

## ***The Entanglements of Power***

*Faisal I of Iraq* by Ali A. Allawi

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'I would not go through the travail of writing a biography unless I was inspired by a feeling of affection and admiration', declared Hesketh Pearson, a mid-twentieth century chronicler of great lives, including those of Shakespeare, Charles II and George Bernard Shaw. This sentiment is the hallmark of Ali A. Alawi's monumental 600-page sympathetic and humane portrayal of King Faisal I of Iraq. He notes of his subject, 'in the modern history of the Arabs it would be hard to find an equivalent figure that combined the qualities of leadership and statesmanship with the virtues of moderation, wisdom and essential decency'.

Prince Faisal was a son of Sherif Hussein of Hijaz, most likely born in Taif in 1883<sup>1</sup>, and not to be confused with the much younger Faisal, son of Sultan Abdul Aziz ibn Saud of Nejd, and later Saudi monarch. In the aftermath of the Great War, Britain was the king maker. Sherif Hussein became the self-styled King of Hijaz (and also *Khalifa*, in defiance of the still continuing Ottoman Caliphate) while his son Abdullah was installed as ruler of Transjordan in 1921 (the present King of Jordan, Abdullah II is his great grandson). Faisal ibn Hussein was a short-lived King of Syria in 1920, and then enthroned as King of Iraq in 1921, which he remained until his demise in 1933. Sherif Hussein's great rival was Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, who gradually advanced towards the Hejaz, capturing Mecca in 1924 and Medina in 1925. Sherif Hussein abdicated in 1924, handing over to his son Ali, who too had to flee Jeddah the same year as it came under bombardment. The victorious Abdul Aziz declared himself King of the Hejaz and Nejd in 1926, appointing his son Faisal, as viceroy of the Hejaz. All these dynastic jockeying were taking place alongside British and French rivalries and intrigues, plots and counter-plots, Zionist preparations in Palestine and seismic changes in Ottoman Turkey with the establishment of a republic in 1922 and Mustafa Kamal's forces taking control of parts of Kurdistan, but having to relinquish claims to Mosul.

Ali Abdul-Amir Allawi's work places the historical record straight on many counts, notably in explaining the circumstances of the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans, which was far more complex than received opinion has it today. For example, David Lean's 1962 film, *Lawrence of Arabia*, with its orientalist imagery, underrated Arab courage and military abilities and overrated the role of an English intelligence officer. It perpetuated the image of Lawrence the 'brain' and Faisal the 'flame'. Unfortunately the film has served as 'history' for many, even re-released in 1988. Moreover, the

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Schnerer in his *The Balfour Declaration* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010) has Faisal's year of birth as 1886.

Indian Khilafatists in the 1920s were also quick to settle on a black-and-white narrative, not Hollywood's 'good Arab, bad Turk', but 'bad Sharifians, good Ottomans'. This simplification has also long persisted - the reviewer remembers a conference of an Islamic students' organisation in the 1970s at which the veteran Muslim activist Maulana Zafar Ansari linked the sorry state of the Muslim world to this act of Arab betrayal. For the British policy makers, Sherif Hussein was 'an obstinate personality'; for most Indian Khilafatists, a British 'puppet'. Allawi succeeds not just in providing the first English-language biography of the founder of modern Iraq, but also an overdue reassessment of the politics of his father in what was the single most critical episode in twentieth century Muslim history.

*Faisal I* deploys material from a variety of sources, including many archives and personal diaries hitherto not accessible to an English-reading public, blending analysis with biography. Apart from the main subjects, he brings to life individuals and episodes otherwise forgotten, like the Iraqi officers who served the Ottoman cause during the Tripolitan War (1911-12) and Balkan Wars (1912-13), before joining the Arab Revolt – men such as Mawlud Mukhlis, Nuri al-Said (later Prime Minister of Iraq), Jafar al-Askari and Yasin al-Hashimi. This transfer of allegiances was emotionally charged, for officers and the rank and file. In passing, Ali Allawi refers to a group of Iraqi prisoners of war, presumably captured by the British in the course of the Mesopotamia and Mosul campaigns of 1915-16 and held in India, then 'landed in Jeddah after they had mutinied on learning they were to form part of an Arab contingent to fight the Turks on the Gaza front. They insisted they had volunteered to fight the Turks as part of an Arab army and not as a unit of a British force'. Ali Allawi also leavens his massive work with an eye for the bizarre, such as the family life of the Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Sa'adoun that was 'overshadowed by his evil-tempered and neurotic Turkish wife. She enforced a strictly Turkish lifestyle on the family, including the use of Turkish at home. He took to drink and playing cards . . .'. Allawi's book is a vast multi-panelled tapestry based on deft scholarship, with only the occasional fading of warp and woof.

