

Lawrence Of Arabia

The Man & His Legacy

By Dov Levy

His image as the swashbuckling Englishman riding camelback alongside fierce Bedouin warriors in traditional Arab dress captured the imagination of a generation. His nickname, "Lawrence of Arabia," said it all, suggesting a man who had undertaken far-flung adventures that a traumatized post-WWI public craved to hear about and that journalists were thrilled to romanticize. But who was the real man behind the image? What was he really fighting for? And how do his activities of a century ago influence the politics of the Middle East even today?

Last June 29, the Muslim terrorist group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), which had conquered large swaths of Syria and Iraq, announced that it would now call itself the “Islamic State.” It declared its leader the new caliph, the official successor to the founder of Islam. Among the statements ISIS made in support of its shockingly fast and violent sweep through the Middle East was that it was undoing the wrong of the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

Most Westerners had never even heard of this agreement, but it has been a source of Arab-Muslim resentment toward the West ever since it was disclosed in November 1917. The agreement, between Britain and France, carved up the crumbling Ottoman Empire into seemingly arbitrary zones of French and British influence. It undermined a simultaneous British promise to the Arabs, guaranteeing them an independent state in exchange for assisting the British in driving the Ottomans out of Arabia. This promise was to the Arabs what the Balfour Declaration was to the Jews.

In 2002, Britain’s Foreign Secretary Jack Straw revealed in an interview, “A lot of the problems we are having to deal with now—I have to deal with now—are a consequence of our colonial past.... The Balfour Declaration and the contradictory assurances which

were being given to Palestinians [he should have said Arabs; back then there were no “Palestinians”] in private at the same time as they were being given to the Israelis [there were no “Israelis” then either]—again, an interesting history for us but not an entirely honorable one.”

Although the barbarism of ISIS has much deeper roots than the Sykes-Picot Agreement, its fascinating history sheds light on the warring, violent Arab-Islamic Middle Eastern culture that the European powers hoped to rule and tame, which is running amok today. Read about the Arab Revolt of 1916 and the involvement of the British, symbolized by the dashing figure of Lawrence of Arabia, and learn how it shaped the Middle East of today.

A Legend Is Born

Thomas Edward Lawrence was born the second of five sons to Thomas Robert and Sarah Lawrence on August 16, 1888, in Tremadoc, a village in Caernarvonshire, Wales. Known as Ned, Thomas Edward was a brilliant young boy who was reading fluently by the age of four... in English. Two years later, he was reading Latin fluently as well.

Presaging a life of exotic travels, the Lawrence family was constantly on the go, moving to southwest Scotland, then to Brittany in northwestern France, and then Jersey, a British dependency off the coast of Normandy, France. Next, the family spent two years in England’s Hampshire before moving to Oxford in 1896. There, Thomas Edward attended a top high school and won a scholarship to attend the famed Oxford University.

As a teenager, Lawrence became fascinated with ancient architecture and archaeology. In 1903, when he was 15, he and a friend bicycled around two counties in England, examining many of the old buildings. During their summer breaks in 1906 and 1907, Lawrence and his friend cycled around France to study its medieval castles.

Later, while completing his university studies in 1909, Lawrence spent three months trekking on foot through parts of



Left: Iconic image of “Lawrence of Arabia,” seen here in Bedouin gear at Aqaba.
Right: The five Lawrence brothers. Thomas Edward is seated at left.



Lawrence standing next to a Chiti slab in Carchemish.



The home in Wales where Lawrence was born.

what are now Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Israel, then the province of Greater Syria under the Ottoman Empire. He covered 1,000 miles as he studied 36 castles left behind by the Crusaders. The trip was grueling, and Lawrence often went hungry and slept on the ground. He suffered through malaria, theft, being shot at and even a severe beating.

He subsequently graduated from Oxford University with honors in 1910. Soon after, he sailed to Beirut to join an archaeological expedition by the British Museum to Carchemish, in northern Syria.

In early 1911, after a brief stop in Lebanon to study Arabic (Lawrence was by then already fluent in Latin, Greek, Turkish and French), he assisted in the excavation of the remains of the ancient Hittite city at Carchemish. He spent much of the next three

years at Carchemish, visiting home during the breaks between excavation seasons. During this time he came in close contact with the local Arabs and became enchanted with their culture, even experimenting with their style of dress.

Preparations for War

Early in 1914, Lawrence and his colleague Leonard Woolley were assigned by the British army to undertake a military survey of the Negev desert under the guise of an archaeological survey. World War I had not begun, but considering the Ottomans’ close economic ties to Germany, the UK had to prepare for the possibility of hostilities. If the Ottomans decided to oppose



ISIS terrorists walk through the streets of a captured Iraqi town.

