

Defying an Empire, Uniting a People

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

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Abstract

In 1916, the Arab Revolt faced an Ottoman Empire far stronger in manpower, weapons, and resources. The forces assembled by Sharif Hussein and his sons were divided among different tribes and leaders, with neither a national army nor an established state. Faisal commanded the revolt in the northern Hejaz, the western region of the Arabian Peninsula along the Red Sea that includes Mecca, Medina, Jeddah, and Taif. In the autumn of 1916, he met T. E. Lawrence, a young British intelligence officer whose years in archaeology and travel had given him an unusual knowledge of the region.

Arab forces gradually learned to avoid battles in which Ottoman superiority would be decisive. They relied on mobility, local intelligence, sabotage, and raids against lines of communication, above all the Hejaz Railway, forcing the Empire to protect hundreds of miles of track, stations, and garrisons. Lawrence contributed to this way of fighting and connected Faisal's forces to British weapons, gold, intelligence, and, later, vehicles and air power. At the same time, Faisal drew tribal contingents, autonomous chiefs, former Ottoman officers, Arab regular units, and Syrian nationalists into the same campaign. The capture of Aqaba in July 1917 opened the way toward Syria. In October 1918, Faisal entered Damascus at the head of a coalition capable both of military action and of claiming political authority.

Two questions run through this history: **how can a weak force challenge an empire without becoming its military equal? How can deeply fragmented groups acquire the capacity to act together without surrendering their differences?** Their success carried them to Damascus, but the means that had enabled them to challenge the Ottoman Empire were not enough to secure the sovereignty of the government Faisal sought to establish there.

Keywords: T. E. Lawrence; Faisal I; Arab Revolt; Ottoman Empire; irregular warfare; strategy; Arab nationalism; coalition; Hejaz Railway; Sykes–Picot; Damascus; sovereignty.

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Prologue. Damascus, October 1918

On 3 October 1918, Faisal ibn Hussein entered Damascus. The son of Sharif Hussein of Mecca and a member of the Hashemite dynasty, he had commanded the revolt in the northern Hejaz against the Ottoman Empire since 1916. T. E. Lawrence, a young British officer and former archaeologist who spoke Arabic, had served in military intelligence in Cairo before being sent to the Arab forces as a liaison officer. Two years earlier, there had been little reason to imagine either man reaching the great Syrian city. The Revolt had just failed before Medina. Its fighters were scattered, lightly armed, and organized around leaders who retained control of their own men. They faced an Ottoman Empire with a regular army, artillery, garrisons, and a railway connecting Medina to the north of the Empire.[1, 2, 31]

The Arab forces never matched the Ottoman army in conventional strength. They increasingly avoided fighting where Ottoman superiority could prove decisive, stepped up attacks on the railway, and forced the Empire to protect lines of communication stretching for hundreds of miles. The capture of Aqaba in July 1917 gave them much more direct access to British weapons, gold, explosives, intelligence, and later vehicles and air power. Lawrence played an important part in this way of fighting and in connecting Faisal's forces to Allied resources. In September 1918, as Allenby broke the Ottoman front in Palestine, Arab forces struck communications and retreating columns. A force that could not defeat the Empire on its own terms had learned to challenge it on different ones.[2, 3, 31, 40]

The forces gathered around Faisal retained their own leaders, organizations, and interests. He brought tribal contingents, fiercely autonomous chiefs, former Ottoman officers, Arab regular units, and Syrian nationalists into the same campaign. He negotiated support, allocated resources, recognized local authority, and gave the advance toward Syria a political purpose that reached beyond the interests of each group. Faisal thus brought into sustained common action men who, two years earlier, had formed neither one army nor one political movement. Their differences remained, but they continued to act together as the campaign moved north, around a political objective in Syria. In Damascus, this coalition had, for the first time, a capital and a government.[1, 19, 28]

Within days of his arrival, Faisal headed a government in Damascus, but he did not control Syria's future. London and Paris possessed the armies, resources, and international recognition on which the new regional order would depend. Some of the resources that had enabled the Arab forces to challenge the Ottoman Empire had, moreover, belonged to Britain. With the war ending, Faisal now had to defend his political project under a balance of forces very different from the one he had learned to exploit during the campaign.[1, 15, 20]

How can a weak force challenge an empire without becoming its military equal? How can deeply fragmented groups acquire the capacity to act together without surrendering their differences? And why did what carried Faisal and Lawrence to Damascus prove insufficient to secure the sovereignty of the government Faisal sought to establish there?

1 Faisal before Lawrence

1.1 A Hashemite family within the Ottoman Empire

Faisal ibn Hussein was born on 20 May 1885 in Taif, in the Hejaz, then under Ottoman sovereignty (in present-day Saudi Arabia, roughly sixty kilometres southeast of Mecca). His father, Hussein ibn Ali, belonged to the Hashemite house that held the Sharifate of Mecca and drew exceptional religious prestige from its genealogy. Faisal therefore grew up within the Ottoman political order. His family also depended on Istanbul. From 1892, Hussein and his sons spent many years in the Ottoman capital, where Sultan Abdulhamid II kept them under surveillance. Faisal received much of his education there and learned early what it

meant to live close to a power on which his family depended while also distrusting it. By the time Hussein was appointed Sharif of Mecca in 1908, Faisal already knew the Ottoman court, administration, and political balance from close range. He later served in the Ottoman parliament as deputy for Jeddah.[1, 31]

Politics also ran through the family. Ali, Abdullah, Faisal, and later Zeid played different roles and pursued different courses. Hussein retained dynastic authority and decided the broad direction of policy; his sons enjoyed real autonomy in their own theatres of action, but remained answerable to their father and had to accommodate one another. Faisal learned early that command often depended as much on negotiation as on authority. During the Revolt, that experience would matter when dealing with tribal chiefs free to withdraw their men, officers trained in Ottoman discipline, and Syrian nationalists whose ambitions extended beyond the Hejaz.[1]

Contemporary descriptions and later biographies emphasize Faisal's reserve, his willingness to listen, and his ability to alter a position without breaking with his interlocutor. That style suited the political world in which he moved. Several forms of legitimacy overlapped, loyalties could coexist, and in 1914 a break with Istanbul was not yet inevitable. Faisal knew Ottoman institutions from the inside; he also knew the weight of Hashemite prestige in the Hejaz. His later politics grew out of the tension between those two experiences.[1, 28, 29]

1.2 Damascus in 1915: networks, risks, and an Arab horizon

In 1915, Hussein sent Faisal to Damascus and Constantinople. The journey brought him into more direct contact with networks of Arabist officers and activists. Members of al-Fatat and al-'Ahd discussed the possibility of an uprising with him and, on 23 May, gave him the text that became known as the Damascus Protocol. It called for British recognition of a large independent Arab state and envisaged an alliance with London. This was more than a year before Faisal met Lawrence.[1, 13, 30]

The Arabist societies remained minorities. Syrian notables were divided, many actors retained Ottoman loyalties, and others preferred forms of local autonomy. Djemal Pasha's repression in Syria radicalized part of the political milieu, but it did not instantly turn a mosaic of communities, cities, tribes, and provinces into a unified nation.[28, 29, 31]

Faisal returned from Damascus with contacts that reached beyond the Hejaz. He had also encountered an Arab claim framed in territorial and diplomatic terms that could serve as the basis for negotiation with a great power. The Hussein–McMahon Correspondence that followed took up some of those demands while leaving territorial ambiguities that would have serious consequences later.[13, 14]

1.3 Faisal's changing political aims

Faisal's political programme changed substantially between 1915 and 1919. The Damascus Protocol gave Arab independence an ambitious territorial form, but it still belonged to a negotiation led by Hussein at a time when the outcome of the war was unknown. In 1916, the immediate task was to keep the Revolt alive and extend it. In 1917, the move to Wejh and then Aqaba made Syria militarily accessible and made the contacts established in Damascus more consequential. In 1918, the advance north made government in Syria a plausible political objective.[1, 13, 17]

After victory, Faisal carried that political aim to Paris. He asked for the independence of the Arabic-speaking peoples of Asia and sought a formula that would secure recognition of Arab authority while accepting limited foreign assistance if necessary. In January 1920, in negotiations with Clemenceau, he was still prepared to discuss French advisers and a privileged

relationship with Paris if that would preserve a Syrian state. A few months later, the kingdom proclaimed in Damascus left him less room for compromise.[21, 22, 34]

Arab political autonomy remained Faisal's broad objective throughout. The means, acceptable borders, and compromises changed with the balance of forces he faced. The flexibility he had shown during the war would also matter after the loss of Syria, when he returned to political prominence in Iraq.



Figure 1: Faisal ibn Hussein, c. 1918.

2 Lawrence before Faisal

2.1 Oxford, Syria, Carchemish

Thomas Edward Lawrence was born on 16 August 1888 in Tremadog, Wales. By the time he reached Cairo, he had an unusual degree of experience in the Middle East for a young British officer. At Oxford, his thesis on Crusader castles required him to connect architecture with terrain and lines of communication. In 1909, he walked across a large part of Ottoman Syria to examine the fortifications on the ground. The journey taught him above all a method: measure actual distances, ask directions, depend on local hospitality, and observe villages and roads rather than reason from a map alone.[2]

From 1911, Carchemish deepened that experience. Under D. G. Hogarth, the British archaeologist who would later head the Arab Bureau, Lawrence spent several seasons at the archaeological site on the Euphrates. He learned Arabic, recruited and organized workers, travelled through the region, and formed lasting personal relationships, notably with the young Selim Ahmed, known as Dahoum. At Carchemish, Lawrence spent years living and working among Arabs, learning their language and forming enduring friendships. He still knew little of the Hejaz when he arrived there in 1916, but he brought with him a knowledge of the Middle East acquired far from the offices of Cairo.[2, 33]

Hogarth mattered for another reason: he connected this local experience to the British state. An archaeologist, a well-connected figure, and later a senior figure in the Arab Bureau, he helped turn knowledge acquired before the war into an intelligence resource. Lawrence's attention to terrain, his appetite for travel, and his reliance on personal relationships therefore predated the war. The strategic doctrine that would give these habits a larger purpose had yet to be developed.

