

Defying an Empire, Uniting a People

Faisal I, Lawrence of Arabia, and the Art of Turning Weakness into Power

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Executive Summary

Jean-Pierre Goux

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jpgoux@biosphere-economics.com

Central argument. When Faisal and Lawrence join forces in the autumn of 1916, the Ottoman Empire holds an overwhelming advantage in manpower, weapons, and organization. Faisal already commands a force, possesses Hashemite legitimacy, and knows how to negotiate among groups whose interests do not always coincide. Lawrence knows the region, serves in British intelligence, and can connect Faisal's army to Allied material resources. Their alliance enables the Arab forces to exploit mobility, knowledge of the terrain, and the vulnerabilities of Ottoman communications while drawing on British military resources they cannot produce themselves. It plays an important part in the campaign that ends in victory in 1918. After the war, however, it is no longer enough for Faisal to secure recognition for, and defend, the political order he seeks to establish.

Two questions run through the Arab Revolt: how can a weak force compel a vastly stronger power to give ground? How can fragmented groups acquire the capacity for common political action?

This executive summary presents the core argument of *Defying an Empire, Uniting a People*: the trajectories of Lawrence and Faisal, what each brings to their alliance, how their cooperation alters the balance of forces, and the limits of that success after 1918. The military operations and historiographical debates are developed in the full paper.

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Before They Meet: What Each Man Brings

The Arab Revolt begins in June 1916. Lawrence does not reach the Hejaz until October. By the time the two men meet, Faisal already commands the Northern Army and has spent months taking part in the uprising launched by his father, Hussein ibn Ali. He leads fighters, negotiates with tribal chiefs, follows the operations around Medina, and maintains his own relations with the British. Lawrence therefore joins an existing command. He will become one of its principal intermediaries with Britain.[3, 4]



Faisal and T. E. Lawrence during the Arab Revolt.

Faisal: Political Authority before Lawrence

Faisal ibn Hussein is born on 20 May 1885 in Taif, in the Ottoman Hejaz, into the Hashemite family that holds the Sharifate of Mecca. His father, Hussein ibn Ali, defends the interests of his house while dealing with Istanbul. Faisal therefore knows from within the imperial system he will later fight. Before the war, he represents Jeddah in the Ottoman parliament. In 1915 he travels to Damascus, where he meets Arabist officers and activists associated in particular with al-Fatat and al-'Ahd. The Damascus Protocol drawn up that year subsequently informs the territorial claims Hussein presents to the British.

At the start of the Revolt, Faisal must command without the instruments of a state. His numbers fluctuate, tribal chiefs retain their autonomy, and the fighters' motives differ. He negotiates support, distributes money and weapons, arbitrates among chiefs, and coordinates operations with other members of the Hashemite family. A letter to his brother Ali dated 26 October 1916, only days after his meeting with Lawrence, shows him distributing forces among several positions while simultaneously following Medina, the railway, and the movements of his allies.[4]

Lawrence: From Archaeology to Intelligence

Thomas Edward Lawrence is born in 1888. While studying history at Oxford, he travels through parts of Syria and Palestine to examine Crusader fortifications. From 1911 he works at the excavations at Carchemish on the Euphrates under the archaeologist D. G. Hogarth. He learns Arabic and walks long distances across Syria and Palestine. These years in the field give him direct knowledge of routes, terrain, water points, and local societies. During the war he joins British intelligence in Cairo, working in cartography and military intelligence. In October 1916 he is sent to the Hejaz to assess the state of the Revolt.

Lawrence joins Faisal as a liaison officer. He has neither troops of his own nor authority over the tribes. His position within the British apparatus does, however, give him access to intelligence, money, weapons,

explosives, specialists, and communications with Cairo. As the campaign moves north, these connections also open access to naval and air support and to larger logistical resources. Lawrence studies the constraints of the Revolt at close quarters and begins to work out a way of fighting suited to the means available.

Their alliance rests on this complementarity. Faisal possesses legitimacy and human networks the British cannot create for him. Lawrence helps secure access to resources Faisal's army cannot produce for itself. Each depends on what the other can provide.

