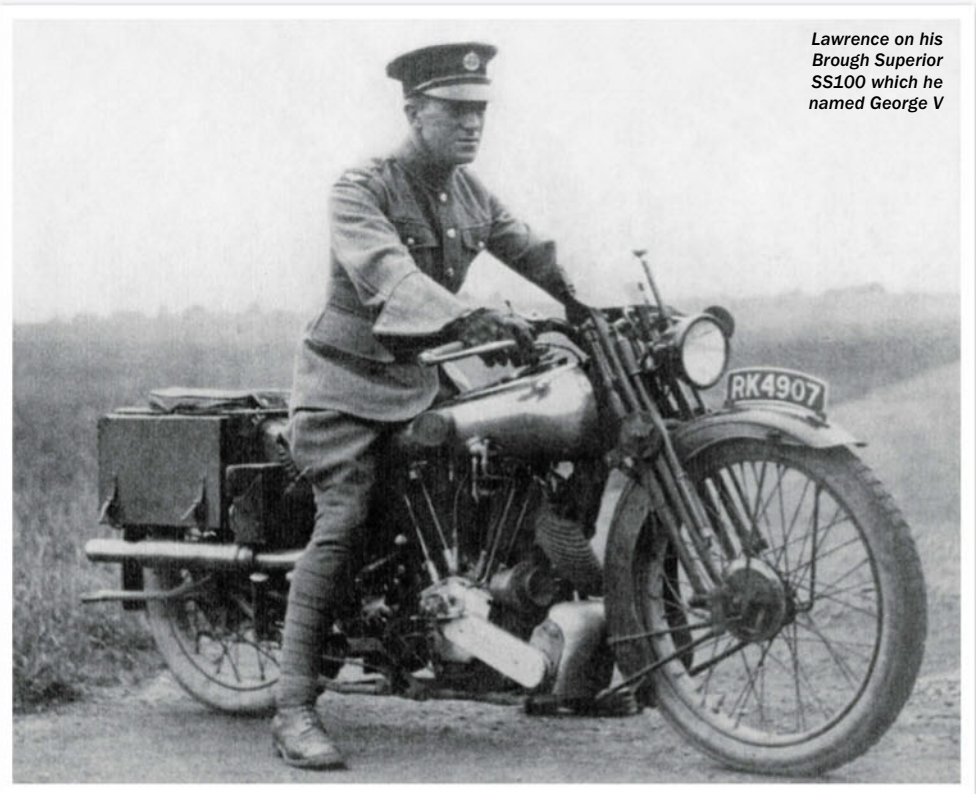
Prince Faisal (centre) and Lawrence (third from right) at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Lawrence unsuccessfully lobbied for the creation of three Arab states ruled by Faisal and his brothers

10,000 rails were torn up. Lawrence intended to keep the Hejaz Railway, "just in working order, but only just," enough to distract the Ottomans from the huge advance of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force under General Edmund Allenby.

Allenby was one of the best generals of the war and captured Jerusalem in December 1917, becoming the first European commander to take the city since the Crusades. Lawrence, who was a passionate medievalist, entered the city with Allenby on foot in British uniform saying, "For me it was the most memorable moment of the war, the one which, for historical reasons, made a stronger appeal than anything on Earth."