2.2 From cartographer to intelligence officer

On the eve of the war, Lawrence took part in a survey mission in Sinai. When war broke out, he was assigned to military intelligence in Cairo. His work involved producing and interpreting

maps, tracking Ottoman forces, assessing information arriving from the region, and helping the British staff understand a theatre it knew imperfectly. The Arab Bureau, established in 1916, brought together officials with differing views of Arab policy. Lawrence neither founded it nor directed it. It did, however, give his geographical knowledge and command of Arabic operational value.[2, 33]

In the Hejaz, Lawrence operated with the resources of an imperial power behind him: intelligence, naval communications, gold, weapons, explosives, advisers, aircraft, and vehicles. Part of his achievement would lie in making those resources useful to a force whose command structure and forms of organization were not British.[31, 39]

2.3 Military reading and historical references

By 1916, Lawrence already had a substantial grounding in military history. His theory of insurgency would emerge during the campaign and receive its most systematic formulation only in 1920. His work on the Crusades had led him to study campaigns in which fortresses, roads, water, and distance shaped military action. He also read European military history. Yet the clearest documented intellectual debts appear mainly in his retrospective writings. In *The Evolution of a Revolt*, published in 1920, he wrote that Napoleon's comparison of Mamluks and French soldiers had suggested to him the value of small groups of high-quality fighters, and that the French colonel Ardant du Picq (1821–1870), author of *Battle Studies*, had broadened the point for him. Elsewhere he invoked Maurice de Saxe (1696–1750), Marshal of France and author of *Reveries on the Art of War*, for the idea that a war could be won without seeking a decisive battle.[2, 5]

These references did not amount to a blueprint for the Arab Revolt. Documents from 1916 and early 1917 show a much more empirical search. Medina held out; the railway sustained it; Faisal's forces were ill-suited to siege warfare and far better suited to movement. Lawrence began with those constraints and only gradually gave them a more general formulation. The *Twenty-Seven Articles* of August 1917 still presented themselves as personal conclusions drawn from working with the Bedouin. Three years later, *The Evolution of a Revolt* organized that experience into a much more developed theoretical argument.[5, 6]

The chronology matters. Lawrence arrived in Arabia with military reading behind him and an established way of looking at terrain. Medina, the railway, and Faisal's fighters then supplied the concrete problems that selected, tested, and reordered those earlier references.



Figure 2: T. E. Lawrence, c. 1918.

Translation status. English translation validated through Section 2, “Lawrence before Faisal”. From the next section onward, the text remains the unchanged French V11 source and is included solely to preserve the complete manuscript during the section-by-section translation process.

3 A Revolt without Lawrence

3.1 June 1916: the Hashemite initiative

The Revolt begins around Medina on 5 June 1916, five months before Lawrence joins Faisal. Ali and Faisal try to seize the holy city and, above all, its railway station. The objective is understandable: Medina controls the southern terminus of the Hejaz Railway and holds a substantial Ottoman garrison. The attack immediately exposes the gap between the forces available and the task they have chosen. After three days, the attackers withdraw. Fakhri Pasha then has roughly 12,000 men, prepared positions, artillery, and a rail connection to Syria.[31, 38]

Elsewhere, the Hashemites make faster progress. Hussein publicly proclaims the Revolt in Mecca on 10 June; Jeddah falls with Royal Navy support; Taif is besieged. Hashemite forces can mobilize quickly, cut roads, operate at several points, and exploit naval support along the coast. They are far less capable of taking a fortified position defended by regular troops and supplied by rail. In June 1916, Medina is still an objective to be captured. The failure of the assaults forces the Revolt’s leaders to find another way to neutralize Fakhri Pasha’s garrison.[38]

3.2 Faisal in command before Lawrence

After the failure at Medina, Faisal takes command of the Northern Army. He commands a force whose numbers, loyalties, and resources are constantly changing. A contemporary document shows him directly at work. In a letter to his brother Ali dated 26 October 1916, he allocates forces among several positions, specifies which groups are to move, coordinates his actions with Abdullah, and simultaneously tracks Medina, the railway, and the protection of the approaches.[8]

Written about three days after his first meeting with Lawrence, the letter captures Faisal exercising command. He has information, a working picture of the family and tribal disposition, and experience in coordinating disparate forces. What he lacks are other resources: artillery, technical means, intelligence organized on a larger scale, and an effective connection to British resources. This is where the relationship with Lawrence will prove useful.

3.3 Yanbu and dependence on Allied support

Late in 1916, the Northern Army is in danger of being driven back toward the coast. Fakhri Pasha moves to retake Yanbu and defeat Faisal’s forces before they can move north. Ottoman troops advance toward the town and threaten an Arab force unable on its own to sustain a prolonged conventional engagement. The balance changes when the Royal Navy appears offshore. Several ships can cover the approaches from the sea; naval gunfire, reinforced by aircraft and additional troops, makes an Ottoman attack far more costly. Fakhri eventually abandons the assault and withdraws toward Medina.[31, 38]

Yanbu provides an early version of the arrangement that will later be refined. Faisal supplies the local force, networks, and political presence; the Royal Navy supplies firepower and coastal security beyond the Northern Army’s reach. The combination saves the position while exposing a dependence that will run through the entire campaign: British support greatly expands Faisal’s military means, while his political objective remains Arab.

4 Hamra, October 1916: the Meeting

4.1 Lawrence's journey

Lawrence leaves Jeddah on 21 October 1916 on an observation mission. Cairo wants to understand why the Revolt has stalled around Medina and which of Hussein's sons offers the strongest basis for British support. Before reaching Faisal, Lawrence visits several Hashemite camps. He sees large but irregular forces, dependence on local chiefs, a shortage of heavy weapons, and the difficulty of keeping men in the field when they are mobilized through tribal obligations rather than military service. His contemporary travel notes in the *Arab Bulletin* are more useful here than the highly worked scene he later wrote in *Seven Pillars*.[\[2, 7\]](#)

Around 23 October, he reaches Faisal's camp at Hamra in the Wadi Safra. Faisal is thirty-one; Lawrence, twenty-eight. Lawrence's famous later description of their first meeting belongs to the campaign's literary memory. The contemporary record establishes something simpler and firmer: Lawrence is looking for an Arab command with which Britain can cooperate; in Faisal he finds an established authority and an army positioned on the route that can open the way north.

4.2 An alliance in practice

Faisal already has a political project, authority, and networks. British cooperation gives him access to resources he does not control: a regular flow of gold, weapons, explosives, specialists, communications with Cairo, intelligence, and later naval and air power. Lawrence becomes an unusually effective intermediary because he understands enough of the Arab camp's constraints to translate its needs into terms the British apparatus can act on.[\[1, 33, 39\]](#)

Lawrence is equally dependent on Faisal. His access to the tribes rests on Faisal's authority and Hashemite legitimacy. His effectiveness depends on the freedom of movement Faisal grants him, on the men Arab chiefs agree to mobilize, and on a political purpose that gives the operations a coherence British sabotage alone could never provide. Their partnership therefore rests on two different sets of resources, neither of which the other possesses.

4.3 An alliance that endures

Their cooperation does not require them to remain constantly together. Lawrence moves among the Arab camp, Cairo, British missions, and raiding parties. Faisal remains the political and military center of the Northern Army. This division of roles helps explain their effectiveness. Lawrence can carry information, request money or equipment, accompany an operation, and return to report; Faisal can decide which tribes to commit, preserve balances among chiefs, and maintain ties with Hussein, Abdullah, Ali, and Syrian nationalists.[\[1, 2, 7\]](#)

Trust develops through this practice. Lawrence gains unusual freedom of movement and direct access to Faisal. Faisal accepts his advice without surrendering command. The *Twenty-Seven Articles* later codify a rule Lawrence draws from this experience: it is better for the Arabs to do something tolerably themselves than for the British to do it perfectly for them. The rule also reflects a political fact. A victory achieved by a force substituted entirely for Faisal's own would have carried far less value for the Arab project.[\[6\]](#)

The sources are far richer on Lawrence than on Faisal. They establish lasting closeness, esteem, and political loyalty, but counsel caution about claims of intimate friendship. What can be traced without speculation is their mutual loyalty when circumstances become difficult. Lawrence defends Faisal's claims in Paris and publicly in 1919; Faisal continues to accept him as an adviser even as British and French commitments become a central problem. Their relationship survives the shift from a military problem to a diplomatic conflict.[\[1, 18\]](#)



Figure 3: Lawrence and Faisal together, around 1918, with Allied officers. The photograph also shows the setting in which their cooperation acquired its full significance: an Arab force operating inside a coalition with naval, logistical, and military resources far greater than its own.

5 Medina: from Failed Assault to War on Communications

5.1 Why Medina holds

Medina is connected to Damascus by nearly 1,300 kilometers of railway. The line carries soldiers, ammunition, food, and water to positions that would otherwise be difficult to sustain across the desert. The city itself is fortified and commanded by Fakhri Pasha, who refuses to abandon it. Medina's ability to hold depends as much on the system supplying the garrison as on its fortifications.[31, 32, 38]

In June 1916, this is not yet a doctrine. The Hashemites genuinely try to take Medina. Failure gradually changes the question. If the city cannot be captured at an acceptable cost, can its garrison be prevented from being useful elsewhere? If the railway must remain open, how many men must the Empire assign to stations, bridges, tunnels, water points, trains, and repair crews?