How the Weak Stop Fighting by the Strong's Rules

The attack on Medina in June 1916 fails. The Ottoman garrison has fortifications, machine guns, artillery, and the railway connecting it to the north. A frontal assault concentrates the Revolt's men against the instruments the Empire uses best. The idea of leaving Medina isolated and shifting the effort to its communications emerges from that failure.[1, 5]

A letter from Lawrence to C. E. Wilson dated 9 March 1917 captures the reasoning as it develops. Lawrence examines the line's locomotives, supply trains, and water installations. He does not necessarily seek to destroy the railway once and for all. Keeping Medina occupied while making it difficult to supply may tie down more Ottoman troops than forcing the city to be evacuated.[5]

From late 1916, and especially during 1917, the Hejaz Railway becomes a regular target. It carries men and supplies between Damascus, the garrisons along the line, and Medina. Arab raiding parties strike rails, bridges, trains, or installations, then disperse. Permanent destruction is unnecessary. Each attack requires repairs, slows traffic, and forces the Ottomans to devote men to protecting an infrastructure stretching for hundreds of miles.[2, 12]

Preserving fighters matters just as much. The Arab forces avoid prolonged engagements in which Ottoman artillery, discipline, and numbers would decide the outcome. Mobility lets them choose some of the places and moments at which they fight, while the Empire must hold towns, posts, and a railway. The size of the territory becomes a burden on the army required to defend it.

The capture of Wejh in early 1917, with Royal Navy support, moves Faisal's base closer to the railway. Aqaba, taken in July, opens a port through which weapons, vehicles, supplies, and specialists can arrive more easily. Arab regular units also grow under officers such as Jaafar al-Askari. By 1918 raids, sabotage, Arab regular forces, and British resources operate on the flank of Edmund Allenby's conventional offensive in Palestine and Syria.

The Empire retains a vast material superiority, but must devote a growing share of it to fixed positions and communications. The Arab forces concentrate their limited means on targets they can reach and then leave. Their weakness has not disappeared. Its consequences have changed.

How Faisal Holds a Coalition Together

Military maps obscure one of the Revolt's central difficulties. In 1916 there is no unified Arab state and no national army under a central command. Tribal, dynastic, local, religious, imperial, and Arabist loyalties overlap. Some Syrian elites remain attached to the Ottoman Empire until late in the war. Faisal must bring different groups into the Revolt and then keep them engaged as the campaign advances.

Hashemite prestige and family networks give him a base, but they do not guarantee fighters. Faisal negotiates with tribal chiefs, distributes money and weapons, recognizes positions and responsibilities, and accepts extensive local autonomy. He has no administration capable of ordering a general mobilization or punishing refusal. Much of his command therefore rests on negotiation.

As the campaign moves north, other forces join it. Auda Abu Tayi, a major Howeitat chief, brings men and tribal prestige to the Aqaba expedition without becoming a subordinate in the sense of a regular army. Arab officers from the Ottoman army, including Jaafar al-Askari and Nuri al-Said, organize regular units and bring a different military culture. Nationalists and Syrian networks connect the Revolt to urban circles. Success on the ground strengthens Faisal's position, attracts new support, and increases the resources he can distribute. In Damascus in October 1918, this coalition attempts for the first time to become a government.[8]

Faisal does not fuse these groups into a single organization. Tribes retain their chiefs, regular units their

hierarchy, and nationalists their own objectives. During the war he nevertheless sustains enough coordination for them to pursue the same campaign. Once the Ottoman enemy disappears, the disagreements contained by the war become more visible.

Lawrence seeks to prevent the Empire from bringing its strength to bear where it would be decisive. Faisal seeks to assemble enough forces and support to sustain common action. From 1917, the British resources Lawrence helps make accessible increase the coalition's capabilities. Military success, in turn, strengthens Faisal's authority and makes further alignments easier.

