ANGLO-ARABIA

I. THIN RED LINES

A. COLLAPSE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The shape of the Middle East as we know it today – the countries and their boundaries – weren’t set down by nature...

They came out of the Great War.

And it was the British, more than any other western land, that drew up the design.

There’s a few things that need clearing up right off the bat:

1. England did NOT go into the war, planning on dismantling the Ottoman Empire.

   It didn’t want to.
   It didn’t need to.

   A weak Empire in the Middle East would keep out other European empires.
   And that was what Britain needed most of all.

   Because it wanted to make sure that nobody strong enough to bar the road to India had hold of that land

2. The blame for the Ottoman Empire being torn apart isn’t the West’s. It is the caliphs and sultans who went to war.

THE MYTH OF ARAB NATIONALISM
3. The Ottomans weren’t beaten by an Arab revolt, fostered by Britain and then betrayed after it.

There WAS no “Arab revolt.”

There were a bunch of strong men, with their own ambitions.

None of them had been Arab nationalists before the war.

Some of them had done the Ottoman Empire’s dirty work for it.

The few who rose, rose to get their own power.

They got the weakest, slackest response from the people of the Middle East.

There WAS no “Arab nation,” and not much Arab nationalism, before the war.

T. E. Lawrence: “Arab unity is a madman’s notion – for this century or next probably.”

B. LAWRENCE & THE GREAT ARAB REVOLT

Fortunately, Thomas Edward Lawrence himself happened to be a madman.

He was an archaeologist, a scholar of Jesus College, in Oxford and, as of 1917, a young staff officer who marched with Allenby through Jaffa Gate, when the Turks surrendered Jerusalem.

28, and looking closer to 19.

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He’d volunteered for the army and been turned down...

too small (just a little above 5 feet tall)

And in the Arab Bureau, with its MP’s,

millionaires,

aristocrats,

he came from a family of nobodies

didn’t even go to one of the private schools like Eton

His military record – nil.

The only way he got into the War Office was pull from his

mentor, the archaeologist David Hogarth, who

now headed the Arab Bureau.

Lawrence would do... for a translator

and to be sent to the Middle East to draw

up survey maps.²

No professional soldier, he was that type that did the Empire its

proudest, an amateur, a dreaming intellectual.

He was kind, he was generous, and he had a vision of rousing the

Arabs, to drive the Turks out of Arabia.

His chosen instrument was one of the Bedouin royal families,

the Hashemites.

the Emir Hussein, and his sons Faisal and Abdullah.

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² David Fromkin, A Peace to End All Peace, 226.
They were not simple tent-dwellers.

Turkish culture and habits had made real gentlemen of them.

They led no more than a tribe among many.

To Moslems in Mesopotamia, or Syria, or Palestine, they were neither leaders nor a fit example to follow.

But the Emir was willing to listen when Lawrence talked, and –

if England got them money and guns –

ready to ride against the Turks.

Let’s not kid ourselves.

The Hashemites no more represented the Arab Nation than T. E. Lawrence did.

They weren’t rising to create an Arab nation.

They were out for themselves.

Before the war, you never heard a peep against the Ottomans from Hussein and his clan.

They were loyal small-time officials in the Turkish empire.

They joined no nationalist movement.

Far from seeing themselves as part of a wider Arab nation, made of
culture, language, religion, or history, they saw themselves as above it, a superior class.

This is a Hijaz version of the “white man’s burden.”

Now, all of a sudden here was their chance to rise from tents to palaces, fiefdoms to kingdoms.

They weren’t out to set anybody free.

They were out to pick up the pieces... for themselves.

Lawrence gave them that chance.

He led the revolt, becoming a dazzling guerrila leader.

It was he who rode with the tribe in arms out of the Arabian peninsula to the lands at the head of the Red Sea, to seize the port at Aqaba.

Aqaba was a sleepy little port, just at the southern end of Palestine.

It was at the head of a channel in the Red Sea.

The Royal Navy dared not go up it, because the Turks held the shore batteries.

But that meant that all the guns pointed out to sea.

Bedouin raiders could swoop up on it from behind.
Which, on July 6, 1917, is just what they did, in a complete
dumbfounder to the Turkish garrison.

Lawrence hadn’t led the attack; he may not even have come up with the
idea.

But he was the first to get to British headquarters with the news – and
to take the credit.

And from then on, he was “Lawrence of Arabia.”

From that point on, the Arabs could actually get into
Palestine to be where the fighting was.