5.2 March 1917: a doctrine taking shape

A letter from Lawrence to C. E. Wilson dated 9 March 1917 lets us see the reasoning before its later literary reconstruction. Lawrence discusses locomotives, supply trains, and water installations.[9] The objective is not necessarily to sever the line once and for all. Total destruction might induce the Ottomans to evacuate Medina and release troops for use elsewhere.

Repeated attacks that can be repaired, but only at a cost, can instead keep the garrison in place while raising the price of sustaining it.

The logic exploits a simple asymmetry. The defender must keep a continuous network usable; the attacker chooses where and when to strike. A small team with explosives can damage a few meters of track or a structure; the Empire must watch hundreds of kilometers and remain capable of responding everywhere. Archaeological work on the railway defenses shows that the Ottomans did adapt their dispositions, including by multiplying and strengthening protective positions.[32]

5.3 From traditional raiding to war against a modern network

Mobile raiding long predates Lawrence. Bedouin societies have long practiced the *ghazu*, a rapid expedition intended to surprise an opponent, seize goods or animals, and withdraw before a stronger response can arrive. Camel mobility, knowledge of water points, intelligence from local networks, and the autonomy of small groups all belong to a tradition far older than 1916.[32]

What changes is the target and the scale. The same qualities are applied to industrial infrastructure on which a modern army depends. Explosives turn a raid into an attack on a network; British intelligence helps identify targets; British gold supports mobilization; and the strategic value of each action depends on its connection to a much larger war. Lawrence's particular contribution is to conceptualize this mechanism and connect it to Allied objectives. Arab fighters supply much of the practical knowledge that makes it possible.

6 Wejh: Organizing a Different Way of Fighting

6.1 Moving the center of operations north

In early January 1917, Faisal leaves Yanbu and moves north along the Red Sea coast toward Wejh with several thousand men and a large camel train. The movement depends on supply by sea. The Royal Navy eventually moves ahead of the column and takes part in the attack on the port, which falls on 25 January. The operation confirms the division of labor already visible at Yanbu: the fleet can transport, supply, and provide support that the Northern Army lacks; Faisal supplies the force that can then make lasting use of the newly opened space.[31, 38]

Wejh changes the geography of the Revolt. Medina remains to the south, but Faisal's army is no longer fixed by it. From the new base, the railway can be approached along a greater length, contact with northern tribes becomes easier, and Syria comes within the campaign's reach. Stewart Newcombe, an engineer and intelligence officer, and Herbert Garland, an explosives specialist, take part in the railway war; Lawrence does not have a monopoly on it. It is also from Wejh that relations with the Howeitat acquire the importance that will lead to Aqaba.[33, 39]

6.2 Commanding without a homogeneous army

At Wejh, Faisal commands contingents that do not all operate by the same rules. Tribal forces arrive with their chiefs and retain considerable autonomy; the regulars organized around Jaafar al-Askari, a former Ottoman officer who becomes one of the leading Arab regular commanders and later prime minister of Iraq, expect more stable organization; the British and French missions possess technical and financial resources but cannot replace Arab command without a political cost. Faisal keeps these elements within the same campaign by assigning them different functions rather than trying to make them uniform.[1, 4]

Auda Abu Tayi, the leading Howeitat chief whose support gives the Revolt a powerful tribal bridge northward, illustrates this form of command. His alignment is not that of an officer entering a hierarchy. It commits a chief and part of the Howeitat to a campaign whose aims can coincide with their own. Jaafar stands close to the opposite pole: a former Ottoman officer, he organizes the regulars and contributes staff expertise. Faisal retains political authority over these different forms of commitment. Lawrence, Joyce, Newcombe, and the French mission operate within this framework rather than at its center.[1, 11, 19]

The *Twenty-Seven Articles*, published in August 1917, codify part of what Lawrence learns inside this system. He stresses knowledge of the men, indirect influence, and the need to let the Arabs carry out tasks themselves. The text records a practice already visible in the campaign: an adviser's effectiveness depends on his ability to act without displacing the partner he advises.[6]

7 An Alliance under Conflicting Commitments

7.1 Hussein-McMahon, Sykes-Picot, Balfour

Military cooperation develops inside a diplomatic framework its participants do not control. Between 1915 and January 1916, Hussein and McMahon correspond about the conditions for an uprising and Arab independence. Their territorial language is ambiguous enough to sustain opposing interpretations afterward. In May 1916, London and Paris secretly conclude the Sykes-Picot Agreement, dividing zones of direct control and influence across part of the Ottoman Empire's Arab territories. In November 1917, the Balfour Declaration adds another commitment concerning Palestine.[14–16]

One point in the chronology remains uncertain: exactly when Faisal learns the terms of Sykes-Picot. Lawrence knows about the contradictions in British policy earlier than most of his Arab partners. Jeremy Wilson argues that he explains the terms of Sykes-Picot to Faisal at Wejh; the evidence for a full disclosure as early as February 1917 remains disputed. What is better established is that by spring 1917, during Mark Sykes's visit to Wejh, Syria's future and the Anglo-French arrangements are explicitly being discussed. The Bolsheviks' publication of the agreement late that year then removes any possibility of keeping it secret.[2, 15]

7.2 British commitments test the alliance

By spring 1917, the contradiction is no longer theoretical in Faisal's camp. Discussions with Mark Sykes at Wejh explicitly concern Syria and the Anglo-French arrangements. Fayez al-Ghussein's diary shows that Faisal's circle understands that an Allied victory may produce a French presence incompatible with the independence they expect. The exact chronology of a full disclosure of Sykes-Picot by Lawrence is less certain; the evidence supports a gradual awareness that had become politically explicit by spring 1917 at the latest.[2, 12, 15]

For Lawrence, the difficulty is concrete. He serves a government that finances and arms the Revolt while knowing that its aims do not fully coincide with Faisal's. For Faisal, British assistance remains indispensable just as its political value becomes more uncertain. Their cooperation continues, but its purpose broadens: the advance north is now also a means of strengthening the Arab position before the final negotiations. Aqaba, and later Damascus, matter both for what they make possible militarily and for the claims they can support afterward.

8 Aqaba: Changing the Scale

8.1 The expedition

The expedition that ends at Aqaba begins in May 1917 with a small group. Lawrence and Sharif Nasir leave Wejh for the interior rather than following the coast. The detour looks disproportionate if measured only in distance; it answers the geography of the position. Aqaba is defended against an attack from the sea and connected to the interior through a chain of Ottoman posts. Taking it first requires turning that defensive geography against itself by approaching through the desert.[2, 11]

The small group that sets out is not the force that eventually reaches Aqaba. The expedition recruits along the way. Auda Abu Tayi's support and the participation of Howeitat groups provide fighters, knowledge of the ground, and local authority that Lawrence does not possess. Before moving on the port, the force strikes Ottoman positions and communications, notably around Abu al-Lissan. The fighting opens the road south and disrupts a defensive system designed chiefly to protect Aqaba from a coastal threat.[11, 31]

Aqaba falls on 6 July. The disparity between the small party that left Wejh and the scale of the result explains much of the later legend, but it can obscure the actual mechanism: recruitment during the march, cooperation with local chiefs, operational surprise, and attack along the least expected axis. Lawrence plays an important role in conception, liaison, and execution; Auda and the Howeitat make the operation possible on the ground; Faisal gives it a place within a larger campaign and is then able to exploit the port politically and militarily.

8.2 Auda, Faisal, and Lawrence

Auda turns an operational idea into a credible local force. Faisal provides the political authority that gives the operation a place in the wider campaign. Lawrence supplies liaison, helps plan the advance, and accepts considerable personal risk. Aqaba depends on all three: Faisal's legitimacy, Auda's tribal network, and Lawrence's intermediation.