### The road to Damascus

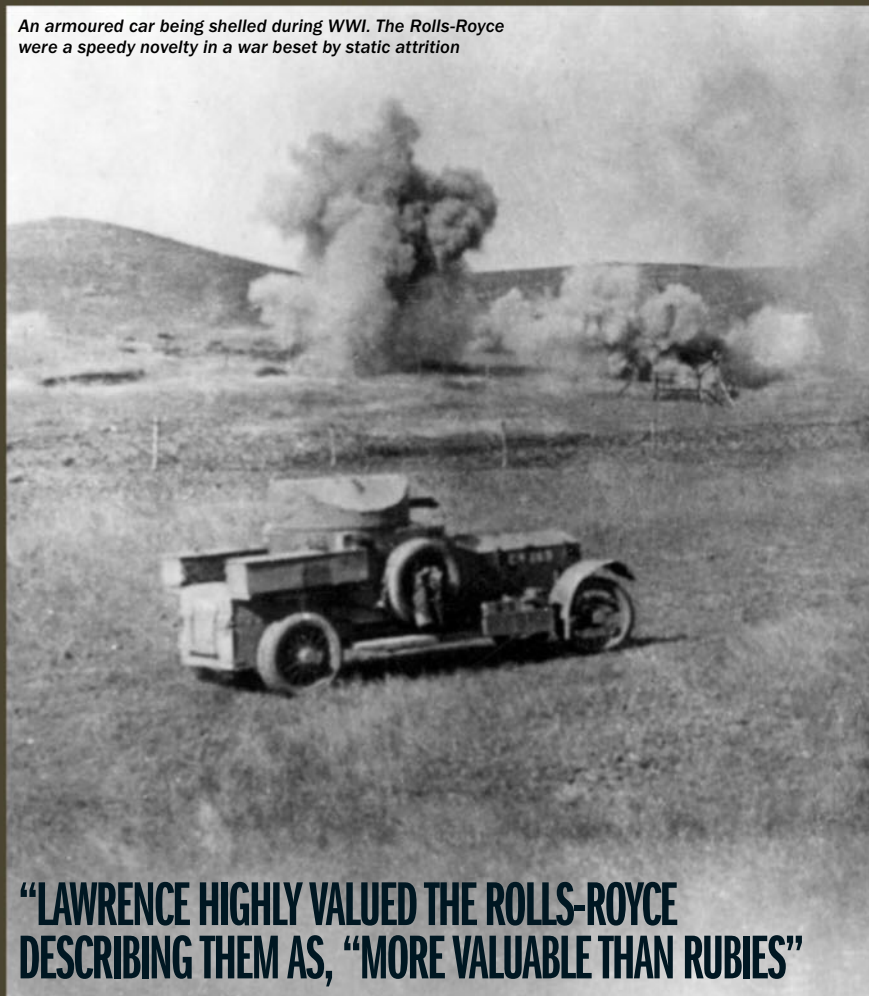
Jerusalem was followed by Lawrence's only pitched-battle victory of the campaign, at the Battle of Tafila in late January 1918. 600 Arabs had advanced on Tafila but their presence alerted 1,000 Ottomans of the 48th Division, who marched to fight the rebels. A tactical retreat was preferable, but that meant exposing the villagers of Tafila to Turkish retribution. Faisal's brother Zeid was ostensibly in command but Lawrence took the initiative by forming the rebels on a ridge outside the town that blocked the Ottoman path.



Lawrence on his Brough Superior SS100 which he named George V

## THE ROLLS-ROYCE ARMOURED CAR

An armoured car being shelled during WWI. The Rolls-Royce were a speedy novelty in a war beset by static attrition



**"LAWRENCE HIGHLY VALUED THE ROLLS-ROYCE DESCRIBING THEM AS, "MORE VALUABLE THAN RUBIES"**

**LAWRENCE PIONEERED THE USE OF ARMOURED VEHICLES IN THE DESERT, WHICH SUCCESSFULLY CONTRIBUTED TO A CAMPAIGN BASED ON SPEED AND FIREPOWER**

By late 1917 Lawrence had a squadron of nine Rolls Royce armoured cars, manned with British crews to aid the Arab Revolt. The cars were a steel-plated version of the 'Silver Ghost' with a strengthened chassis to support a steel cylinder, which was five feet in diameter. This cylinder housed a Vickers-Maxim machine gun and the revolving turret was highly effective against infantry whilst protecting the crew. Most of the car body was covered with bulletproof armoured plating and its wheels were inlaid with metallic rims, which enabled it to traverse across rough terrain. Two spare wheels were also provided to minimise puncture damage and they could travel at speeds of 45 miles per hour, with a range of 149 miles.

Lawrence highly valued the Rolls-Royce describing them as, "More valuable than rubies." He witnessed their effectiveness between 27-28 December 1917 when an Ottoman trench at Tell Shahm Station was machine-gunned by the cars, with the returning Turkish fire being ragged and ineffective. Lawrence noted, "Armoured car work seemed fighting deluxe, for our troops, being steel-covered, could come to no hurt." The cars satisfied Lawrence's passion for speed and adequately met his strategic demands.