Navy ships could carry them there.

When General Allenby drove into Syria, he had an army of Hashemites on
his right flank, with Faisal as commander and Lawrence calling the
shots.

Over them flew a new banner – black, green, red, and white

... to symbolize the past glory of the Moslem Arab empires.

And, like most such symbols, it didn’t come from the Arabs.

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A British emissary designed it.

And the British military supply offices in Egypt turned them out by the dozens to supply Hussein’s troops with.

The only thing Hussein did was change the shade of red being used.\textsuperscript{4}

We’d better remember just how big Hussein’s army \textit{wasn’t}.

... 1000 regulars
... 2,500 irregulars

... and maybe several thousand more from Bedouin tribes.

Their fighting quality was just plain miserable.

But they were VERY good at robbing and pillaging any town they

\textsuperscript{4} David Fromkin, \textit{A Peace to End All Peace}, 315.
passed through.  

Say what you will about Faisal’s army; his brother Abdullah’s was a joke.

Go into his camp and you find him spending his days, in a tent with a lavish carpet on the ground, reading Arabic newspapers, and making violent attacks on any food that came his way.

The closest he came to action was playing William Tell with his entourage, using a rifle to shoot an apple off his head.

But he could tell you all the crowned heads of Europe and who was related to who, and how.

The money that Britain sent to pay his troops never got to them.

It went to distant tribes that weren’t involved in the war.

Gold sovereigns were melted down, by the thousands, to make into fancy swords and daggers, to give as gifts to sheiks that Abdullah was hoping to get along with.

He wasn’t about to fight the Turks.

There’d be another war, after the peace – a war with Ibn Saud in central Arabia.

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5 David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 328.
That was his father’s war, and Abdullah was a very loyal lad.

The more supplies he saved, and the more guns, the readier he’d be when the fighting began.

Let Faisal dream of being king over the Fertile Crescent.

Abdullah dreamed of being king in Mecca and Medina, and down to Yemen. ⁶

The Turks were very glad that British forces sent Abdullah so many supplies: the Bedouins turned around and sold them to the Turks. ⁷

In just about no place did Arabs rise up till British – not Arab riders – British troops – arrived in town.

Damascus fell, and the Arabs and English rode into the city together.

Faisal took over the governing of Syria.

His brother Abdullah was promised Iraq for his kingdom.

They had won the war together – though Britain had done most of the fighting, and footed all the bill.


That bill included some 40 million pounds to make Hussein and Faisal discover their patriotism.

C. Muddle East Mapmaking

But it was quite another thing to make promises stick.

In fact, Britain had made a tangle of promises, that kept stepping on each other’s shoes.

– on the one hand the whole area had been split into a French and British sphere of influence

– on the other hand, the Balfour Declaration had promised that the Jews would be given a “homeland” in the British zone of Palestine.

And by that, everyone assumed, Balfour meant a separate Jewish nation.

– the Fourteen Points seemed to say that there wouldn’t be ANY colonies or ANY divvy in the Middle East.

The people living there would pick their own governments and draw their own boundaries.

... in which case, there might be a Kurdistan

(The Kurds were sure of it, and started building a Kurdish state in northern Iraq)

– administrators wanted Iraq turned into a suburb of India.
It could be peopled with folks from India, Moslem farmers.

Some of these promises would have to give.

As the peace conference got under way, the map-makers started sorting out what needed to be done.

Britain knew what it wanted, and, no, it WASN’T a bigger empire.

It wanted safety for India.

At all costs, the new order in the Middle East had to do what the Ottoman Empire had done....

keep any of the Great Powers from controlling the sea routes east of Suez.

If that took outright control of the outlets to the Persian Gulf ...

So be it.

But if it could be done by friendly client states ...

That would be just fine, too.

By the time they were done, the peacemakers invented countries and set down boundaries...

Mesopotamia
Syria
Lebanon
Palestine

Later historians would claim that the whole system was artificial...

“British inventions, lines drawn on an empty map by British politicians.”

This just isn’t so.

They were lines drawn on an empty map by British and French politicians.
They were drawn to give France the countries of Syria and Lebanon to run.

But they were also drawn as a compromise with the demands of the Hashemite clan, to give them at least some of what they wanted.  

It wasn’t a dividing of the Arabs’ property into artificial states.

ANY states would have been artificial.

Arab nationalism was a very frail little hothouse flower that grew around the university commons.

Palestine’s Arabs and those in Iraq had just about nothing in common.
They didn’t intermarry, intermingle, intersect.