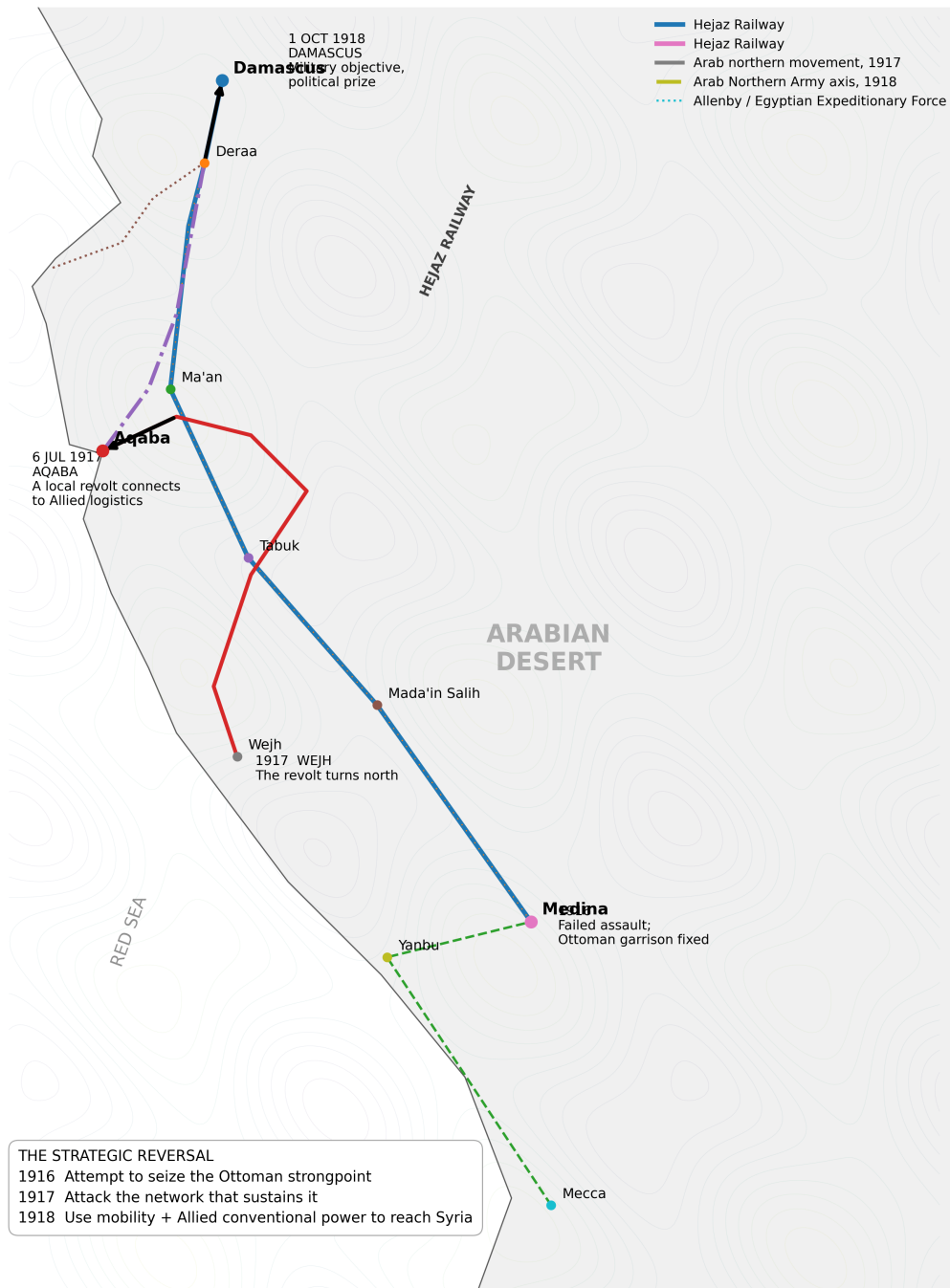
8.3 Aqaba as a base for a new kind of campaign

After Aqaba falls, Lawrence crosses Sinai to report the news to the British command. The port becomes a base through which supplies, weapons, vehicles, specialists, and communications can flow. Faisal's force also moves closer to Allenby's main theater of operations. The Hejaz uprising can now take a more direct part in a campaign toward Syria.[11, 39]

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE ARAB REVOLT

1916-1918 | From Medina to Damascus

The revolt became strategically effective when it stopped treating Ottoman strongpoints as the main problem and began attacking the network that made Ottoman control possible.



Strategic reconstruction. Campaign movements are schematic; city and railway nodes are geographically located.
 Historical basis: Arab Bulletin; T. E. Lawrence wartime reports; British Library Aqaba report; NZ History; 1914-1918 Online.

Figure 4: The geography of the Arab Revolt, 1916–1918. Medina, Wejh, and Aqaba correspond to three successive ways of framing the military problem: seize a position, attack its communications, then connect the Arab force to Allied resources and the Syrian axis.

9 From Irregular War to a Composite Force

9.1 The Arab regulars

Faisal's force does not remain an aggregation of tribal contingents. From late 1916, Arab officers and soldiers from the Ottoman army, many of them former prisoners of war, form a regular core. Jaafar al-Askari becomes one of its central figures; Nuri al-Said, an Arab officer in the Ottoman army and future prime minister of Iraq, serves within this organization. They bring capabilities for which the irregular contingents were not designed: staff work, more stable discipline, the use of artillery and machine guns, holding positions, and organizing units able to remain in combat for longer periods.[4, 19]

Faisal has to make these professional soldiers coexist with chiefs whose authority comes from different sources. The regulars may disdain tribal indiscipline; the chiefs have no reason automatically to accept the methods of a regular army. The answer is not to merge every fighter into one organization. Regulars perform tasks requiring permanence and technical skill; tribal forces retain their mobility, local intelligence, and autonomy. This division of labor gradually widens the range of operations the army can undertake.

9.2 Armored cars, aircraft, artillery, and intelligence

From Aqaba onward, Faisal's army gains greater access to Allied armored vehicles, aircraft, artillery, specialists, and communications. These technologies do not replace local mobility; they extend it. An armored car has value only where the ground permits its use; reconnaissance aircraft become more useful when combined with information from the ground; industrial explosives become strategically important when mobile groups can reach the railway.[10, 39]

From 1917, the campaign brings several forms of warfare together. Irregular contingents retain their mobility; Arab regulars hold positions and use heavier weapons; British and French missions provide specialists, aircraft, armored cars, and intelligence; the whole force is progressively connected to Allenby's operations. The distinctive feature lies in combining them within a single campaign.

9.3 Tafileh: knowing when to accept battle

In January 1918, Arab forces operate around Tafileh, south of the Dead Sea. The sequence begins with actions against the railway and Ottoman posts. Regulars under Nuri al-Said, tribal contingents, machine guns, and light artillery take part. When the Ottomans move to retake Tafileh, the situation no longer resembles Medina in June 1916: the Arabs have the ground, information about the enemy's approach, and a stronger combination of regular and irregular forces.[10, 39]

Faisal and his commanders then accept a more direct engagement. The Ottoman force is defeated and withdraws. At Tafileh, experience acquired since 1916 leads the Arab commanders to give battle under conditions they have partly chosen. A weaker force avoids an engagement when it restores the opponent's advantages in mass, artillery, and organization; it can accept battle when terrain, information, surprise, and the combination of forces have already altered the local balance.

Table 1: Tactics for challenging a stronger power

Mechanism	Legacy or precedent	Application, 1916–1918	Condition / limit
Deny the enemy concentration	Mobile raiding, desert warfare	Dispersal and choice of where to act	Space, mobility, local intelligence
Raise the cost of protection	War on communications	Railway, stations, bridges, water points	A long, vulnerable network
Fix rather than destroy	Economy of force	Medina retained as an Ottoman burden	Works only if fixing the enemy costs more than releasing him
Command indirectly	Tribal coalition, liaison	Chiefs retain autonomy under Faisal’s political direction	Requires legitimacy and trust
Connect the weaker force to an ally	Older auxiliary and coalition practices	Gold, Navy, aircraft, armored cars, Allenby	Risk of political dependence
Combine irregulars and regulars	Multiple precedents	Tribes, Jaafar, artillery, raids, EEF	Coordination without forced uniformity
Create a territorial fact	War and diplomacy	Aqaba, Transjordan, Damascus	Military control does not guarantee recognition

10 Uniting without Erasing Differences

10.1 A coalition of tribes, officers, and Syrian networks

The language of the Revolt can retrospectively suggest a national actor that already existed as a coherent whole. Faisal in fact works with affiliations that overlap without becoming identical: Hashemites from the Hejaz, tribes with local interests, Arab officers from the Ottoman army, nationalist activists, urban notables, and, as the campaign advances, populations in Transjordan and Syria.[1, 28, 29]

The political task is to make these affiliations compatible with a common undertaking while allowing them to persist. Hashemite authority provides a rallying point. Money and captured resources sustain tribal mobilization. Regular officers give the military effort greater permanence. The Syrian project attracts nationalists and notables who would not have fought for a purely Hejazi revolt.

10.2 Faisal’s instruments

Faisal possesses few coercive instruments of the kind available to a state. He cannot impose uniform conscription, reliably pay a national army, or replace the authority of local chiefs. His command therefore depends on keeping different interests within the same campaign. British money matters: it helps finance contingents and sustain alliances. Money alone, however, cannot secure lasting commitment. Faisal also distributes recognition, access, responsibility, and a political prospect.[1, 4]

The Howeitat alignment around Auda shows one way this works. Their participation opens an area in which the Revolt had previously lacked the same local depth. Faisal does not turn Auda into a bureaucratic subordinate; he incorporates him into an undertaking whose success can serve the chief’s prestige, his tribe’s interests, and the Hashemite advance at the same time. With Jaafar al-Askari and the Arab officers, the mechanism is different. Faisal gives them the opportunity to redirect their Ottoman military experience into the service of an Arab army and gives them a substantive place in his command.[1, 11, 19]

A different mechanism operates through Faisal's Syrian connections. Contacts established in 1915 and maintained during the war allow Faisal to present the Northern Army's advance as more than Hashemite expansion beyond the Hejaz. As the campaign approaches Damascus, officers, nationalists, and notables can see it as the military support for a future Arab government. The American report of March 1918 notes that as early as 1915 Faisal had been in constant communication with Arab leaders in Damascus and with chiefs in Syria, Transjordan, and the Hauran who promised support for a Hashemite revolt.[17]

These three forms of coalition-building do not erase differences. They give distinct loyalties a temporary reason to converge. This is the hardest part of Faisal's political skill to describe accurately: he makes different loyalties compatible for a time rather than manufacturing unity by making them alike.

10.3 A coalition that remains fragile

The same features that make the coalition adaptable also limit its durability. Tribal commitments can dissolve; local rivalries persist; not all Syrian elites accept Hashemite predominance; the French support other actors; the British pursue objectives of their own. Faisal can keep together men whose loyalties, interests, and forms of organization differ. As the territory expands, he must also raise revenue, administer towns, maintain an army, and arbitrate conflicts that will not disappear with victory.