On 19 April 1918, Lawrence and his car squadron attacked the Turkish position of Mudawwara and carried out a series of high speed demolitions, with each car being laden with two tonnes of explosives, "Bridges and rails roared up about us on all sides, whenever fancy took us. The crews of the cars covered themselves under the turrets of their cars when stones or iron fragments came sailing through the smoky air. We enjoyed ourselves." When the Arab army liberated Damascus on 1 October 1918, Lawrence entered the city, not on a camel, but in his own open top Rolls-Royce called 'Blue Mist'.

Arab snipers skirmished with the advancing Turks, which caused them to halt. The skirmishing turned into a long-range firefight but the Arabs had the edge as Lawrence had paced out the ground beforehand.

The rebels, supported by local armed peasants and machine guns, assaulted the Turkish line from three sides, causing the Turks to collapse. Lawrence and Zeid then ordered the Arab main line to charge. One of Zeid's household retinue, "led them on his camel, in shiny wind-billowed robes, holding the crimson banner of the Ageyl high over his head."

At the height of WWI, Lawrence was fighting a battle that was almost medieval in its conduct, but it worked. The Ottoman commander was mortally wounded and the Turks were routed. For 100 Arab casualties, the Turks lost 600 dead. Lawrence was again promoted, this time to lieutenant colonel, and awarded the Distinguished Service Order. His standing among the Arabs was reaching great heights. Lawrence was often greeted by horsemen with the cry of, "Ya Aurens!" and an Australian pilot observed, "The Arabs [stopped] in the streets to kiss his robes."

By September 1918, Allenby was pushing towards Damascus and won a complete victory at Megiddo with a skilful combination of air attacks and cavalry charges, which routed the Turkish Army. Lawrence and his Arab allies had helped by cutting railway lines around Deraa, but success came at a cost. After Megiddo, a retreating brigade of Turks massacred the

inhabitants of Tafas, south of Damascus, including women and children. The advancing Arabs were so enraged that they caught up with the brigade and annihilated them in revenge. Lawrence wrote, "By my order no prisoners were taken, for the only time in our war."

Despite the carnage, however, the end was in sight. Damascus was not a fortress but its status in the Middle East was predominant, with a population of 300,000 and home to diverse cultures and religions. It had been the first capital of the Islamic global empire, which started in the mid-7th century CE and was the last of the six great cities of Arabian Islam to still be held by the Ottomans. Lawrence saw an Arab liberation of Damascus in a highly symbolic light, but the first troops to arrive on 1 October 1918 were Australian cavalrymen who chased the remaining Turks out of the city to clear the way for the Arabs.

Lawrence drove into Damascus at 9am on 1 October to a tumultuous reception with the streets, "nearly impassable with the crowds, who yelled themselves hoarse... Auda abu Tayi and myself were cheered by name, covered with flowers, kissed indefinitely, and splashed with attar of roses from the house-tops."

To prevent the Allies from asserting control, he became the Acting Governor of Damascus. In four days, he organised a new administration including setting up utilities, a police force, food distribution, repairing the railway and introduced a new currency. The Allies continued to push back the Turks, capturing Beirut, Tripoli

and Aleppo. On 30 October, the Ottoman Empire requested an armistice, having lost Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Arabia.

Lawrence's efforts in Damascus resulted in the establishment of an Arab Constitutional Government under Faisal that avoided total French control until 1920. Regardless, Britain and France ruthlessly carved up the Middle East between them and never established the Arab independence that Lawrence dreamed of, creating a deep resentment that still lingers. Some fundamentalists have even called the establishment of the so-called 'Islamic State' as the 'End of Sykes-Picot' and have used the imperial mistakes of WWI to justify their gruesome campaign of terror and violence.

Though Lawrence could not have foreseen this, he was devastated by the betrayal of the Arabs and left Damascus, on 4 October 1918, a broken man. "I had been born free, and a stranger to those whom I had led for the two years," he would later comment. "It seemed that I had given them all my gift, this false liberty drawn down to them by spells and wickedness, and nothing was left for me but to go away. The dead army of my hopes confronted me, and my will broke suddenly in my hand and fell useless."

*Below: Lawrence riding a camel during the revolt. He ingratiated himself with the Arabs by immersing himself in their culture and suffered their privations in the field*

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– TE Lawrence