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They may have had a shared history – but how can you share something you don’t know?

Local loyalties to clan and tribe and village were what mattered.

Even being a Moslem mattered less than what kind of Moslem you were.

No, if there was any crime the western powers committed, it wasn’t in breaking the unity of the Middle East into a half-dozen states.

It was in assembling a thousand and a thousand little entities into any states at all.\(^9\)

And it was in letting Hussein and his brood have any kingdoms at all ... especially ones like Syria or Iraq, miles from anywhere they had ever claimed to rule.

And it had to be done, for India’s sake.

Little warring tribes can be gobbled up like Junior Mints.

Countries, now ... they have a better chance of making viable economies, armies, codes of laws.

They may be able to hold on, against outside invaders.

\[\text{D. Unmaking the Great Arab Kingdom}\]

But once you’ve made these countries, the question is, what do you

do with them?

Bring them into the Empire?
Or put them in the hands of your friends?

The clearest division lay between T. E. Lawrence and the Foreign Office, on one side and the Indian Office and the chief commissioner for Iraq, 34 year old Arnold Wilson on the other.

– the Foreign Office wanted a Middle East shaped by Arabs for Arabs with an Arab prince to control it.

– the India Office wanted Iraq tight in the mitts of the Empire, to do as it was bloody well told ...

It didn’t like the Hashemites.

And it knew pretty well how the Hindu millions in India would feel.

For that matter, India’s Moslems didn’t like Hussein and his kin, either.

By rising up against the caliphate, he was throwing a lot of Moslem holy places, like Jerusalem, in real danger.

T. e. Lawrence had a lot of reasons for wanting to give the Hashemites a kingdom.

Maybe guilt played a role.

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Maybe a sense of personal redemption.

But deep down, at the heart of it, Lawrence was talking what seemed like plain common sense.

Arabs didn’t want to throw off a Moslem empire’s yoke, to get into a Christian empire.

What’s more, they needed some kind of leadership, and leaders were right scarce just then.

As sponsors of the Arab revolt, the Hashemites also were the closest thing to the voice of all Arabs as you could find. ¹¹

¹¹ Timothy J. Paris, “British Middle East Policy-Making After the First World War: The Lawrentians and Wilsonian Schools,” *Historical Journal*, 41 (September 1998): 777. As Paris’s essay makes clear, there were a lot of people in the India Office who felt that maybe Lawrence was right and Wilson wrong. What shifted them to his side was that Lawrence went into the press with violent, savage attacks on Wilson and his policies. The India Office may not have agreed with Wilson all that much, but dash it all, you do take care of your own. They lined up firmly behind his outlook.
In the end, the Government took Mesopotamia out of the hands of the Foreign Office and out of Lord Curzon’s control –

He could deal with Egypt and Persia.

And gave it to Colonial Office; and gave the Colonial Office to Winston Churchill, who had views not so far from those of T. E. Lawrence.¹²

But this needs to be said, too: neither France nor Britain did what – fifty years before – would have been natural.

They didn’t turn the Middle East into outright colonies.

They invented countries, and put them into trusteeship... as Mandates.

A Mandate wasn’t the same as a colony.

The person holding the mandate was more like the guardian for a ward.

It had to treat the country right, and its rights to run affairs, the League of Nations could always take away.

**Syria’s Business**
To the Hashemite chiefs, it looked like Colonialism, just spelled a little differently.

They had been given all Arabia, or, anyhow, Hussein had got it.

But where was the kingdom for his son Faisal? Where was the kingdom for Abdullah?

Were they to be denied all the little Persian Gulf states, just because these already had their own little kings and sultans?

Were they to be denied Damascus and Palestine and Lebanon...

just because nobody there really wanted them, and most every Arab living in Mesopotamia or Palestine objected very loudly to having any such outsiders and strangers ruling them? ¹³

just because the only body in Syria that asked Faisal to be king was a Congress he had invented, for that purpose?

and just because they claimed lands they’d never been promised and that the British, over and over, had told them they couldn’t possibly have?

You bet they were.

The British took their troops out of Syria and left Faisal to fight the French on his own.

¹³ Which is the case. Remember, Hussein and his folks weren’t from the Fertile Crescent or Palestine. They were from the Hejaz. That’s in the dry innards of Arabia. Karsh and Karsh, Empires of the Sand. 284-85.
It took the French just four days and one battle, and Faisal’s army collapsed. By the end of the week, he was out of Syria, and out for good.14

Mess-opotamia: the Iraqi Revolt, 1920

Meanwhile, in Mesopotamia, the Arabs wanted no English Mandate to rule over them.