Defying an Empire, Uniting a People: The Two Mechanisms

Defying an empire	Uniting a people
Do not attack Medina. After the failure of June 1916, keeping the Ottoman garrison in place while making it difficult to supply ties down more men than capturing the city.	Do not build a single army. Faisal leaves the chiefs, structures, and autonomy of the groups that join him intact. He seeks their participation, not their absorption.
Attack the railway rather than the soldiers. Rails, bridges, locomotives, trains, and water installations become targets. Every strike imposes protection, repair, and escort costs.	Win the chiefs' support. Faisal negotiates men, weapons, money, responsibilities, and objectives with tribal leaders. Auda Abu Tayi brings his men and prestige without becoming a regular subordinate.
Force the Ottomans to disperse. Raids across hundreds of miles compel the Empire to defend fixed points against a mobile enemy.	Add different forces without dissolving those already present. Tribal contingents are joined by Jaafar al-Askari's regulars, officers such as Nuri al-Said, and Syrian nationalist networks.
Take Aqaba from the landward side. The Arab force bypasses defenses oriented toward the sea and captures the port in July 1917. Aqaba then becomes a supply base and a link to the British.	Give the coalition an objective beyond local interests. The advance toward Syria and Damascus connects local fighting to the prospect of Arab political authority after the war.
Add what the Arab forces do not possess. Gold, explosives, weapons, intelligence, specialists, vehicles, and aircraft come from the British; mobility, fighters, and knowledge of the terrain come from the Arab forces.	Make the coalition real through action. The same groups advance, fight, and take towns together without becoming a homogeneous whole.
In 1918, strike while Allenby attacks. Arab raids disrupt Ottoman communications and retreats while the British army breaks the front in Palestine.	In Damascus, move from coalition to government. Taking the city opens the attempt to turn the wartime alliance into political authority.

What They Build Together

The capture of Aqaba in July 1917 changes the scale of the resources available to Faisal's army. A force coming out of the desert takes the town with decisive participation by tribal fighters. Possession of Aqaba then opens a Red Sea port. Faisal's army can receive weapons, gold, vehicles, supplies, specialists and, as the campaign develops, increasing air support. A victory won with relatively light means thus opens access to industrial and logistical capabilities on an entirely different scale.

By 1918 irregular groups, Arab regular units, and British resources are operating in the same campaign. Irregulars attack communications and exploit mobility. Arab regulars add more conventional fighting capacity. The British provide intelligence, finance, explosives, specialists, aircraft, vehicles, artillery, and naval support. On the main front, Edmund Allenby's army exerts pressure the Arab forces could not sustain alone. Faisal remains the political center of the Northern Army. Lawrence links that command, the raiding groups, and the British military apparatus. Around Deraa, their operations contribute directly to the offensive that dislocates the Ottoman position.

Arab mobility threatens a network the Ottomans must protect across hundreds of miles. Knowledge of the terrain makes raids and sabotage more effective. Faisal's authority enables forces that retain their own chiefs and organizations to take part in the same campaign. Aqaba gives them far more direct access to British weapons, vehicles, supplies, and specialists. In 1918 Allenby's offensive gives Arab operations on the flank a reach they could not have achieved alone. None of these resources is decisive

in isolation. Together they enable the Revolt to produce military effects far beyond what its initial means would suggest.

Much of the external support remains under British control. London pursues its own war aims and can decide how resources on which Faisal's army depends are used. British commitments to France are incompatible with some Hashemite and Arabist ambitions. As long as the Ottoman Empire remains the common enemy, the divergence can be contained. After 1918 it becomes decisive.[6, 7]

From Military Victory to Sovereignty

When Arab forces enter Damascus in October 1918, Faisal attempts to establish an Arab government. He must now administer territory, finance a new state, secure international recognition, and defend borders. In 1919 he goes to Paris and negotiates directly with the leaders of the victorious powers. He argues for Arab independence, negotiates with the French, concludes an agreement with Chaim Weizmann whose implementation he makes conditional on the promises made to the Arabs being fulfilled, and seeks to use the findings of the American King-Crane Commission. In Paris, his experience as a negotiator meets a balance of power he cannot control. Britain moves closer to France over Syria and withdraws its troops. The Damascus government is left without sufficient international recognition and without an outside protector willing to defend it.[9–11]

In March 1920 the Syrian Congress proclaims Faisal king of an independent Syria. A month later, at San Remo, the Allies assign the mandates for Syria and Lebanon to France. In July French troops advance on Damascus. The Syrian army is defeated at Maysalun and the kingdom disappears.