The author has a personal exposure to statecraft at the highest levels, which is reflected in judicious assessments of those thrust with the burdens of leadership. Ali Allawi served brief spells as Iraq's first post-Saddam civilian Minister of Defence in 2004 and subsequently Minister of Finance in 2005. He notes, in an account of these years (*The Occupation of Iraq, Winning the War, Losing the Peace*) that 'my extended family had been intimately involved in the affairs of the country, providing ministers, senators, governors and ambassadors to what had been the kingdom of Iraq'. His father, Dr. Abd Al-Amir Allawi, was Minister of Health from 1953 to 1958 in the cabinets of Fadhel al-Jamali and the afore-mentioned Nuri al-Said.

There are several key themes that run through *Faisal I*: the prelude to the Arab revolt declared in June 1916; Faisal's rising star in the military campaigns and post-War machinations; the fractured and disjointed nature of Arab society – tribe vs.

tribe, desert dweller vs. urban folk, town vs. government; the instrumentalisation of religion. Ali Allawi in *The Occupation of Iraq* notes that 'Iraq is one of the most invaded and violated territories in the history of the world, and over a long period of time the people who lived in the country had survival and accommodation skills that would confound the most determined of occupiers'. Like Iraq's history, *Faisal I* is a tale of tragedy and precarity.

### **Prelude to the Arab Revolt**

Accounts of the Arab Revolt usually start with references to the Sherif-McMahon exchanges and the arrival of T.E. Lawrence in the Hijaz, both events in October 1915. Allawi brilliantly presents the situation in the preceding years and months that led to these developments. His account also sheds new light on the relationship between Faisal and his father.

The region of Hijaz, including Mecca and Medina and stretching to west Yemen, had been one of the Ottoman Arab provinces since the sixteenth century. It was controlled in a manner not dissimilar to the British Empire's relationship with the nawabs and royal families of India after 1857 – the local ruling family given freedom on internal matters, but always under the watchful eye of the Political Resident, who could decide on the heir-apparent and only accountable to the Viceroy in Delhi. Hijaz too had both an Ottoman governor and a *pasha* of Mecca. Sultan Abdul Hamid II and his advisors in Istanbul determined which among rival clans of Hijazi nobility would be conferred the amirate of Mecca. The largesse from Istanbul to the amirate was immense, primarily to ensure safe conduct for pilgrims. When Nawab Sikander Begum, the ruler of Bhopal performed the Hajj in the 1860s she noted, 'the Sultan of Turkey gives thirty lacks of rupees (£30,000) a year for the expenses incurred in keeping up the holy places of Mecca and Medina' and that the Sherif's wives were 'literally covered with diamonds from head to foot'.<sup>2</sup> In the 1880s, Faisal's father did not belong to the clan in favour and spent many years on and off in Istanbul at the Sultan's command. Faisal himself was educated in the great metropolis from the age of ten. He wed his cousin Huzaima, daughter of a former Sherif of Mecca in 1904, only departing in 1908 when Hussein was formally appointed Sherif of Mecca. By this time Faisal was in his mid-twenties, perhaps more an Ottoman than an Arab, light-skinned and with delicate, almost effeminate features.

Sherif Hussein assigned Faisal to military duties within a combined force of Bedouin tribal units and Ottoman detachments to confront an Idrisi rebellion in Yemen. It seems he was indifferent to his son's preparedness for such a change of environment and culture. His brother Abdullah was also despatched to confront Ibn Saud's militia east of Medina. Allawi notes, 'The sons [Abdullah, Faisal, Ali] were in awe of their father [Sherif Hussein] . . . they also had to reimmerge themselves in the

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<sup>2</sup> Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *A Princess's Pilgrimage*, Markfield: Kube, 2007.

life of the Hijaz after spending a good part of their formative years in Istanbul . . . Sherif Hussein made sure that Faisal would shed his European clothing . . . He and his brothers had the same food, bedding and hard saddles as the rest of the corps.' Faisal was perhaps relieved to return to Istanbul in 1912 at the age of 29 as one of the two delegates from the Hejaz to the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies.