They’d never obeyed anybody, and they weren’t about to now.

Sunni and Shi’ite
Jewish
Kurd
Assyrian Christian

The Shi’ites weren’t bothered that the English would rule them.

They were alarmed that the Sunnis would rule them.

But all these groups had one thing in common. They didn’t want to pay taxes to an outside authority.

There was an uprising, and the worst of it was, the British officials never could figure out exactly what was behind it, or what it was all about.

Was Turkey pulling the strings?
Or maybe it was the Germans?\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} (Who, as everybody knows, were behind the Russian Revolution.... and the Jews were behind them – and, as everybody in London knew,
all the Arab nationalist movements were run by the Bolsheviks.

... which meant that actually, if you unmasked the Arab nationalist movements whoooooo was pulling the strings?

*The Jewwwwwwwwws!*

So many foreign policy experts. So few padded cells.
Or Standard Oil?

Or Shi’ites?

Or just ornery tribesmen?

It took the best Sepoys from India to put them down again.\textsuperscript{16}

Direct rule, if the British tried it, was going to be expensive.

The Turks had had to keep 14,000 local conscripts in Mesopotamia to keep order, and killed 200 people a year, to keep the peace.

Britain had to keep 90,000 men, plus airplanes, armored cars, gunboats and armored trains, and in one summer’s uprising had to kill ten thousand people.\textsuperscript{17}

What made it harder was that most of the British troops weren’t English. They were Indians... Moslem Indians.


\textsuperscript{17} The figures are T. E. Lawrence’s. See Fromkin, \textit{A Peace to End All Peace}, 497.
And the more they killed other Moslems, the less the Moslem sepoys liked it.

Another uprising, and there might be a mutiny among the soldiers.

And with India already a political tinder-box, did you want Moslems sending the word home that the British Empire was in the business of butchering people of the Faith?

No, something better would have to be done for Mesopotamia.

It would need to have in charge the closest thing to a local boy

And there was Faisal, who was out of a job and looking through The Times classified Help Wanted for “king.” Hmmmimmmmmmmm......

He needed a consolation prize, somewhere.

**E. CAIRO CONFERENCE, 1921**

So came about the Cairo Conference, March 1921

Britain sealed its wartime alliance with the Hashemite family

Hussein got the Hejaz (western Arabia) to rule.\(^{18}\)

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\(^{18}\) Hussein wasn’t happy, it ought to be added. He insisted on being declared king of “all Arabs,” that is, given full rights and authority over everybody from Morocco and Tunis to Kurdistan, including the various emirates along the Persian Gulf. This was, even by the fantasy standards of British diplomacy, a crazy proposition, and they
wouldn’t hear of it.

As it was, to get Hussein his kingdom, they had to buy off Ibn Saud, who had claims to most of Saudi Arabia and wanted all of it. That meant digging into the exchequer for funds: 100,000 pounds a year in subsidies. See Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 506.

The settlement didn’t take, subsidy or no, and that was Hussein’s fault. On March 3, 1924, Turkey abolished the office of Ottoman Caliph. At once, Hussein declared that he meant to be the new Caliph, and had himself proclaimed Caliph on March 5th. Needless to say, Moslems everywhere were furious – Egypt to India to Morocco. In Arabia, this was all the excuse the Wahhabis needed, in their fight on the Hijaz, and they had help from Ibn Saud. Hussein was forced to abdicate in favor of his eldest son, Ali. He was sent off to exile in Cyprus, but came back to Transjordan and died there in 1931. Ali didn’t survive long. The Saudis moved in for the kill and in May 1925 Abdullah (who had an eye for a bargain) saw to it that big chunks of Hijaz were handed over to Transjordan, where the British Empire could protect them – and Abdullah could rule them. Before the end of the year, Ali was out, the Saudis were in, and Hijaz because part of Saudi Arabia.

By the way, Hussein was not at all happy about either of his sons being a king with a kingdom of their own. He wanted it all. He was more angry at them than at the British and he never spoke to Faisal again. He quarreled with Abdullah, too, but Abdullah, being nicer, gave him a very nice funeral in Jerusalem. Faisal didn’t attend the funeral. See Kamal Salibi, *The Modern History of Jordan* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 1993), 88-90.
Faisal was given Mesopotamia
to be king over.

It wasn’t all that Arab.

