

T. E. Lawrence lost hope at about the same time. As his mother would relate to a biographer, her son slipped into a state of “extreme depression and nervous exhaustion” that autumn, and during visits home he “would sometimes sit the entire morning between breakfast and lunch in the same position, without moving, and with the same expression on his face.”

PART OF THE enduring fascination with T. E. Lawrence’s story is the series of painful “what if?” questions it raises, a pondering over what the world lost when he lost. What would have happened if, in 1918, the Arabs had been able to create the greater Arab nation that many so desperately sought, and which they believed had been promised them? How different would the Middle East look today if the early Zionists in postwar Palestine had been able to negotiate with a man like Faisal Hussein, who had talked of “the racial kinship and ancient bonds” that existed between Jew and Arab? And what of the Americans? Today, it scarcely seems conceivable that there was a time when the Arab and Muslim worlds were clamoring *for* American intervention in their lands; what might have happened if the United States had risen to the opportunity presented at the end of World War I?

In all probability, not quite the golden age some might imagine. As Lawrence himself frequently stated, the notion of a true pan-Arab nation was always something of a mirage, the differences between its radically varied cultures far greater than what united them. Perhaps such a fractious and vast nation could have endured for a time through sheer lack of strong central control, much as under the Ottomans’ old system, but advances in technology and communication would almost certainly have soon brought these disparate cultures and peoples into conflict. Similarly, there were never going to be truly harmonious relations between the Jews and the Arabs in Palestine, given that Arab resistance to an expanded Jewish presence long preceded the Balfour Declaration and took little notice of Faisal’s moderation; indeed, the one postwar Arab leader who would try to reach an accommodation with Israel, Faisal’s brother Abdullah, would be assassinated by a Palestinian gunman for his troubles. As for American occupying troops being hailed as liberators, that surely would have been short-lived too, ending when those troops were drawn into policing local conflicts they little understood, with the inevitable choosing of sides this entails. Even if it somehow managed to avoid those treacherous straits, the United States would certainly have shed its image as “the one disinterested party” as it steadily became an imperial power in its own right.

All that said, it’s hard to imagine that any of this could possibly have

produced a sadder history than what has actually transpired over the past century, a catalog of war, religious strife, and brutal dictatorships that has haunted not just the Middle East but the entire world. That sad history began from almost the moment the negotiators in Paris packed their bags and declared their mission complete, leaving in their wake “a porcelain peace.”

Denied Lawrence’s assistance in the autumn of 1919, a desperate Faisal was forced to accept the few crumbs of compromise the French were willing to throw his way in Syria. When Faisal returned to Damascus, however, he found himself denounced as a traitor for selling the nation out to the European imperialists. Harnessing this popular rage, Faisal renounced his deal with the French and in March 1920 staged something of a palace coup by declaring himself king of Syria. That act, in conjunction with the San Remo conference the following month at which Great Britain and France formalized their partition of the region—Britain taking Iraq and a “greater” Palestine that included a broad swath east of the Jordan River, or Transjordan, France the rest of Syria—set Faisal on a collision course with the French. That collision came in July; after a brief and one-sided battle on the outskirts of Damascus, the French ousted Faisal and cast him into exile. By the close of 1920, the French at last had much of their *Syrie intégrale* (with the exception of the British mandate in Palestine and Transjordan), but they now faced a populace seething with rage. They also now confronted an external threat; in the deserts of Transjordan, Faisal’s brother Abdullah was massing his followers with the intention of marching on Damascus.

But whatever problems the French had at the end of 1920 were dwarfed by those of the British. In Palestine, tensions between Zionist immigrants and the resident Arab population had escalated into bloodshed. In Arabia, ibn-Saud was once again pushing to oust King Hussein. The worst crisis point was in Iraq. The previous year, Lawrence had predicted full-scale revolt against British rule there by March 1920 “if we don’t mend our ways,” but he had been off by two months; by the time the May rebellion in Iraq was put down, some one thousand British and nine thousand natives were dead. As Lawrence would explain in his 1929 letter to William Yale, at Paris, Great Britain and France had taken the discredited Sykes-Picot Agreement and fashioned something even worse; how much worse was evidenced by the myriad fires that had spread across the region almost immediately.

To combat these crises, in December 1920 Lloyd George turned to a man who had become something of a pariah in British ruling circles, former first lord of the admiralty, Winston Churchill. One of Churchill’s

first acts upon assuming the position of Colonial Office secretary was to enlist the help of another recent outcast, former lieutenant colonel T. E. Lawrence.

At least initially, Lawrence had little interest in rejoining the fray. Immersed in writing his memoirs, and undoubtedly still smarting over his shabby treatment by Lloyd George's government the previous year, he told Churchill he was too busy and that he had left politics behind. He only relented when the new colonial secretary assured him that he would have a virtually free hand in helping fundamentally reshape the British portion of the Middle Eastern chessboard at the upcoming Cairo Conference. As a result, the Cairo deliberations were little more than a formality, with Lawrence and Churchill having worked out ahead of time, as Lawrence told a biographer, "not only [the] questions the Conference would consider, but decisions they would reach."

Iraq was now to be consolidated and recognized as an Arab kingdom, with Faisal placed on the throne. In Arabia, the British upheld Hussein's claim to rule in the Hejaz, while simultaneously upholding ibn-Saud's authority in the Arabian interior. Surely the most novel idea to come out of Cairo was the plan designed to stay Abdullah from attacking the French in Syria. At the close of the conference, Lawrence journeyed to Abdullah's base camp in Amman and convinced the truculent Arab leader to first try to establish a government in the Transjordan region of Britain's Palestine mandate. To Lawrence's great surprise—and perhaps to Abdullah's as well—this most indolent of Hussein's four sons actually proved to be a remarkably good administrator; in the near future, Transjordan was to be officially detached from the rest of Palestine and made an independent Arab kingdom—today's Jordan—with Abdullah as its ruler. By the time Lawrence returned to England in the autumn of 1921, his one-year service to the Colonial Office nearly over, he had quite literally become the unseen kingmaker of the Middle East.