Table 2: Methods of political coalition-building around Faisal

Instrument	Function	Fragility
Hashemite legitimacy	Provide a recognized center for a disparate coalition	Insufficient by itself for nationalists or populations with no Hejazi ties
Autonomy of components	Allow tribes and chiefs to participate without surrendering their position	Makes command less predictable
Distribution of resources	Sustain mobilization and alliances	Dependence on British funding
Arab officers and regulars	Provide permanence, expertise, and administration	Potential tension with tribal forms of authority
Syrian objective	Broaden the cause beyond the Hejaz	Collides with French plans and some local autonomies
Victories and institutions	Give common action concrete experience and form	A fait accompli remains vulnerable without external recognition

11 Deraa and Damascus: the Campaign Becomes a Struggle for Political Position

11.1 Integration with Allenby's offensive

By 1918, the military value of the Arab Northern Army increasingly lay in its relationship to Allenby's main offensive. Arab forces operated against communications, threatened Ma'an and Amman, and then concentrated more heavily around the Deraa junction. When the EEF launched the Megiddo offensive in September, the destruction of railways and communications north and south of Deraa complicated the Ottoman retreat.[10, 31, 40]

The campaign now rested on a division of functions. Allenby had the mass required to break the front. Faisal's forces ranged across a wider space, disrupted communications, drew in new adherents, and accelerated the Ottoman disintegration. In September 1918, the two parts of the offensive performed distinct roles. Allenby broke the Ottoman front in Palestine with the mass of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. To the east, Faisal's forces

struck communications around Deraa, impeded the retreat, and gained new recruits as the Ottoman army came apart. Their convergence brought about the fall of Syria.

11.2 Damascus as a military and political objective

After Megiddo, the Ottoman collapse turned the advance on Damascus into a race. Arab forces moved along the eastern flank of the retreat, struck communications around Deraa, and converged on the capital while units of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force advanced from the west. The familiar question of who entered Damascus “first” captures the situation poorly: several columns reached a city whose Ottoman apparatus was disintegrating, and the decisive issue almost immediately became which authority would be recognized there.[20, 40]

Allenby allowed Faisal to occupy and administer Damascus within the Allied arrangements, without promising that the final settlement would confirm that authority. Supporters of the Arab cause therefore moved quickly to establish an administration and turn military presence into political consequence. Aqaba had provided a base; the operations of 1917–1918 had expanded the networks and the army; Damascus finally provided a capital.[20]

For Faisal, an Arab government established before the peace conference could claim to speak from administered territory rather than from a wartime promise alone. For the British and French, that presence remained subject to inter-Allied decisions. Both interpretations were already present in October 1918.

12 Damascus: the Expansion of What Seemed Possible

12.1 From the Hejaz Revolt to a Syrian government

In Damascus, the coalition had to accomplish within weeks a transformation for which the war had done little to prepare it. The new authority had to appoint officials, maintain order, raise and spend revenue, administer cities, and govern populations many of whom had taken no part in the Revolt. Faisal relied on Arab officers, nationalist networks, and urban notables; the administration created after the conquest sought to extend its authority from Damascus toward Homs, Hama, and Aleppo.[1, 20, 28]

The tensions within the coalition appeared at once. Former Ottoman officers brought administrative and military skills; al-Fatat activists wanted to give the new authority a national purpose; notables sought to preserve their influence; the British still supervised part of the military structure; France contested the extension of Arab authority into the zone it claimed. Faisal’s government therefore had an institutional reality, but depended on an international environment it did not control.[20, 28]

This was the coalition’s first test as a state. During the war, flexible commitments had been an advantage. In Damascus, administration required durable decisions and recognized authority over actors who could no longer simply choose how far they wished to participate. The problem of holding the coalition together had changed.

12.2 Faisal and Lawrence did not have the same dream

Damascus abruptly enlarged what Faisal could reasonably hope to achieve. In 1915, he had carried between Damascus and his father the program of a group of conspirators and officers. Three years later, he had an army, a capital, and an administration. When he subsequently addressed the victors, he claimed independence for the Arabic-speaking peoples of Asia and an Arab authority able to choose for itself the form of any foreign assistance it might accept.[21]

Lawrence shared much of that objective, above all the desire to give real political substance to the Arab contribution to victory. But his commitment was that of a Briton trying to alter

the policy of his own country, not that of a Hashemite claimant expected to govern. The difference became more visible after Damascus. Faisal had to decide which territorial or international concessions he could accept to save a state. Lawrence could advocate, interpret, write, and use his growing fame; he did not bear the same political cost for compromise.[1, 18]

Their paths therefore remained distinct. In Paris they could defend the Arab position together while carrying different responsibilities, risks, and futures.

13 Paris: a Different Distribution of Power

13.1 Faisal before the victors

In Paris, Faisal again had to operate in a different arena. On 6 February 1919, he presented the Arab claim himself before the Council of Ten. He asked that the Arabic-speaking peoples of Asia, southward from a line running from Alexandretta to Diarbekir, be recognized as independent, while stressing the diversity of local circumstances. He allowed for different forms of government across the territories and sought recognition of the political principle from which later arrangements should be negotiated.[21]

His position was more flexible than a simple maximalist claim would suggest. Faisal knew that the state he wanted lacked the administrative cadres and resources of a great power. He accepted foreign assistance provided it did not become imposed sovereignty. That distinction structured his negotiations in 1919 and early 1920. It also explains why he could negotiate with the British, the French, and Zionist representatives without treating those discussions as equivalent to abandoning independence.[1, 22]

13.2 Faisal-Weizmann: negotiating several issues at once

On 3 January 1919, Faisal signed an agreement with Chaim Weizmann that envisaged cooperation between the Arab and Zionist movements and included provisions favorable to the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. The document has often been cited as evidence of broad Arab acceptance of the Zionist project. Yet the handwritten reservation Faisal added sharply limited its scope: his commitment depended on obtaining the Arab independence he had requested; if those conditions were not met, he did not consider himself bound.[22]

Faisal sought support, accepted compromises, and tied his concessions to achievement of his principal objective. He had negotiated in much the same way during the war. In Paris, however, the bargain depended on commitments whose fulfillment he could not control.

13.3 King-Crane and the question of legitimacy

The American King-Crane Commission gathered petitions and testimony in the former Ottoman provinces in 1919. A large proportion of the Syrian petitions called for independence, and the program of the Syrian Congress supported Faisal as head of a Syrian state.[23] The findings gave Faisal a serious argument against the claim that his government was merely a Hashemite venture imported from the Hejaz.

The methods used to mobilize petitions, local pressures, and the diversity of preferences, all documented by the commission itself, make it impossible to read the results as a modern referendum. They nevertheless establish a solid point: both the independence project and Faisal personally enjoyed real political support in Syria in 1919, though that support was neither uniform nor sufficient to neutralize French power.

14 The Syrian Kingdom and the Closing of Possibilities

14.1 The British withdrawal

In the autumn of 1919, the withdrawal of British forces from parts of Syria abruptly altered Faisal's position. During the war, the alliance with London had provided money, protection, weapons, and access to Allenby. After the armistice, London wanted to reduce its commitments and reach an accommodation with Paris. French forces gradually replaced the British in critical areas.^[24]

Faisal retained local legitimacy and an administration in Damascus. But the British departure deprived him of the military protection that had accompanied his expansion. France could now exert directly a pressure that London had still constrained during the war.

14.2 The compromise with Clemenceau

On 6 January 1920, Faisal and Clemenceau reached a provisional compromise. The text recognized the principle of a Syrian state with Damascus as its capital, but provided for extensive French assistance: advisers and instructors, a role in civil and military administration, financial organization, external representation, and economic priority. Faisal also accepted an independent Lebanon under French protection. He secured an agreement that affirmed Syrian independence without making the word "mandate" its organizing principle, but France retained instruments capable of sharply limiting that independence.^[1, 34]

Faisal accepted the text because his alternatives were narrowing. The British were withdrawing from Syria and were unwilling to confront Paris to preserve his government. An agreement with Clemenceau might still save an Arab state in Damascus, at the price of substantial dependence on France. On his return, however, this room for compromise collided with a more demanding Syrian politics. Nationalists who had made Faisal a symbol of independence found it difficult to accept his return from Paris with foreign tutelage, even when described as assistance.

14.3 March–July 1920: kingdom, San Remo, Maysalun

On 8 March 1920, the Syrian Congress proclaimed independence and Faisal king of a Syria whose claimed borders extended far beyond the area France was prepared to leave to him. The January compromise became politically almost impossible to implement. A few weeks later, San Remo assigned the mandate for Syria and Lebanon to France. The Damascus government now faced an international decision backed by a military power already present on the coast and in Lebanon, while London no longer offered it a guarantee.^[1, 26, 28]

In July, High Commissioner Henri Gouraud issued an ultimatum. Faisal tried to avoid a war whose balance of forces he understood and eventually accepted most of the French demands. But the king's authority over the national movement was no longer sufficient to impose capitulation without a fight. His minister of war, Yusuf al-Azma, assembled regulars, volunteers, and disparate contingents at Maysalun, on the road from Beirut to Damascus.^[1, 28]

On 24 July, the Army of the Levant attacked with clear superiority in manpower, artillery, armor, and aircraft. Estimates of Syrian strength vary, but the defenders were far fewer and much more poorly equipped than the roughly twelve thousand men committed on the French side in the campaign. The battle was brief. Al-Azma was killed, the Syrian position was broken, and French forces entered Damascus soon afterward. The kingdom disappeared.^[1, 28]

Maysalun casts the campaign of 1916–1918 in a different light. After the failure at Medina, the Revolt could change its strategy because it could abandon the attempt to take the fortress, move elsewhere, attack a network, and rely on a conventional ally. In July 1920, the Syrian

government could not abandon Damascus without abandoning the state it claimed to embody. It no longer had a British ally willing to supply the conventional power it lacked. Mobility and dispersion, which had made weakness useful during the war, could not solve the problem of a government compelled to defend its territory and capital.