There were lots of Kurds – lots of Jews
– some Christians.

And the Arabs were two separate and
warring kinds of Moslems.

But, united, it could be called Iraq, and it was better than
nothing.

As for his brother Abdullah, the English carved off a big
piece of Palestine, all that bit the other side of the
River Jordan – called it Transjordan – and made
him king there.

(Only temporarily; only for six months or so.

He would keep order.

Paying for him, after all, was cheaper than
one battalion of British soldiers
and England needed to save
what money it could.

Unruly Arab tribesmen would obey an
Arab – they assumed.

And he had some very good qualities.
He was self-indulgent.
Lazy, too.

Lazy people *let other, wiser people handle things for them* –
like, shall we say, the British Resident?^{19}

Nothing worked out as planned.

Abdullah couldn’t keep order by himself.
Other Arabs weren’t Arab nationalists.
They were tribesmen, loyal to their tribe.

Within months, RAF planes and British troops had to come in to suppress revolts.

As for Abdullah stilling attacks on the French in Syria, he wanted the attacks to go on (with deniability on his part).

So before long, French officials in Syria were being assassinated
– and the killers were finding safe hiding places in

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Transjordan. And his Cabinet looked more like a government in exile... chock-a-block with Syrians.

The one thing that did work out as planned was that Abdullah became king; and that was the way Abdullah planned it.

He wasn’t going to leave after six months. He was there for keeps.

(And this had serious effects on the plan to make a Jewish homeland. Because here in one fell swoop, the British had taken 75% of Palestine, and forbid Jews to settle anywhere there, and cut them out of any part in running it)

Both kings were on their own.

20 The king’s defenders could make a case. To survive, Abdullah needed to stay cozy with Arab nationalists. Defying the British and allowing the nationalists to harry Syria gave him credibility. And many of the Arab nationalists – who thought of Abdullah as a British puppet – wanted to put him on the spot with his masters. So naturally, even without any encouragement from Amman, they were going to use Transjordan as a jumping-off place for their raids. Kamal Salibi, The Modern History of Jordan, 95-96.

21 Wilson, King Abdullah, Britain and the Making of Jordan, 62.

22 Fromkin, A Peace to End All Peace, 511-14.
But both would be ... ahem.. “advised” by British officials behind and around the throne.\textsuperscript{23}

In fact, having the Middle East all in the family had real advantages.

The kind of man you want running Iraq is somebody who know he has a lot to lose. And he does...

\textsuperscript{23} Lawrence James, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the British Empire}, 400-01. It needs to be stressed that none of these things were \textit{just given} to the Hashemites, like alms to a beggar. They were squeezed out of the British Government. The handovers were insisted on by the emir and his sons, and in the end Britain gave in, gave way.

Abdullah had been proclaimed the king of Iraq by a self-styled – and wholly undemocratically-chosen – Iraqi Congress. Neither the French nor British government would recognize the proclamation as legal. But the Transjordan was different. There WAS no authority there – neither French nor British troops in mid-1920. It could well belong to the Palestine mandate; in which case, it would be ruled by the British empire. Or, as Syria went into French control, it might well be scooped up by the French – unless somebody was found to rule it. What settled matters was when Abdullah moved his forces into Amman, which meant that he was sitting in Transjordan and would have to be expelled. He had nourished big plans (remember) of a war to take all the Arabian peninsula away from Ibn Saud. Those plans had gone up in smoke – the smoke of battle, where Abdullah had been given a downright shellacking. His ambitions southward were gone bust. His only hope was northward. At that point, Faisal had just lost his right to the throne in Syria. But he was England’s fair-haired boy. There was no doubt in Abdullah’s mind what would happen: Britain would give Faisal some other throne sooner or later, and very likely Iraq’s.

But if he had his soldiers in Transjordan, they would have to bargain with him; and they did. Because those troops were a standing menace to the French in Syria, and of course Abdullah must have moved the soldiers in to defend his brother’s right – right? There was sure to be war, and the last thing Britain needed was to get into a war with the French, especially since tensions already were pretty high about the French working out a separate peace with the Turks – a peace that put Greece at the mercy of Mustafa Kemal; and remember, the Greeks were closely aligned to the British side. So Abdullah’s presence with soldiers in Transjordan was like a guy with a box of matches sitting down in a gunpowder magazine. He hasn’t lit one yet; he’s just taken a match out of the box.... So, you have to buy this guy off with something. How about the chance to be ruler of Transjordan himself?

