

Lawrence of Arabia and Jews

by Michael Curtis



Here and there, everywhere, scenes concerned with peace in the Middle East, all recall memories of a remarkable person.

After the longest crisis in the country's history Israel has sworn in a unity government. The two leaders, Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz, have agreed to press ahead on controversial proposal to annex parts of the West Bank. The Palestinian leadership has vehemently rejected the legitimacy of the proposal which it says would make peace impossible.

The proposal, together with the impact of Covid-19 on the territory, and the resulting economic distress, is likely to escalate the difference between the two sides. More certainly, it has lessened the likelihood of the peace negotiations which are essential for any agreement on Israel.

Memories of the past suggest the outcome of the aspirations of Zionists and Arabs might have been different. Exactly eighty-five years ago on May 19, 1935, Colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence

died as a result of a motor cycle accident in Dorset. So did Lawrence of Arabia, John Hume Ross, and T.E. Shaw, different names he adopted at various points in his short career. Born in North Wales, out of wedlock, of a landowner father, and a mother governess, Lawrence is not a neglected if enigmatic figure. He is the author of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, aided by George Bernard Shaw, published in 1926, a mainly autobiographical account of his experience during the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1916-1918. He has been the subject of many books, articles, and plays, but an important part of his career, his concern for the aspirations of Zionism is little known or remembered.

Lawrence is best known as the featured adventurer in three films, of which the most popular is the four hour spectacle film, *Lawrence of Arabia*, directed in 1962 by Londoner David Lean, and starring Peter O'Toole, handsome blond actor, of Irish descent, taller , 6'3", than his character, 5' 5". Lean's film, seen by millions throughout the world, won the Academy Award for Best Picture. Lawrence is portrayed in popular fashion for the younger generation, being one of the images that appear on the cover of the album by the Beatles, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

The focus of the 1962 Lean, that has made millions of people aware of Lawrence, is his activity with the Arab tribal leaders in the Hejaz and greater Syria. It also, though inference and subtlety, indicated his inner turmoil over his own identity, sexual and otherwise, and the tension between his loyalty to the British army and his friendship with Arab desert leaders. Illustrated by his wearing of picturesque Arab garb.

Much of the initial popularity of Lawrence stemmed from the presentation of his image by the self-promoting journalist , Lowell Thomas in his lectures and TV portrait in the U.S. and UK on Lawrence's adventures working with Arabs during World War 1 in the Middle East areas ruled by the Ottoman Empire.

Thomas made the unknown British Colonel into "Lawrence of Arabia." Lawrence claimed he had an aversion to celebrity, but Thomas remarked he had a facility for backing into the limelight. Certainly, Lawrence exaggerated his feats, such as the blowing up of 79 bridges along railroads on Ottoman territory. But unquestionably Lawrence was an important figure in helping Sherif Hussein of Mecca and his sons in 1916-17 to remove the Turks from the Arabian Peninsula. He helped Feisal seize the city of Akaba on July 6, 1917. He was with General Edmund Allenby when British Forces entered Damascus on October 1, 1918, though Lawrence entered the city in a Rolls Royce.

T.E. Lawrence had studied at Oxford, got a first class degree, mastered Arabic, and became interested in the history of the Hittites in the 11th century BC. For a short time he worked for the War Office as an archaeologist and photographer in the Middle East. He walked 1,100 miles in Syria and Palestine to inspect 67 castles. In 1914 he joined the army as a second lieutenant and was posted to Cairo between 1914 and 1916 as an intelligence officer. He became the liaison officer to Emir Feisal, one of the sons of Hussein, Grand Sherif of Mecca, leader of the Arab revolt against the Ottoman empire.

Lawrence is now best known as "Lawrence of Arabia," but he was a complex figure, ambivalent on some key issues on Middle East affairs, as well about his own life. What is less well known is his understanding of and sympathy for Zionist aspirations in the Middle East. He recognized in a visit to the Palestinian area in 1909 that the place, once a decent country, was a disaster. He wrote to his mother on August 2, 1909 that "the sooner the Jews farm it all the better. Their colonies are bright spots in a desert." Though he was ambivalent about the Balfour Declaration which called for a Jewish Homeland in Palestine, he was not hostile to Jewish settlement.