At Maysalun, Faisal faces a French army under conditions very different from those of the Revolt. During the Revolt he could preserve a loose coalition, while Lawrence could help select operations that avoided the main Ottoman forces. A government cannot abandon its capital or disperse when an army challenges its sovereignty. Networks that facilitate recruitment cannot substitute for public finance, stable administration, or a conventional army. British support, decisive during the war, depended on a decision in London and could be withdrawn.

What Remains of Lawrence and Faisal

Lawrence's writings spread his experience of the Revolt widely. The *Twenty-Seven Articles*, written in 1917 for British officers attached to Arab forces, deal with knowledge of the local environment, the conduct of an adviser, and the indirect exercise of authority. *The Evolution of a Revolt*, published in 1920, sets out his thinking on irregular war more directly. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* then gives the campaign a much wider audience.

Basil H. Liddell Hart, a British officer and military theorist, corresponds with Lawrence from 1921 and draws on the Arab campaign in his work on the indirect approach. Before the Second World War, *Seven Pillars* also appears among the readings of MI(R), a War Office body studying irregular warfare. Colin Gubbins serves there before becoming one of the leading figures in the Special Operations Executive, the SOE.[13, 14]

The influence can be traced into the preparation of some Allied officers sent into France during the Second World War. From 1944, Jedburgh teams, generally composed of three men, are parachuted in to work with the maquis, provide liaison and radio communications, assist with weapons and training, and coordinate some operations with Allied command. William Colby, later director of the CIA and a Jedburgh in France, recalled reading *Seven Pillars* during his preparation to understand how an outsider could act alongside local fighters without taking their place. This testimony documents a specific line of transmission. It does not make the French Resistance as a whole an heir to Lawrence.[15, 16]

Lawrence continues to be read by writers and officers involved in modern debates on irregular warfare. In 2006 David Kilcullen echoes the title of the *Twenty-Seven Articles* in his *Twenty-Eight Articles* on counterinsurgency. That same year General David Petraeus cites Lawrence in an article on Iraq and co-signs *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency*, later issued commercially as *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. Lawrence thus remains part of the literature of irregular warfare and counterinsurgency, alongside many other writers and experiences that shaped those doctrines.[17–19]

Faisal leaves a different kind of legacy. After the Syrian failure, he becomes king of Iraq in 1921. There he again confronts a problem already encountered in the Hejaz and Syria: how to build common authority

across a territory containing different groups, regions, and interests, under strong British influence. This time he has the instruments of a state: an administration, an army, and a school system.

The career of Sati' al-Husri provides a direct link between Damascus and Baghdad. A former senior Ottoman official and one of the leading theorists of Arab nationalism, he had served in Faisal's government in Damascus. He continues his career in Iraq, where he plays a major role in education and uses schooling, language, and history to foster a common Arab identity. Other men shaped by the Revolt and the Syrian experience also take part in the new state. People from the Damascus experiment, and the institutions they help build, carry forward part of the political effort that had formed around Faisal in Syria.[20]

Public memory has treated the two men very differently. Lawrence writes the campaign, draws strategic texts from it, and from 1919 becomes the central figure in Lowell Thomas's shows and later David Lean's film. Faisal leaves far fewer writings intended to fix his own version of events. His record survives above all in the coalitions he led and the governments he tried to build.

Conclusion. Turning Weakness into Power

During the war, Faisal succeeds in making forces act together while they retain their chiefs, organizations, and some of their own objectives. Lawrence helps this coalition exploit the vulnerabilities of the Ottoman position and gain access to British resources. Their alliance removes neither the Revolt's material weakness nor its divisions. It gives those forces a military effectiveness they would not have possessed separately.

The alliance has its greatest effect under the particular conditions of war against the Ottoman Empire. After 1918, Faisal must secure international recognition, finance a government, and defend territory against a conventional European power. Mobility, tribal networks, raids, and British support, all important during the campaign, no longer produce the same results.

Between Medina and Damascus, Lawrence and Faisal had learned how to make Ottoman rule costly, dispersed, and vulnerable. At Maysalun, the means that had helped defeat the Ottomans were no longer enough. They had learned how to make an empire retreat on the battlefield. They lacked the power to impose on the victors the political order they wanted the war to bring into being.

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