But ruler for how long? That’s the catch. Britain would have liked to make him governor of Transjordan, and make Transjordan just one province in Palestine. But Abdullah insisted on being king, and having Transjordan not part of Palestine at all. In the end, that is what he got, though British officials thought they were only agreeing to have him as king for six months, and then a better person chosen for governor. Instead, Abdullah became ruler till his assassination in 1951.

Of course Abdullah wasn’t aiming at Transjordan alone. He had a much bigger vision, and admitted it all along. Someday, he would absorb Syria, too. See Karsh and Karsh, \textit{Empires of the Sand}, 289-325; Wilson, \textit{King Abdullah, Britain and the Making of Jordan}, 40-53.
his father’s nice fat subsidy

his brother’s two-bit throne in Amman.

As for what was left of Palestine itself, the Colonial Office would handle that.

Black & Tans and Auxis would act as cops.

In terms of who ruled how, you might say that the Middle East had become the *Muddle East*.

Palestine was a Mandated Territory.

The Colonial Office would run it.

Transjordan and Iraq were vassal states, fronts controlled by British advice, and guarded with British weaponry.

The Persian Gulf emirates were protectorates, tied to Britain by treaty.

Egypt was declared independent, but it had to do as it was told.

There was only one outright colony in the lot: Aden, at the tip of the Arabian peninsula.

But everywhere, the one influence that counted was British influence.
F. HOLY PLACES: OIL KINGDOMS

This is an awful lot of trouble to go to, and nowadays, a lot of us would know what MUST have been the reason:

English policy marched to an oildrum-beat.

As it happens, oil wasn’t anywhere near so important in the 1920s as India.

In the 1920s, 4/5ths of all the oil in the world came from Mexico and the US, not the Middle East.\textsuperscript{24}

Even in 1938, the Middle East only provided one twentieth of the oil output of the world.

And in 1948, only one eighth.\textsuperscript{25}

(The big jump happened in the 1950s. By 1960, one fourth of all oil production came out of the Middle East).

What, no Kuwaiti wells?

By 1965, about half of all the oil Britain imported came from Kuwait.

True enough. But Kuwait didn’t start serious drilling ... till 1949!

Go to the best fields today in Saudi Arabia.

In the 1920s, a New Zealander had rights to them.

\textsuperscript{24} Lawrence James, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the British Empire}, 403.

\textsuperscript{25} Elizabeth Monroe, \textit{Britain’s Moment in the Middle East}, 95.
He put them up for sale. Nobody would buy.

Special experts went to Iraq to check into the potential for oil.

They reported that the BIG money-maker for many years to come would be *wheat*.\(^{26}\)

The simple fact is, that if Britain had known – known – that there wasn’t a drop of oil in Iraq, they STILL would have insisted on a controlling influence there.

Because the real issue wasn’t oil. It was India.

Anyone who held Iraq had a long, broad, fertile plain going down to the head of the Persian Gulf.

If there was no stable government there, the Turks certainly would come back and take over.

Or the Russians.

Or the French.

Either way, you CAN’T afford the lifeline to India to be in the hands of a probable enemy.

\(^{26}\) Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East*, 96. That was in 1924, three years before the tremendous discoveries at Kirkuk.
If there’d been a place to make into a colony, it wouldn’t have been Iraq. It’d have been Persia. England got about one-fifth of its oil from there (and three-fifths from the United States).²⁷

But demand was rising, and by 1920, people knew for a fact that the oil reserves of Persia were tremendous.

The Anglo-Persian Oil company had exclusive rights to drill in Persia, on a half million square miles.

By 1912, they had a tremendous refinery on Abadan Island. By 1919, they were pumping out 7.5 million barrels a year – by 1934, 57 million.

Persia, plainly, would be a very nice addition to the Empire.

But oil wasn’t what was on the Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon’s, mind.

He was thinking of his old hobby, India.

Control who holds Persia, and you control the gates to India.

²⁷ These are the figures for 1938. Total oil from the Middle East amounted to just 22%, and of that amount, 18% was from Persia. See Elizabeth Monroe, Britain’s Moment in the Middle East, 95.
You put pressure on the Afghans to behave, because they have the British army in front of them and Britain’s friends at their back door.

Not that Lord Curzon was thinking of making it a colony.

Just a puppet state. With, perhaps, a big British military presence in the oil country, to keep out the Russians and keep the Persians friendly.

Drawing up a treaty of friendship was easy.