14.4 Mosul and oil in the post-Ottoman settlement

Oil belongs to this history, but its importance varied over time and across regions. Before the Revolt, the Turkish Petroleum Company already brought together British, Anglo-Dutch, and German interests around the petroleum prospects of Mesopotamia. The war greatly increased the strategic importance attached to oil, and the question of Mosul became one of the issues in the territorial settlement.[25, 36, 37]

At San Remo, the Franco-British oil agreement provided, among other things, for a 25 percent French share in the Mesopotamian interests derived from the TPC and addressed the conditions under which oil would be transported. The United States later challenged arrangements it regarded as exclusive and defended the Open Door principle.[25]

After the war, negotiations over Mosul directly linked territory, mandate, infrastructure, and access to resources. They extended the imperial rivalries of 1916 into a setting in which oil had acquired much greater strategic importance. For Faisal, the decisive effect was institutional: the fate of territories he claimed was being decided in forums where the European powers possessed instruments he did not.

15 Two Paths after Syria

15.1 Faisal in Iraq

The loss of Damascus did not end Faisal's political career. The Iraqi revolt of 1920 convinced London that direct administration was costly and politically fragile. At the Cairo Conference of 1921, the British supported Faisal's candidacy for the throne of Iraq. In Mesopotamia he entered a political project different from the one he had lost in Syria: a state under construction, formed from the former provinces of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul and divided by deep confessional, tribal, urban, and regional differences.[1, 34]

Iraq therefore became a second test of his political method. This time Faisal had to turn coalition-building into durable institutions: administration, army, school system, relations with tribes, and compromise with urban elites. He depended on Britain for security and for part of the kingdom's international architecture, while gradually seeking greater room for maneuver. His Hashemite legitimacy and the prestige of the Revolt gave him a national standing that British administrators lacked; they did not erase the divisions within the new state.[1]

His reign showed what Syria had not had time to test. Faisal could work within the constraints imposed by a tutelary power, integrate different elites, and use the state to create more unity than had existed at the outset. Tensions remained strong and independence was negotiated over many years, but Iraq was admitted to the League of Nations on 3 October 1932. Faisal died in Bern on 8 September 1933, aged forty-eight, less than a year after that formal recognition.[1, 4, 27]

15.2 Lawrence after the campaign

Lawrence accompanied Faisal to Paris and used his growing fame to argue for a settlement more favorable to the Hashemites. He later worked briefly with Winston Churchill at the

Colonial Office on the Middle Eastern settlement. Meanwhile, Lowell Thomas turned his illustrated lectures into a public sensation and did much to create “Lawrence of Arabia.”[2, 41]

Lawrence had a contradictory relationship with this celebrity. He worked on *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, lost his first manuscript at Reading station, rewrote the book, and circulated a subscribers’ edition in 1926. At the same time, he sought anonymity in the RAF under the name Ross and later in the Tank Corps as Shaw.[2, 43]

The distance between the man and the public figure became part of his story. His writings are indispensable for understanding the campaign, but their literary power and reconstruction of memory also fixed a version in which his own consciousness occupies disproportionate space. His correspondence sometimes corrects that image; in 1927, for example, he pointed out that Lowell Thomas had accompanied him on no operation and had spent only a few days with him at Aqaba.[42]

Lawrence left the RAF in February 1935. On 13 May, he was injured in a motorcycle accident near Clouds Hill in Dorset. He died on 19 May 1935 at the military hospital at Bovington Camp, aged forty-six. Faisal had died less than two years earlier. Their cooperation, which had lasted only a few years, was already becoming a story much simpler than the history itself.

16 Innovation through Combination

Raiding, attacks on communications, tribal alliances, the use of auxiliaries, and sabotage all have long histories. Lawrence himself placed his thinking within a broader military culture; Faisal worked with practices of coalition and forms of legitimacy that predated the war. Their contribution lies chiefly in the combinations made possible by the circumstances of 1916–1918.

Table 3: Inheritance, adaptation, and contribution in the Lawrence-Faisal campaign

Domain	Inheritance	Transformation during the Revolt	Identifiable contribution
Raid	<i>Ghazw</i> , desert mobility	Explosives, railway targets, coordination with intelligence	Local raiding turned into systematic pressure on industrial infrastructure
Command	Autonomy of chiefs and personal alliances	British liaison that respected Arab command	Influence without substitution, codified by Lawrence but practiced within a system led by Faisal
Coalition	Hashemite legitimacy, tribal alliances	Integration of officers, nationalists, and regulars	Gradual expansion of a dynastic revolt into an Arab political enterprise
Technology	Allied industrial armies	Aircraft, armored cars, artillery, and communications supporting a mobile force	Connection of an irregular force to industrial capabilities without full organizational absorption
Strategy	War on communications, economy of force	Deliberate decision to leave Medina in Ottoman hands and apply selective pressure to the railway	Explicit understanding of the cost of protecting a network and the value of dispersing enemy forces
Politics	Territorial fait accompli	Aqaba and then Damascus as bargaining assets	Conscious linkage between military advance and a claim to sovereignty

Their originality lay in the combination. Tribal raids were linked to modern explosives and intelligence; Arab regular officers fought alongside Bedouin contingents; local networks guided capabilities supplied by British power; Faisal’s operations eventually meshed with Allenby’s

offensive. The combination remained fragile: the Allied power providing an essential share of these means pursued objectives of its own.

17 Defying an Empire, Uniting a People

17.1 Giving the enemy a different problem

Medina provides the first case. In June 1916, Hashemite forces attacked an entrenched garrison supplied by rail and commanded by regular officers. They were fighting where the Ottoman advantage was greatest. After the assaults failed, the campaign shifted to the railway. A mobile party could choose its point of attack, lay charges, and disappear; the Empire had to protect stations, bridges, tunnels, water points, convoys, and repair crews across more than a thousand kilometers. Ottoman power remained greater, but an increasing share of it was absorbed in protecting the network.

At Tafleleh in January 1918, Arab forces accepted a more direct battle: terrain, intelligence, and local concentration gave them a temporary advantage. Economy of force here meant accepting battle when the enemy's strengths mattered least and Arab strengths mattered most.

Aqaba added a third dimension. From July 1917, Faisal's army received weapons, gold, vehicles, specialists, and increasing air support through the port. By 1918, its operations were combined with Allenby's offensive. A weaker force could thus draw on the capabilities of a great power. British assistance sharply increased Faisal's means; it also tied part of his military strength to decisions made in London.

Table 4: Ways to challenge a superior power

Principle	Problem posed on the enemy	im- the	Application in the Revolt	Conditions and limits
Deny enemy concentration	Makes mass difficult to employ	diffi-	Avoid strongpoints; move through the desert	Space, intelligence, freedom of movement
Attack communications	Expands the area that must be protected	the	Hejaz Railway, stations, bridges, water points, convoys	Vulnerable network; less effect if the enemy can abandon it
Control the tempo	Forces the enemy to react		Short raids, dispersal after action	Discipline, mobility, local intelligence
Preserve the force	Reduces the stronger side's attritional advantage	advan-	Battle accepted at Tafleleh under favorable conditions	Requires the ability to refuse battle elsewhere
Borrow capabilities	Adds industrial means without producing them		Gold, explosives, Navy, aircraft, armored cars, Allenby	Dependence on the ally and possible divergence of aims
Create territorial facts	Turns military action into political position		Aqaba, then Damascus	A fait accompli remains reversible without recognition or durable force

17.2 Building a coalition without erasing its parts

Faisal faced a different problem. The Northern Army brought together tribal contingents attached to their own chiefs, Arab officers trained in the Ottoman army, Syrian activists, and Allied agents or specialists. Auda Abu Tayi joined the Aqaba expedition with his men and his standing among the Howeitat. Jaafar al-Askari brought regular military experience and

organized units capable of holding a front. Syrian networks opened political space for Faisal north of the Hejaz. Each entered the coalition through a different route.

Faisal held this ensemble together through dynastic legitimacy, personal negotiation, distribution of resources, and shared victories. Tribal contingents retained their chiefs and organization. The regulars had a more conventional chain of command. Syrian nationalists found in the advance toward Damascus a political horizon beyond the defense of the Hejaz. Aqaba and then Damascus gave the coalition a credibility that proclamations alone would have struggled to produce.[1, 17, 19]

That flexibility suited a war of movement. In Damascus, Arab authority had to raise revenue, administer cities, maintain a standing army, and arbitrate among interests that diverged once the common enemy disappeared. The Iraqi experience would continue that work in a more durable setting.

Table 5: Ways of holding Faisal’s coalition together

Mechanism	Application	Intended effect	Limit
Common cause	Arab independence, then a Syrian horizon	Give direction to different motivations	Precise aims differ among groups
Autonomy of components	Tribal chiefs, regulars, and urban networks retain their own forms	Broaden the coalition without requiring uniformity	Harder coordination
Resources and recognition	Gold, weapons, offices, prestige, access to the prince	Sustain loyalties and attract new adherents	Depends on available resources
Shared victories	Aqaba, advance north, Damascus	Make the enterprise a credible reality	Military prestige erodes if the political project fails
Institutions	Damascus administration, then the Iraqi state	Make unity endure beyond the war	Requires finance, administration, and legitimate coercion

17.3 From military victory to sovereignty

Between 1916 and 1918, space often favored Faisal. He could move his forces, choose his targets, and force the Ottomans to protect an immense territory. After the armistice, decisions moved to capitals and international institutions. France and Britain controlled diplomatic recognition, the mandates, access to ports, much of the financing, and conventional armies capable of occupying territory.

In Damascus, the change became concrete. The city gave Faisal a capital and an administration; it also compelled him to defend a defined territory. When the British withdrew from Syria, the coalition lost the partner that had supplied an essential share of its conventional strength. At Maysalun in July 1920, the Syrian government directly confronted a better-equipped French army backed by the new international order. Mobility, raids, and dispersion offered no answer to an army arriving to impose the mandate by force.