Sherif Hussein was no novice to Ottoman politics after his enforced sojourns in Istanbul. The first government of the Young Turks that deposed Sultan Abdul Hamid in 1908 had included well-educated pan-Islamists like Prince Said Halim Pasha (the first Ottoman to obtain a degree in Political Science in France), but after an internal coup in 1913, the greater influence was of a clique within the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), particularly the triumvirate of Enver Pasha, Talat Pasha and Jamal Pasha. Historian Fatma Gocek's comment on the latter applies to the CUP in power as a whole – they possessed 'the fervent patriotism as well as lack of education, experience and short-sightedness that wreaked havoc and eventually brought down an empire'.<sup>3</sup> The CUP retired all middle and lower level military officials and replaced them with those who had total allegiance to the CUP, and resorted to assassinations to exercise control, even of members of the Chamber of Deputies. It was common for junior CUP members to over-rule established and long-serving Ottoman administrators. It is no wonder the centuries old Ottoman order unravelled so quickly in the course of the Great War and its immediate aftermath, and the reasons emerge in Ali Allawi's study.

Sherif Hussein had the sagacity to sense early on that an Ottoman-German victory was unlikely in the Great War. Allawi notes,

Faisal and Abdullah returned to the Hijaz in late August [1914], and their reports on the condition in the capital made Hussein very apprehensive about the momentum for war and its implications for the empire, the Arab provinces, and especially the Hijaz. He wrote a letter of advice and warning to Sultan Muhammad Rashad [successor to Abdul Hamid], but his entreaties not to join the war fell on deaf ears, as did his demands to reinforce and properly provision the Ottoman forces the Hijaz, 'Asir and Yemen.

Sherif Hussein must have been further discomfited when the CUP appointed general Wahib Pasha as governor and commander of the Ottoman forces in the Hijaz. Allawi's reading of the historical records sheds much light on the breakdown of trust in the late Ottoman period,

A trove of documents fell into the hands of Sherif Ali on the march towards Medina [in support of Wahib Pasha's plan to attack the British at Suez]. These

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<sup>3</sup> Fatima Muge Gocek, *What is the meaning of the 1988 Young Turk revolution? A critical historical assessment in 2008* In I.U. Siyasi Bilgiler Fakultesi Dergisi, No. 38 (Mart 2008)

revealed a series of secret correspondence between Wahib Pasha and the CUP leadership, which discussed the assassination of Sherif Hussein and his sons, and the suppression of the Hijaz's special status in the empire . . . Sherif Hussein then used his knowledge of the contents of the documents to demand the removal of Wahib as governor of Hijaz. He also decided to send Faisal to the capital to demand an explanation for Wahib's actions and to elicit a formal apology and a redress. Faisal was selected for the mission partly because of his still pro-Turkish sentiments.

There was a growing sentiment within the Ottoman Arab provinces that the CUP was leading the Muslim world to disaster, and that its inexperienced leadership had blundered. At the outset of hostilities Sherif Hussein would have been 62, while Enver, the Minister of War, and Talat, Minister of Interior, were in their thirties. It is related that when Enver Pasha visited Hejaz in 1915, 'the Sherif told him it was he, an ignorant youth, who had dragged Turkey into destruction'.<sup>4</sup> For many informed Arab circles, the CUP's call on the empire to rally for a jihad was a mere instrumentalisation of religion. Allawi provides much information on the growth of Arab secret societies, such as the Cairo-based Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiya, which 'under the leadership of the religious scholar Rashid Rida, was mooted the possibility of the Arab provinces of the empire to form a new caliphate.' When Faisal was returning to Mecca after the Wahib episode, he stopped at Damascus, and was sought out by two other secret societies, al-'Ahd and al-Fatat, that had jointly prepared a manifesto 'for entering the war on the side of the allies [i.e. Britain]'. The societies regarded Sherif Hussein as the natural leader in the event of a revolt. The Syrian resentment was exacerbated by the actions of Jamal Pasha, appointed Governor of Syria in 1915 with full powers in military and civilian affairs.

