

Broken Promises: the Arabs and the West

In the years leading up to WWI, the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire were becoming increasingly active in their quest for independence and began engaging in secret meetings in Damascus in 1914 between representatives from Syria, Palestine, Iraq and the Hejaz. When the Ottoman Empire entered WWI on the side of Germany, various Arab initiatives and delegations were formed to win the support of the British and French governments and to strike an alliance against the Ottomans. This perfectly matched the search by Britain and France for allies who would help them achieve a speedy victory against the Ottoman Empire and ensure their vital interests in the Arab region.

The British therefore made an alliance with the Arabs: in exchange for the promise of support for an independent Arab state, Sharif Hussein Ibn Ali of Mecca was to lead the Arab people seeking independence from the Ottoman Empire to join the British forces in the war against the Ottomans. Arab irregular troops in the Hejaz rose up against their Ottoman overlords and marched north, cooperating closely with the British forces advancing on Palestine from Egypt. By harassing the Ottoman supply convoys, sabotaging their railways, and providing intelligence to the British Army, Arab troops led by Emir Faisal of the Hejaz greatly facilitated the British Army's advance on Jerusalem in 1917. The capture of Aqaba by the Arabs was a major defeat for the Turkish forces and a crucial battle in the British conquest of Palestine.

Upon reaching Jerusalem, General Allenby of the British Army immediately assembled the city's notables and religious leaders and announced the imposition of British martial law over Palestine. The province liberated from Ottoman rule was now at the mercy of the policies of the British government.



General Allenby declares martial law on Palestine



Meanwhile, in November 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour sent a letter to Lord Rothschild expressing the British government's "sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations" and supporting the "establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."

Although the Balfour Declaration was a British pledge to the Jews, it also acknowledged Arab rights by stating that "nothing will be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."



Arthur Balfour

Emir Faisal, influenced by the maverick British officer T.E. Lawrence, had acted in good faith with the British assurances made by Sir Henry MacMahon to his father, Sharif Hussein of Mecca. Meeting General Allenby in Damascus in October 1918, Faisal was shocked to hear of the Sykes-Picot Agreement by which the British general was required to abide. The British were caught between conflicting interests and alliances with the Zionists, the French, and the Arabs, and were forced to prioritize their promises according to strategic value in the context of WWI. While maintaining their support for the Arab call for independence, their policies changed to nurture more profitable alliances with the Zionists.



Allenby with Emir Faisal

Faisal-Weizmann Document



Emir Faisal

In June 1918, a series of meetings between Arab and Zionist leaders was facilitated by T.E. Lawrence, and Emir Faisal met with Chaim Weizmann – who introduced himself as a representative of the British government – to discuss the future of the region. To allay Arab suspicions of Zionist intentions, Weizmann assured Faisal that the Zionists did not intend to set up a Jewish state in Palestine. The subsequent Faisal-Weizmann conditional agreement of January 1919 expressed Faisal's support for Arab-Jewish cooperation in Palestine in exchange for Jewish support of Arab aspirations for unity and independence. He endorsed the Balfour Declaration and boundaries were to be determined in the Paris Peace Conference later the same year.



Chaim Weizmann

Faisal spoke no English and Weizmann no Arabic, so communication between the two was through interpretation by Lawrence, who was a fluent Arabic speaker. The document that was signed was in English, and Faisal signed in good faith in Weizmann's integrity and Lawrence's translation, adding in handwriting that "if changes are made, I cannot be answerable to failure to carry out this agreement."

Awni Abdul Hadi, Faisal's political secretary and a Palestinian nationalist, told the Zionist delegation at the post-WWI peace conference in Paris that the Arabs "were troubled on the point of Zionist claims to British Trusteeship for Palestine... What the Arabs really wanted was that Syria should be an independent state under Arab rule." Awni Abdul Hadi proposed the Arab political agenda in which Palestine, Syria and Iraq would be united in an independent confederation, and all rights and liberties would be given to the Jews in Palestine on equal terms with the Arabs. The Zionist reaction was that this agenda fell short of the Zionist program and "could not be entertained for a moment"³, and some were not sure whether Awni Abdul Hadi was presenting his own personal thoughts or those of Emir Faisal.



T. E. Lawrence



Awni Abdul Hadi

3 Abdul Hadi, Awni. *Private Papers*, Beirut: PLO Research Center, 1974.