All it took was a bribe for the Persian negotiators, out of one of the banks that England ran.

Britain had the power now to spread its empire from the eastern shore of the Mediterranean to India.

It could build that buffer zone it needed in central Asia.

It could create lines of communication to India, that would free it from reliance on the Suez Canal.  

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28 Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, 396.
Two things made the dream dissolve:

– Britain hadn’t the men

– Britain hadn’t the money

The boom just at the end of the war fizzled.

Joblessness went from 3% to 17% by the end of 1921.

Britain had a mountain of war debts to pay off.
Tax receipts had fallen off sharply.

It couldn’t afford foreign adventures ...

certainly not the 30 million pounds a year to keep Britain as a presence in Persia.29

The army had demobilized in the first days of peace.

Where were replacements to come from?

... especially with Tommies garrisoning the Rhineland – handling the plebiscite in Silesia...

fighting in Bolshevik Russia

keeping the Irish revolution in hand

defending India’s northwest frontier

29 Lawrence James, The Rise and Fall of the British Empire, 397.
keeping the peace in India itself?  

So the best Britain could do was to leave Persia ...  

but leave it in the hands of its friends.  

It helped to have a friendly Shah, and the Empire did...  

Reza Pahlewi, a onetime Cossack officer  

In 1920, Britain gave him the green light to overthrow the government and take the throne.  

In Iraq, the oil fields opened late in the 1920s.  

The Turkish Oil Company ran them, but behind it was British, American, and French money.  

Its pipeline ran to Haifa, in the British Mandate in Palestine.  

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30 Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, 396-97.  

31 Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, 403.
II. THE SANDLORDS

A. PROTECTING CLIENT STATES

To enforce the peace in the Middle East, Britain would set up “air control.”

Bombers and fighter planes

(“the roaring lions of the air,” natives called them)

Cheaper than soldiers... and anyhow, the Empire didn’t have soldiers to spare.

RAF bombers would be at the kings’ disposal.

They could also draw on squadrons of armored cars and local armies, officered by British commanders.

Any sheik that got iffy would get two visits from the bombers.

– the first would drop leaflets

– the second ... well, you can guess what the second dropped.

Since less than one person in ten could read, the military also put loudspeakers into some of the planes to warn inhabitants what to do and where to run to. 32

Air control was efficient – it machine-gunned everybody: women and kids included. The faster they ran away, the better targets they made.

32 Lawrence James, The Rise and Fall of the British Empire, 401-02.; James, Imperial Rearguard, 78-79.
In open country, a party of 400 or so made swell targets. The best shooting of all came if you could scare them into a lake. Then they were easy to spot and they couldn’t move as fast.

Every so often entire villages were levelled.\(^3^3\)

Sometimes it was used against rebels.

Sometimes it was used to induce people to pay their taxes on time.

British support, though, had another advantage.

The kings got used to having it, and couldn’t do without it.

So, let’s say you’re king of Jordan.

There’s raids over your border from the Wahhabi

[the ultra-puritan sect of Moslems, that have Saudi backing]

\textbf{You} can’t cope. You give the Brits a buzz.

They don’t answer your calls.

... until you dismiss the Arab nationalists from your Cabinet and pick a premier who can get along with the British Resident –

and until you pick a British officer as supreme commander, and money-handler

\(^{33}\) Lawrence James, \textit{Imperial Rearguard}, 80-81.
for your army.\textsuperscript{34}

It also meant peace.

There’d be no wars over borders, as long as Britain commanded the planes and armored cars.

British mapmakers would settle where Saudi Arabia ended and Transjordan began ...

with the settlement surest to keep Arabia from making a war.

\footnote{Which is just what happened in 1925-26. The British officer was Captain Frederick Peake, about whom more later on. See Kamal Salibi, \textit{The Modern History of Jordan}, 104; Wilson, \textit{King Abdullah, Britain and the Making of Jordan}, 72-76.}
What could Transjordan do? Alone, they couldn’t fight.\textsuperscript{35}

\section*{B. PIMLICO PASHAS}

The system could work, and usually did.

\textbf{IRAQ and JORDAN}

Britain gave up its Mandate on Iraq in 1930.

The country became – theoretically – independent.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{35} Wilson, \textit{King Abdullah, Britain and the Making of Jordan}, 100-01.
Why did it get independence in any form? The most important historian of the British involvement in the Middle East thinks it was a matter of bad conscience: they’d promised a throne to Faisal in Syria, and then let him get tossed out. Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East*, 79.