In May that year, twenty one Arab nationalists were executed under Jamal Pasha's emergency powers, including Amir Omar al-Jaza'iri, a descendent of the legendary Abder Qader al-Jazairi, who had been banished by the French and found a home in the Amara district of Damascus in 1855. Those executed included political and literary figures who probably only desired more rights within an Ottoman dispensation. A further significant development was the defection of Lieutenant Muhammad Sharif al-Faruqi – who would have been lost to posterity were it not for Allawi's scholarship – from Ottoman to British lines at Gallipoli. Al-Faruqi's information on Arab discontent encouraged British establishment to re-appraise their Middle East policy and offer support to Sherif Hussein, the terms of which are enshrined in the well-known Sherif-McMahon correspondence of October 1915. Sherif Hussein thus turned to the British for a variety of reasons: dislike of the CUP for overthrowing Abdul Hamid and its colonialist high-handedness; the offers of

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<sup>4</sup> The Irish Times, 27 June 1916

backing from the Syrian secret societies; a fear of a Turco-German occupation of Mecca; the desire to protect dynastic power.

Sherif Hussein had decided to accept British assurances that the military support to be provided was not to gain a foothold on the Arab peninsula, and that British advisors would be restricted to the coast. In return, Britain would 'recognize and uphold the independence of the Arabs in all the regions lying within the frontiers proposed by the Sherif of Mecca', with the *only* exceptions of 'the districts of Mersin and Alexandretta, and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo [that] cannot be said to be purely Arab'. Sherif Hussein did not disclose the terms of the agreement with McMahon to Faisal, only Abdullah being privy. Of course, father and sons were oblivious to the Sykes-Picot Treaty, in which Britain and France agreed to partition the Ottoman Arab provinces under their own spheres of domination. They were also unaware that leading Jews in London were lobbying for a homeland in Palestine – Weizmann's first meeting with Balfour took place in March 1916.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the die was cast; Sherif Hussein trusted the McMahon undertaking, and, on 10 June 1916,

[He] leaned out of a window from his palace in Mecca and fired a single shot in the air in the general direction of the Ottoman army headquarters. This was the agreed signal for his men, who had massed the previous night at various concentration points in Mecca, to rise against the main Ottoman strongholds in the town. Communications between Mecca, Jeddah and Ta'if had already been severed the night before when the telegraph wire had been cut. The Ottoman response was quick and fierce, with artillery barrages levelled against the attackers and the palace of the amir. Sherif Hussein exhibited remarkable sang-froid as his palace came under bombardment. He did not change his daily routine and insisted on remaining in his office throughout the working day, even as the bombs were raining down on his home . . . the final Ottoman outpost in Mecca, the Jarwal fortress, fell on the ninth day of the uprising, where nearly 1,200 were taken prisoner . . . On 13<sup>th</sup> June [1916], 'three British warships (the *Dufferin*, *Hardinge* and *Fox*) sailed along the Jeddah coast and began firing at the Ottoman fortifications. Three days later the Ottoman forces in Jeddah surrendered.

In Allawi's view 'there is no doubt that Hussein would have scuppered the possibility of a revolt if the details of the Allies' post-war plans had been made known to him'. Perhaps history will come to judge Sherif Hussein more a pan-Islamist than Arab nationalist – but Faisal ibn Hussein being the reverse.

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<sup>5</sup> Op. cit. Schneer

## Faisal's rising star

Faisal was initially placed in charge of tribal battalions besieging Medina. Ali Allawi provides details of Faisal's skill in uniting the tribes, relying on T.E. Lawrence's chronicle of events and personality portraits, but including other secondary sources, such as the work of the Jordanian historian Sulaiman Mousa. Allawi has an eye for knitting the salient aspects with the bizarre,

The tribal forces exhibited maddeningly contradictory qualities. Incredible feats of individual bravery were mixed with slovenly, even cowardly, behaviour. Looting and the never-ending quest for booty in a society that lacked nearly all material possessions were never far from the surface. To ill-discipline, wild firing and inexplicable disappearances was added to the bane of tribes: blood feuds and vendettas. Faisal tried to keep these rivalries and feuds in check but they never completed left the camp or battle place. The baffling behaviour of the tribes could lead to disastrous consequences. In one notorious case, the Juhayna tribe withdrew from the battlefield at a critical juncture . . . to have coffee. Faisal, thinking they had been routed, called a retreat.