His view of Zionists is expressed most strikingly in an article, "The Changing East," published in *The Round Table* magazine of September 1920. He viewed the earliest Zionists as "a conscious effort on the part of the least European people in Europe to make head against the drift of ages, and return once more to the Orient from which they came." The settlers would take back with them samples of all the knowledge and technique of Europe. Later, in November 1918 he said that "speaking entirely as a non-Jew, I look on the Jews as the natural importers of western leaven so necessary for countries of the Near East."

More important than Lawrence's picture of the values that Jews would bring from Europe are views that are pertinent in present day Middle East. The success of the Zionists, Lawrence argued, "would involve inevitably the raising of the present Arab population to their own material level, only a little after themselves in point of time, and the consequences might be of the highest importance for the future of the Arab world. it might well prove a source of technical supply rendering them Independent of industrial Europe, and in that case the new confederation might become a formidable element of world power."

Lawrence helped arrangements for important meetings, one was between Feisal and Chaim Weizmann, president of the Zionist Organization in June 1918, on Arab-Jewish cooperation. At another on January 3, 1919 Feisal and Weizmann, with the help of Lawrence who translated documents, signed an agreement by which Arabs would recognize the Balfour Declaration and encourage Jewish immigration and settlement in Palestine.

Lawrence also arranged a meeting between Feisal and Felix Frankfurter at the Paris Peace conference in 1919. As a result, Feisal wrote a letter, probably written at least in part by Lawrence, to Frankfurter on March 3, 1919, published two days later in *The New York Times*, saying that Arabs and Jews were cousins in having experienced similar oppression,

and that the two representatives were together taking the first steps towards the attainment of their national ideals. The letter says, "we Arabs look with the deepest sympathy on the Zionist movement, a movement that is national and not imperialist."

Feisal's advice is pertinent today, "Others are trying to exploit local differences between Arabs and Zionists, and have misrepresented Zionist aims. These differences are not on questions of principle but on matters of detail such as must inevitably occur in every contact of neighboring peoples, and are easily adjusted by mutual goodwill."

After the war Lawrence was appointed by Churchill, who had become Colonial Secretary in January 1921, as his advisor on Arab affairs. He reported to Churchill in a letter of January 17, 1921 that Feisal had agreed to abandon all claims of his father and other Arabs to Palestine, in return for Arab sovereignty in Bagdad, Amman, and Damascus. Lawrence took part in the complicated negotiations over the Middle East at the Cairo Peace conference. The British proposals, based on Lawrence's advice, for the area was, among other issues, that Feisal would become King of Iraq, that Transjordan would be created, and that western Palestine would become the area of the Jewish National Home, promised in the Balfour Declaration, under British control. Therefore, there did not appear to be a conflict in promises made to Arabs in the Hussein-McMahon correspondence 1915-16 and to Jews with the Balfour Declaration, November 2, 1917.

The restless Lawrence quickly resigned from the Colonial Office, receiving on July 8, 1922 a tribute from Winston Churchill, that, "Your help in all matters and guidance in many has been invaluable to me and to your colleagues." Churchill later remarked that Lawrence had been the truest champion of Arab rights whom modern times have known.

His last years were an enigma. He was appointed a Fellow of

All Souls College at Oxford, resigned after a short time yet his headstone contains a simple statement, "Fellow of All Souls." He joined the Royal Air Force, resigned and joined the Tank Corps of the army as a private, and then rejoined the RAF under the name T.E. Shaw, presumably a tribute to GBS who was a friend, and gave him a motor cycle.

On this day May 19, the anniversary of his death at age 46, it is worth remembering, not the unjust portrait of Lawrence in the epic film Lawrence of Arabia as exhibitionist and narcissistic, but his legacy of sympathy for Zionism and his genuine pleas for Arab-Jewish conciliation and cooperation, a lesson for contemporary leaders in the Middle East.