But if all this brought a measure of stability to the center of the old Ottoman Empire map, it did little to improve matters to the north and south. There, the situation remained uncertain and bloody for some time to come.

In Anatolia, the former Turkish general Mustafa Kemal, the hero of Gallipoli, had refused to accept the dismemberment of Turkey as outlined by the Allies. Over a four-year period, he led his army of Turkish nationalists into battle against all those who would claim a piece of the Turkish heartland, before finally establishing the modern-day borders of Turkey in 1923. France's turn in this round robin of war came in the autumn of 1921 when Kemal, soon to become better known as Atatürk, turned his attention to the French troops occupying the Cilicia region.

Quickly routed, the French armies in Cilicia beat a hasty retreat back into Syria under the leadership of their commander, the unlucky Édouard Brémond.

At the same time, a bewildering arc of war extended from the Caucasus all the way to Afghanistan as various nationalist groups, Russian Reds and Whites, and remnants of the Young Turks battled for primacy, forming and reforming alliances with such dizzying regularity as to defy both logic and comprehension. Among the prominent aspirants in this crucible were both Enver and Djemal Pasha, and it was no more surprising than anything else going on in the region that Djemal Pasha should turn up in Kabul in the winter of 1921 as a military advisor to the king of Afghanistan.

And then, far to the south, it was King Hussein's turn. With the British having long since tired of his mercurial rule and refusal to accept the political realities of the Middle East—in 1921, Lawrence had spent a maddening two months in Jeddah futilely trying to get Hussein to accept the Cairo Conference accords—he was all but defenseless when ibn-Saud and his Wahhabist warriors finally closed on Mecca in late 1924. Hustled to the coast and then onto a British destroyer, Hussein was first taken to exile in Cyprus, before finally joining his son Abdullah in his new capital of Amman, Jordan. The deposed king, who had once dreamt of a pan-Arab nation extending from Mecca to Baghdad, died there in 1931 at the age of seventy-six.

From there, matters simply turned worse for the West. By the 1930s, the British faced a quagmire in the Palestine mandate they had schemed so hard to obtain, first a full-scale Arab revolt fueled by increasing Jewish immigration into the region, joined after World War II by attacks from Jewish guerrillas who saw the British occupiers as the last roadblock toward the creation of Israel. In 1946, the war-exhausted French were forced to give up their cherished *Syrie intégrale*, but not before carving out a new nation, Lebanon, from its territory; within three years, Syria's pro-Western democratic government would be ousted in a military coup, and the convoluted governing structure imposed by the French in Lebanon would set the country on the path to civil war. In 1952, British control of Egypt ended when their puppet king was overthrown by Gamal Abdel Nasser and his nationalist Free Officers Movement, followed six years later by a military coup in Iraq by like-minded junior officers that ended the pro-Western monarchy established by Faisal. By the 1960s, with the era of European imperialism drawing to its unceremonious close, the Middle East resembled the shambles the colonial powers were leaving behind in other parts of the globe, but with one crucial difference: because of oil, the region had now become the most strategically vital

corner on earth, and the West couldn't walk away from the mess it had helped create there even if it wanted to. What has transpired there over the past half century is, of course, familiar to all: four wars between the Arabs and Israelis; a ten-year civil war in Lebanon and a twenty-year one in Yemen; the slaughter of ethnic minorities in Syria and Iraq; four decades of state-sponsored terrorism; convulsions of religious extremism; four major American military interventions and a host of smaller ones; and for the Arab people, until very recently, a virtually unbroken string of cruel and/or kleptocratic dictatorships stretching from Tunisia to Iraq that left the great majority impoverished and disenfranchised.

Certainly, blame for all this doesn't rest solely with the terrible decisions that were made at the end of World War I, but it was then that one particularly toxic seed was planted. Ever since, Arab society has tended to define itself less by what it aspires to become than by what it is opposed to: colonialism, Zionism, Western imperialism in its many forms. This culture of opposition has been manipulated—indeed, feverishly nurtured—by generations of Arab dictators intent on channeling their people's anger away from their own misrule in favor of the external threat, whether it is “the great Satan” or the “illegitimate Zionist entity” or Western music playing on the streets of Cairo. In an ironic and unforeseen way, that era now appears to be coming to an end. Beginning with the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, but greatly accelerated by the so-called Arab Spring movements that have roiled the region since 2010, the established order has steadily eroded before the force of the “Arab street.” Thus far, though, that “street” has shown little sign of coalescing around any notion of Arab unity, let alone the old dream of a greater Arab nation, but very much the opposite: a reversion to the balkanized patchwork of ethnic and religious enclaves that existed under the Ottoman *millet* system. While no American government official will publicly admit it, Iraq today has largely devolved into three mini-states, divided along those sectarian and ethnic lines—Kurdish, Shia and Sunni—that predated the Western imperial mapmakers. With the overthrow of Muamar Qaddafi, Libya too, is rapidly becoming a nation in name only, separating into the three principal tribal regions that existed even before the Ottomans. With the brutal civil war in Syria now entering its fourth year, there is open talk of further disintegration there, of the ruling Alawite minority potentially carving out a mini-nation consisting of their ancestral strongholds along the Mediterranean coast. Today, it appears increasingly clear that one result of the intensifying turmoil across the Middle East will be a redrawing of many of those arbitrary frontiers imposed by the West nearly a century ago; whether the new lines foster greater harmony or even greater fractiousness, however, is anyone's guess.