The eventual success of the Arab Revolt, with Faisal leading the tribal battalions to the outskirts of Damascus, would not have been possible without the professionalism provided by Egyptian, Syrian and Iraqi officers defecting from the Ottoman army, British guns and T.E. Lawrence's expertise with explosives in blowing up railway tracks . Much Ottoman blood trickled into the Arabian sands:

At Wadi Musa [in the autumn of 1917] a day-long battle ended with the Turks in retreat, leaving 400 killed, wounded and captured'; nearly four thousand stragglers from the Ottoman armies were holed up in Dera'a [in September 1918]. A thousand of them were stripped of their clothing by Bedouins during their retreat into Dera'a . . . the Turkish retreat was everywhere stymied by the destruction wrought on the Hijaz railroad, forcing the soldiers to take the roads. Columns of retreating troops were waylaid by Bedouins or armed peasants. The front line was indistinct, confused and jumbled. Mustafa Kemal, the commander of the defeated Ottoman Seventh Army and later the founder of the modern republic of Turkey, was one of those nearly captured by Arab army troops as he beat a retreat northwards . . . Atrocities followed atrocities as Arabs took their revenge against the carnage committed against helpless villages by the Turks. At Tafas, a small village near Dera'a, a particularly gruesome massacre of retreating troops took place.

The British increasingly made Faisal, rather than Sherif Hussein, their main confidante in the field. He was commander of the Northern Army, reporting to General Allenby. Faisal's forces were organised into three formations: 'the first comprised the regular troops under Ja'afer Pasha al-'Askari . . . Nuri Pasha al-Sa'id [Nuri al-Said] was chief of staff . . . the second formation consisted of the Egyptian

and British section commanded by the former Captain, now Colonel Pierce Joyce . . . the third formation was a French – Algerian pack battery of four mountain guns and machine guns commanded by a Frenchman, Captain Rasorio Pisani'. Not an Arab tribal chieftain in sight! The strategic role of Faisal's forces was to divert the Ottoman troops from going to the Palestine front and confront Allenby. Arab forces were thus used to distract the Ottomans from defending Palestine. The British were generous, and shrewd, in the disbursement of largesse to buy loyalty:

The British subvention to Hussein to sustain the revolt and his administration was increased to £200,000 per month in the summer of 1917. Of this sum, the amount allocated to Faisal was fixed at £50,000 per month. . . His British advisers, through whom the money was passed on to him, played with the disbursement of these subsidies . . . Joyce reported to his superiors on one such occasion when he withheld funds from Faisal, "Lawrence and I did a dreadful thing and only gave him [Faisal] £10,000 instead of £50,000. The other £40,000 remains on the Humber to be given to him as occasion arises".

As Faisal's Northern Army approached Damascus in September 1918, Allenby forbade him from marching into Damascus, 'when he had the means to do so'. Faisal was given the green light to enter the city a month later, after Allenby's arrival. Ali Allawi conveys the excitement of the moment, perhaps seeing a parallel with the liberation of Baghdad in 2003:

Reaching al-Kiswa, about 20 kilometres from Damascus, the train stopped . . . the crowd gathered around Faisal, kissing his hand and congratulating him on this great victory. Amongst the crowd were veterans of the war and the Arab cause, as well as opportunists who saw their chance in the new order. . . He entered it from its southern approaches through the Midan route, surrounded and followed on horseback by the tribal leaders from the Howaitat, Ruwala and Druze. Behind them were tribesmen on camels and on foot, numbering thousands. It was a magnificent spectacle. All of Damascus appeared to have turned out to greet their hero. Faisal slowly made his way through the mass of people, waving and saluting the townsmen, in scenes of great jubilation and joy. The crowds were deliriously acclaiming him and their unaccustomed freedom. The flags of the Arab Revolt were everywhere. For now at least, the city was at his feet.

He expected to be assigned governance but,

Faisal was informed that France was to be the protecting power over Syria. . . [He] objected very strongly. He said that he knew nothing of France in the matter; that he was prepared to have British assistance; that he understood from the advisor whom Allenby sent to him that the Arabs were to have the whole Syria including Lebanon but excluding Palestine; that a country without a port was no good to him; and that he declined to have a French Liaison Officer



or to recognise French guidance in any way. Allenby then turned to Lawrence and asked him whether he, Lawrence, had told Faisal about a French protectorate over Syria and the French position on Lebanon. On both issues Lawrence stated that neither he nor Faisal knew about these arrangements, in effect denying that he had any knowledge of the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

Allawi notes that Lawrence's statement 'cannot stand scrutiny'. The details of the Anglo-French secret treaty were made public by the Bolsheviks ten months earlier. It is amazing that Faisal too was so unaware! Perhaps someone of stronger character would have resigned at this point and returned to the Hijaz. But once entangled in the pursuit of power, extraction becomes difficult.