Table 6: From wartime resources to the requirements of sovereignty

Resource	During the war	After 1918
Mobility	Allows the force to choose where to act	A government must hold and administer territory
Local networks	Provide intelligence and mobilization	Sovereignty also requires external recognition
Flexible coalition	Brings different actors together against a common enemy	A state must arbitrate their differences over time
British support	Multiplies Arab military capacity	London negotiates its withdrawal and agreements with Paris
Fait accompli in Damascus	Gives the Syrian claim a territorial base	A conventional army can overturn it
Prestige of victory	Strengthens Faisal’s authority	Must be turned into institutions, finance, and durable force

18 What Outlived Them

18.1 Lawrence’s Ideas Enter Military Doctrine

After the war, Lawrence’s writings made an experience built through successive trials available to others. The *Twenty-Seven Articles* of 1917 had been written for British officers assigned to Arab forces; *The Evolution of a Revolt*, published in 1920, drew broader conclusions from the campaign. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* later brought those ideas to a much wider readership. Lawrence himself warned that advice devised for the Bedouin was not a universal recipe. What travelled most readily were certain ways of thinking: serve alongside a local force without taking its place, understand the society in which one is operating, look for vulnerabilities in the enemy’s system, and adapt the organization of war to the environment in which it is fought.[2, 3, 5, 6]

The relationship with Basil H. Liddell Hart (1895–1970), the British officer who became one of the leading military theorists of the interwar years and later wrote *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*, provides the best-documented intellectual connection of the period. The two men corresponded from 1921. Liddell Hart read Lawrence while developing his own thinking on strategy and the indirect approach, and later made the Arab campaign an important case in his work. Azar Gat has documented borrowings and intellectual affinities that go beyond retrospective resemblance. Lawrence was nevertheless wary of the use Liddell Hart made of him. He objected to being recruited too readily into a general theory and rejected, in particular, Liddell Hart’s excessive hostility to Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), the Prussian general whose *On War* became one of the foundational works of modern strategic thought. The connection is real, but Lawrence was not the sole origin of the “indirect approach.”[2, 44]

After 1945, Lawrence continued to appear in several genealogies of irregular warfare. John Boyd (1927–1997), the U.S. Air Force colonel and military theorist whose briefing *Patterns of Conflict* deeply influenced American strategic thought, explicitly devoted part of it to Lawrence. David Kilcullen, an Australian officer who became a leading contemporary writer on counterinsurgency, opens his *Twenty-Eight Articles* by telling the reader that he has read Galula, Lawrence, and Robert Thompson. In Iraq, General David Petraeus, later commander of the Multi-National Force and one of the principal architects of *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency*, invoked Lawrence’s advice that a foreign force should not do itself what local partners can do imperfectly but sustainably. Petraeus and Lieutenant General James F. Amos signed *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency* in 2006; a commercial edition appeared the following year as *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. Lawrence thus remains present

in part of the professional literature on military advising, counterinsurgency, and partner forces.[46–48, 61]

18.2 A Genealogy That Requires Caution

That legacy has also produced overly simple lines of descent. Mao Zedong is often compared with Lawrence because both placed great value on space, mobility, population, and the refusal of battle on unfavorable terms. The sources examined here establish no transmission from Lawrence to Mao. Their ideas developed in profoundly different political, social, and intellectual settings. The resemblance is therefore comparative, not a documented genealogy.

The case of Võ Nguyên Giáp, the principal military strategist of the Viet Minh and later North Vietnam, is more intriguing. French General Raoul Salan, then serving in the Indochina War and later commander-in-chief there, reported that in 1946 Giáp had described *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* to him as his “gospel of combat.” The claim entered military writing and later academic work; as early as 1953, *Time* reported Salan’s view that Lawrence had strongly influenced Giáp. We have not, however, found a contemporary Vietnamese transcript or a 1946 document that authenticates the phrase itself. At a minimum, the testimony records how Salan understood Giáp. It makes Giáp’s reading of Lawrence plausible, but it does not justify reconstructing Viet Minh strategy as a descendant of the Arab Revolt.[49, 50]

The distinction applies across Lawrence’s wider legacy. Influence can be demonstrated when texts circulate, are cited, or appear on reading lists. Operational resemblance alone proves less. Resistance movements and armies facing a stronger opponent often rediscover similar constraints: avoid the enemy’s mass, preserve their own force, exploit local knowledge, and make the defense of territory expensive. Lawrence belongs to the history of these ideas alongside other practitioners and theorists who formulated or rediscovered them in different settings.

18.3 From Lawrence to the Maquis: Transmission through Allied Institutions

During the Second World War, some of Lawrence’s ideas can be traced beyond military libraries. MI(R), the small War Office organization established in 1938 to study and prepare irregular warfare, was an early conduit. Holland had *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* read there; Gubbins wrote guerrilla-warfare manuals before moving to the Special Operations Executive (SOE), created in 1940 to support sabotage, subversion, and resistance movements in occupied Europe. The Arab Revolt was only one of the experiences these men drew upon, alongside Ireland, Russia, and other irregular wars. Its place in their professional formation is nevertheless documented.[3, 45]

In France, this transmission acquired an operational form through Allied organizations working with the maquis. Jedburgh teams, usually three-man groups combining British, American, and French personnel, were parachuted behind German lines from 1944. They brought radios, links to Allied command, weapons, training, and coordination. Their task was to work with French forces that already existed, not to replace them. The maquis retained their leaders, networks, and objectives; the Allied teams connected them to the resources of a far more powerful military coalition.[62]

William Colby’s career provides an unusually clear individual trace. Before becoming Director of Central Intelligence, Colby served in the Office of Strategic Services and parachuted into France as a Jedburgh in 1944. He later explained that he had read *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* to understand how an outsider could operate within a society and a force that were not his own. He drew from it a rule of conduct: avoid taking command, learn to suggest,

adapt to local counterparts, and build trust over time. In his case, the passage from Lawrence to a mission alongside the French Resistance is explicit.[63]

The documented line ends there. There is no basis for presenting the French Resistance as a whole as an heir to Lawrence. Its movements grew out of French political trajectories, occupation, clandestine networks, and their own experience. The connection concerns above all some of the British and American organizations that supported them. A practice observed in Arabia had become a text, entered a professional culture, and twenty-five years later informed the conduct of some Allied officers in another theater.

18.4 From the Arab Revolt to *Unconventional Warfare*

After 1945, the same problem reappeared in efforts to connect a small external presence with a much larger local force. Contemporary *unconventional warfare* combines advising, training, intelligence, communications, resources, and clandestine or irregular action in support of a resistance movement, insurgency, or partner force. U.S. military publications continue to use the Arab Revolt among the historical cases through which this relationship can be examined.[48, 51]

Technology has changed the form of the targets. The Ottoman railway concentrated transport, supply, and the burden of protection. In contemporary war, those functions are distributed across railways and roads, depots, electrical grids, telecommunications, command centers, sensors, and supply chains. The analogy becomes misleading if every drone strike or act of sabotage is treated as a replay of 1917. It remains useful when focused on the problem imposed on the stronger side: a force unable to destroy the opposing army may instead multiply the points that army must watch, repair, and defend.

The SOE, the OSS, U.S. Special Forces, and contemporary concepts of prepared resistance have their own histories and doctrines. Lawrence was neither their single origin nor a ready-made model. His place is narrower and more durable: a precedent for thinking about the relationship among an outside adviser, a local force, knowledge of the environment, and the resources of an allied power.

18.5 Faisal: A Legacy without a Named Doctrine

Faisal's legacy followed a different path. No body of writing comparable to Lawrence's military texts codified a method of coalition under his name. His influence passed through the institutions and people with whom he worked after the war. Damascus provided the first laboratory. The Arab government of 1918–1920 had to accommodate urban notables, officers, nationalists, and administrations inherited from the Empire while giving political substance to a sovereignty that remained contested. The work of holding people together moved onto different ground: the coalition that had sustained the campaign now had to become an administration, a school system, an army, and a structure of political representation.[1, 28]

Sati' al-Husri gives this continuity a particularly clear form. A former senior Ottoman official who became one of the leading theorists of Arab nationalism, he joined Faisal's government in Damascus in 1919 and took charge of education. After the fall of the Syrian kingdom, he rejoined Faisal in Iraq. There he directed education and used schools, language, and a shared Arab history as instruments of national formation. Studies of al-Husri describe him as educator, ideologue, and close associate of Faisal; during the interwar years Iraq became one of the principal centers from which Arab nationalism spread.[52–54]

The documented continuity stops short of Nasserism and Ba'athism, whose genealogies are multiple. Later pan-Arabism emerged from several experiences and intellectual traditions. What can be traced more securely is narrower: networks and individuals who had passed through Damascus reappeared in the Iraqi state; education there became an explicit instru-

ment for forming a common identity; and the ideas taught through it later circulated far beyond Iraq. Faisal's legacy therefore lies in a political and institutional experience to which some of its participants later gave durable form, rather than in a doctrinal corpus bearing his name.

The difference helps explain why the two men are remembered so unevenly. Lawrence's prescriptions can be lifted from a text, quoted in a manual, and taught to a military adviser. Faisal's practice is harder to reduce to a handful of principles because it depended on relationships, compromises, and institutions whose effects continued after him. His legacy is less visible in military libraries, but it bears on a problem faced by any insurgency that becomes a claimant to power: how can unity forged in struggle survive once the common enemy disappears?