In any case Allenby manoeuvred to allow Faisal to establish a military administration. The Maronites in Lebanon invoked French help, so soon Beirut and the Beqa'a valley slipped out of his grasp. The French 'mischievously insisted on calling Faisal's Arab government "the sharifian government". This was designed to belittle its legitimacy as well as to raise doubts in the minds of the Syrian elite about their role in a state dominated by outsiders from the Hijaz'. Faisal, now at some distance from his father both geographically and in political outlook, began to express his own vision of an ethnic nationalism very much in keeping with the times,

The Turks departed from our lands and we are now as children . . . I am an Arab and I have no superiority over any other Arab, not even by an atom. . . I call upon my Arab brethren irrespective of their different sects to grasp the mantle of unity and concord, to spread knowledge, and to form a government to do us proud . . . the Arabs were Arabs before Moses, and Jesus and Muhammed . . . I am an Arab before all else . . .

The Paris Peace Conference seemed to be the opportunity at which a case for Arab autonomy could be made, and the Syrian people given the right for self-determination in keeping with US President Woodrow Wilson's declaration. The British formally invited Sherif Hussein [now King Hussein] to present the case, but made it clear that it was Faisal who should attend. It was in these circumstances that it fell on Faisal to proceed to London and Paris. About 60 pages of *Faisal I* provide a detailed account of this period, which includes new information on the controversial meeting with Weizmann and Lawrence's dishonesty. Whether he was inclined to do so or not, the instructions from his father were to trust the British absolutely. Hussein did not help his son by not disclosing to him the British promises for Arab independence according to his agreement with McMahon. According to Allawi, 'it is inexplicable why Hussein did not see fit to brief Faisal of their import before his departure to the peace conference.'

Faisal pushed himself to the limit and impressed the great leaders of the time with his dignity and intelligence. Even the hostile French were charmed,

De Caix [the French diplomat] in particular developed a great respect for Faisal. He contrasted him favourably to the native rulers of French North Africa. "In him we find no Bey of Tunis or Sultan of Morocco, disposed by his character and tastes to resign himself without pain to lead an easy and gilded existence as a client of France.

In March 1920 a Syrian congress offered the crown to Faisal as a constitutional king, a role he accepted. He wrote to his father that with this step 'with the help of God, we have started the work and have declared Syria and Iraq independent under the overall kingship of your majesty', perhaps in the hope that an Arab federation could emerge through a hierarchy of constitutional monarchs. However Hussein's days as King of Hijaz were numbered – as those of the new King of Syria. The British had decided to strengthen Abdul Aziz ibn Saud's hand by supporting him instead of the rival Al Rashidis – for Churchill in the Middle East Department, 'it would seem Bin Saud is much the stronger figure in the Arabian Peninsula' and he had no intention of relinquishing British control of Iraq, even if it meant bombing it to submission.<sup>6</sup> However, Allawi places on record an episode during the negotiations over the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1922, which does not reflect well on ibn Saud,

[Sir Percy] Cox [High Commissioner of Iraq during the mandate] initiated a meeting between representatives of ibn Saud and the Iraqi government to demarcate the frontiers between Iraq and ibn Saud's Nejd state. They met at Muhammara on the Shatt- al-Arab. A treaty was signed between the two parties on 5 May 1922, known as the Muhammara Treaty. But ibn Saud refused to accept the treaty, blaming his representative for conceding too much. He loudly complained to the visiting Lebanese writer, Amin Ruhani, that the British were abandoning him, their true friend, in favour of the Hashemites [Sherif Hussein and sons]. Cox agreed to reconsider the terms of the treaty and arranged to meet ibn Saud personally, this time on the eastern coast of Arabia, at 'Aqeer. Ibn Saud demanded that the border between Iraq and his state should be the Euphrates River. Cox was infuriated by his intransigence and exploded in anger, whereupon ibn Saud completely collapsed and, on the verge of tears, loudly exclaimed his loyalty to Britain and to Cox in particular. He dropped his insistence that the frontier should be at the river's banks.

The local Syrian leaders made Faisal many promises of help to stand up against the French, but at the crunch at the Battle of Maysaloun, these turned out to be mere bombast, 'Shaikh Kamil al-Qassab [the Syrian al-Fatat Society leader] boasted to Faisal that he could field ten thousand fighters, but when it came to it, he produced a few hundred bullets and £300 gold pounds as his contribution to the war effort.'

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<sup>6</sup> Warren Dockter, *Churchill and the Islamic World*, London: Taurus, 2015. As Secretary for War and Air in 1920, Churchill sanctioned the use of mustard gas to crush the Iraqi revolt of 1920; his policy of air power led to an atrocity in June 1921 when RAF planes fired on tribesmen and their families seeking refuge in a lake.

Faisal had to leave Syria, spending some time in Italy and Britain. His father, with characteristic callousness 'admonished Faisal for declaring a separate Kingdom and not being content with being Hussein's representative'. Meanwhile, the British engineered his appointment as King of Iraq, which Allawi argues, owes much to Lawrence's influence.

Faisal ruled Iraq from August 1921, relying on an inner circle – and perhaps the reason why a non-Iraqi was accepted by the populace - of Iraqi veterans of the Arab Revolt like Nuri al-Said. Among Faisal's achievements were patient and persistent efforts to end British control. The British lost control of Iraqi education in 1923<sup>7</sup>, and in late 1929 the mandate, in place since the Great War, came to an end. Faisal was able to maintain an even keel amidst sectarian interests. He normalised relations with Turkey, fraught over the issue of Mosul. Faisal was able to converse with Mustafa Kemal in fluent Turkish. Allawi refers to a curious episode in which Faisal ibn Hussein, King of Iraq, encountered Faisal ibn Abdul Aziz, Viceroy of Hijaz,

When ibn Saud' son, Faisal, visited Baghdad in the summer of 1932, he was feted by the government and the king, and stayed as a guest at Faisal's Harthiya palace. Deep in Faisal's heart must have been the feeling that in the final analysis his family, led by his father and Abdullah, had made irretrievable errors in their dealings with ibn Saud. They had lost their kingdom and indeed their birth right to a more capable, charismatic and forceful leader.

It is not clear what 'irretrievable errors' the author is alluding to, because as far as is known, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud detested Sherif Hussein.

The constitution gave Faisal I wide powers, and he was actively involved in the coming and going of prime ministers, including the unfortunate al-Sa'adoun referred to earlier. He had to tackle many political crises while his health deteriorated. He died in September 1933 while receiving medical treatment in Berne. Allawi has a sombre note in the concluding chapter, 'Faisal's life ended just when he had approached his full political maturity and at a time when independent Iraq, and indeed the broader Arab world, was in dire need of leadership'. A year prior to his demise, the great man put to paper a memorandum which Allawi considers like no other in modern Arab history. Allawi's references to it are perhaps also directed to his peers in statecraft,

Faisal characterises Iraq as a country that lacks the essentials of a cohesive social unit, namely a people "united by a common ethnicity, set of beliefs, and religion. In this situation, [Iraq's] potential is scattered and its people divided against themselves". Iraq's politicians must therefore hold the highest qualities

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<sup>7</sup>. Reeva S. Simon's 'The Teaching of History in Iraq before the Rashid Ali coup of 1941' in *Middle Eastern Studies*, v.22, no. 1 (January 1986) provides an account of educational policy debates.

of wisdom and competence, and be immune to personal, sectarian and extreme views. “They must pursue a policy of justice, balance, alongside firmness, as well as greatly respect the traditions of the people, and not be pulled either towards reactionary or to extremist, counterproductive policies.”

Allawi's *Faisal I* is a rich oeuvre shedding new light on the lives and times of key personalities, and the episodes, that have shaped recent Muslim history. Faisal ibn Hussein was given a tough hand to play in the poker game of world politics, but to his credit he remained loyal to many values, including fealty to a difficult father. With the large number of books on the so-called 'brain' of the Arab Revolt – T.E. Lawrence - it is excellent to have the definitive biography on the 'flame'.

*M. A. Sherif*

*April 2016*

<http://www.salaam.co.uk/?p=1328>