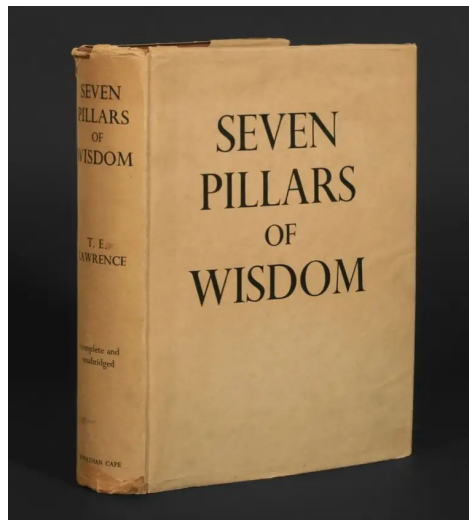
Table 7: After 1918: lines of transmission, convergence, and reuse

Transmission	Conduit	What the sources support	Assessment
Indirect approach	Liddell Hart	Correspondence, reading, and explicit borrowing, with Lawrence's reservations about generalization	Direct and documented
British clandestine warfare	MI(R), then the SOE milieu	<i>Seven Pillars</i> appears among MI(R)'s essential reading; Gubbins develops his own manuals there	Institutional, partial
French Resistance	Jedburghs, William Colby	Allied teams work with the maquis; Colby states that he used <i>Seven Pillars</i> to think about his relationship with a local force	Indirect; direct in Colby's case
Thinking about disruption	John Boyd	Lawrence is explicitly used in <i>Patterns of Conflict</i>	Direct and explicit
Advising and counterinsurgency	Petraeus, Kilcullen	Explicit citations and references to Lawrence's writings	Direct and explicit
Chinese revolutionary warfare	Mao	Similar problems and methods without an established documentary chain	Independent convergence
Vietnamese warfare	Giáp	Influence reported by Salan; famous phrase not verified in a contemporary Vietnamese source	Probable, with qualification
Arab national formation	al-Husri, Iraqi state	Personal and institutional continuity from Damascus to Baghdad; schools used to disseminate a common Arab identity	Strong institutional connection
Later pan-Arabism	movements of the 1940s–1960s	Circulation of ideas and elites, but multiple genealogies	Indirect

Strategic assessment, what endures

A century after the Arab Revolt, the legacies of the two men remain asymmetrical. Lawrence left texts that soldiers could read, quote, and incorporate into their own doctrines. Faisal left above all a political experience: a coalition that had to be turned into institutions and a shared identity. Lawrence gave irregular warfare a vocabulary; Faisal's experience points to a different problem, how a movement held together by a common enemy can preserve that unity once the enemy is gone.

18.6 *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*: From Testimony to Myth



T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Jonathan Cape, complete and unabridged edition.

A book built after the war. Lawrence began writing his account after 1918. A first manuscript disappeared in 1919 during a train journey. He began again, then worked between 1920 and 1922 on a third version. Eight sets of proofs of this text, now known as the *Oxford Text*, were printed in 1922; it ran to about 334,500 words. Between 1924 and 1926 Lawrence cut and revised it for a private subscribers' edition of about 250,600 words. His own accounts record 128 complete copies sold, 36 given away, six incomplete copies given away, and nine sets of proofs. The exceptionally lavish production cost him almost three times what subscribers paid. To cover his debts, he published the much shorter *Revolt in the Desert* in 1927. The text of the subscribers' edition did not become generally available until after his death, in 1935.[43, 55]

A hybrid form. The 1926 edition contains an introduction, ten books, and an epilogue. Its structure is narrative rather than that of a military treatise. The reader moves from portraits of people and places to accounts of operations, then to passages in which Lawrence tries to understand what the campaign taught him. Part of the book's influence comes from this construction: strategic ideas are embedded in lived experience and in a highly wrought literary work. It also requires caution. *Seven Pillars* is a major source on the Revolt, but it is a retrospective reconstruction, rewritten several times and shaped by its author. Wherever possible, its retrospective account is checked against contemporary reports, correspondence, and Arab sources.[2, 3, 56]

Faisal opens the book. The frontispiece of the 1926 edition is Augustus John's portrait of Faisal. Lawrence had acquired the painting, made in 1919, and placed it at the front of the book. The material detail captures a paradox of later memory: the work that did most to place Lawrence at the center of the story opens with the man who commanded the revolt to which Lawrence had been sent as a liaison officer.[43, 57]

From the book to "Lawrence of Arabia." Lawrence was already famous before the general publication of *Seven Pillars*, notably through the illustrated lectures of the American journalist and showman Lowell Thomas, who popularized the figure of "Lawrence of Arabia" from 1919. The success of *Revolt in the Desert*, followed by the posthumous circulation of *Seven Pillars*, gave the public figure greater literary depth. Cinema then carried that memory worldwide. The David Lean Archive preserves a 1961 screenplay still entitled *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and shows that the book was among the direct sources for the 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*. The adaptation turns a collective history into a sweeping biographical trajectory.

Lawrence becomes the face of the Revolt, while Faisal and many of the Arab participants recede into the background.[41, 58–60]

Two legacies in one book. *Seven Pillars* preserved and disseminated reflection on a war fought by a weak force with the support of a great power. It also fixed a way of telling that war around Lawrence. The book shaped both military thought and the memory of the Revolt.

Conclusion

Lawrence's fame long pushed Faisal into the background. Yet when Lawrence reached Hamra in October 1916, Faisal already commanded the Northern Army, possessed his own networks, and pursued an Arab political project. Lawrence arrived with regional knowledge unusual among British officers, close attention to terrain, and, above all, direct access to the resources of an Allied power. Their cooperation connected those two worlds.

Their way of fighting emerged from the campaign itself. Failure before Medina pushed the insurgents toward the railway. Wejh brought Faisal's army closer to Syria and to seaborne supply. Aqaba opened a port through which weapons, vehicles, aircraft, and specialists could arrive. Tribal contingents now fought alongside Arab regular units; in 1918 their operations combined with Allenby's offensive. The Revolt found a way to exploit mobility, local intelligence, and the vulnerability of Ottoman communications while borrowing from Britain some of the capabilities of an industrial army.

Meanwhile, Faisal widened the coalition. He kept around him tribal leaders, Arab officers from the Ottoman army, and Syrian nationalists whose loyalties and objectives differed. The advance north gave this coalition a cause, victories, and eventually a capital. On 1 October 1918, Damascus turned a military enterprise into a claim to government.

The postwar settlement confronted Faisal with a different balance of power. In Paris, and later against France in Syria, sovereignty depended on resources the desert campaign had supplied only weakly: international recognition, public finance, permanent institutions, and conventional military force. London prioritized its settlement with Paris and withdrew its forces from Syria. In July 1920 the French army defeated the kingdom's defenders at Maysalun and entered Damascus. Faisal would resume state-building in another form in Iraq; Lawrence, for his part, would spend part of the postwar years defending the Hashemite cause. Their legacies then followed different paths: Lawrence's writings entered the culture of irregular warfare, while Faisal's political experience endured chiefly through the institutions and people who moved from Damascus to Baghdad.

Between Medina and Damascus, Lawrence and Faisal had learned how to make Ottoman rule costly, dispersed, and vulnerable. At Maysalun, that power was no longer enough. They had learned how to drive an empire back in the field. They lacked the power required to impose on the victors the political order they wanted the war to bring into being.

Appendix A. Lawrence and Saint-Exupéry: Two Experiences of the Desert, Two Visions of the Human Condition

Paths That Might Have Crossed

T. E. Lawrence died in 1935, Faisal in 1933, and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in 1944. Their lives overlapped long enough for a meeting to have been possible. The research conducted for this paper has found no source establishing that Saint-Exupéry ever met Lawrence or Faisal. Nor has it identified, in the writings and correspondence consulted, any statement in which Saint-Exupéry named Lawrence as an influence. Later readers have found affinities between their works, but the available evidence does not establish a personal connection or direct line of influence.

Denis de Rougemont Makes the Comparison

Denis de Rougemont made the comparison explicit. In “Prototype T.E.L.,” published in *La Table ronde* in January 1952, the Swiss writer devoted an entire section to “T.E.L. and Saint-Exupéry.” Only eight years after Saint-Exupéry’s death, he set side by side two men whose temperaments differed sharply but whose trajectories he regarded as deeply akin. Both entered, while still young, occupations that combined technical skill, risk, and command; both spent long periods outside their own country; both treated the desert and their relations with Arabs as a school for understanding people. Rougemont dwelt above all on a form of authority that came neither from rank nor regulation, but from the ability to understand, persuade, and serve.[64]

From *Seven Pillars to Wind, Sand and Stars*

Rougemont directly compared *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* with *Terre des hommes*, published in English as *Wind, Sand and Stars*. In both books, experience comes before reflection. Desert, machines, danger, comrades, and responsibility are not scenery for a thesis already formed; they are the material from which each author tries to make sense of what he has lived. Lawrence turns the Arabian campaign into an inquiry into action, command, and the limits of authority. Saint-Exupéry turns aviation, airmail, and the desert into a reflection on responsibility and the bonds between human beings. Rougemont’s comparison rests on the way both men draw thought from lived experience. No direct transmission has been established.[64]

Where the Parallel Ends

Rougemont himself marked the limit of the comparison. In *Citadelle*, Saint-Exupéry pursued a meditation on human community, order, meaning, and civilization for which Lawrence has no equivalent. Lawrence’s reflection remained tied to a specific historical campaign and to the difficulty of living with the public persona that emerged from it. Saint-Exupéry extended the experience of desert and action into a broader inquiry into human community. Rougemont summarized the divergence by seeing Saint-Exupéry more as a writer and Lawrence more as an agent of History. Their affinity points to two different uses of experience: Lawrence uses it to understand action and authority; Saint-Exupéry to ask what can sustain a human community.[64]

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