But this doesn’t strike me as persuasive. British officials felt that they’d done pretty well by Faisal – a lot better than he’d done by them. What they did see, though, was that the best way to keep down nationalist furies was to put as much distance between British overlordship and the king of Iraq as possible. And the best way to discourage the French from colonizing further in the Middle East was, don’t give them the excuse: don’t make an area a colony yourself, and give the French a model to follow in Syria.

Point #2: Britain acted in Iraq the way they were acting elsewhere: pulling back, as long as they could keep the thing that mattered – military bases – secure. With nationalism on the rise in Iraq, they couldn’t even depend on keeping those, unless they gave some ground.

Point #3: in Article 22 of the covenant of the League of Nations, it very specifically defined the responsibility of whoever held mandate to prepare the country for self-rule, as soon as the country was able to stand by itself.

Point #4: it was very plain that English public opinion didn’t want any new colonies and didn’t want any new wars to hold onto domains that were not technically colonies.

It always helps not to assume that when realpolitik is all on the side of doing something, the Government does it because it has a bad conscience. For the motivations, see Daniel Silverfarb, *Britain’s Informal Empire in the Middle East: A Case Study of Iraq, 1929-1941* (New York: Oxford, 1986), 16-20.
It stayed a British puppet all the same.

Its army, Britain trained and supplied.

Its bases and transport facility were open for the Empire to use however it saw fit.

And at Habbaniya, the RAF kept its garrison and aerodrome.\textsuperscript{37}

You could see the British influence in everything.

The royal family had English tutors, English nannies, English coachmen, English grooms and mechanics.

The royal mausoleum was designed by an English architect.

The royal sons went to Harrow.

His royal Highness appeared, not in the sheik’s Arab attire, but in tasteful lounge suits.

The kings drove excellent sports cars.

In fact, Faisal’s heir, Ghazi, got killed driving his

\textsuperscript{37}Lawrence James, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the British Empire}, 403.
But the palace wasn’t where the power lay.

If you wanted action, a decision, you went to the British High Commissioner’s headquarters, by the Tigris River.

Just as, in Transjordan, when you went to Amman, the first place you called, for satisfaction, would be the British Residency

Who figured out the taxes?

The Department of Lands and Surveys did, in Transjordan.

... a department with a British director

It did the fiscal survey of the country.

It re-assessed all the land taxes, to make them fair and uniform everywhere.

Who divided up lands held in common, in a fair way?

British authorities.

They didn’t want to see a country of vast estates and landless peasants.

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38 In 1939, leaving behind a six year old heir to the throne. And that meant, in the long term, the worst kind of trouble and almost assured a military coup and British interference during World War II. But that is another story. Kamal Salibi. The Modern History of Jordan, 147
So they handed out tribal lands, dividing them up and seeing that grazing lands were held in common and farm land in small tracts.

As for the military ... British soldiers held the top commands.

Iraq and Jordan’s kings did just what they were told.

Go to Amman to find Transjordan’s defenders...

the Arab Legion.

But its commander is Fred Peake – “Peake Pasha,” they call him.

He wears the Arab head-dress, but his khaki uniform is strictly British empire

The man who took his place would be Abu Huniak, Father of the Little Chin ... but his real name was Glubb –

John Bagot Glubb

who, till the 1950s, was the power behind the throne.

Abdullah not only got along with Glubb; he liked him.

Glubb knew Arabic, and admired the Arab tribes.

They trusted him, liked him even.

As a professional soldier, Glubb put his loyalty to
Abdullah ahead of just about everything.

There’d be no intrigues with his enemies.\(^{39}\)

But Glubb’s loyalty involved doing FOR the King what the king might not do for himself.

Who became the arbiter of what tribal law was?

The British commander of the Arab Legion.

Who provided the money, and spent it, too, when a drought hit?

\(^{39}\) Glubb told how he got the job. He was summoned to Abdullah’s office. “You are English,” the Amir said, “and this is an Arab country, and an Arab army. Before you take over command, I want you to pledge me your word that, as long as you remain in this appointment, you will act always as if you had been born a Trans-Jordanian. I know you would not wish to fight your own countrymen. If it should ever come to fighting between us and the English, I will hold you excused. You may leave us then and stand aside. But if, by God’s will, this does not happen, I want you to be one of the people of Transjordan.” “Sir,” Glubb told him, “I will give you my word of honour. From now on I am a Trans-Jordanian, except under the conditions you mentioned, and which I pray may never come.” See Kamal Salibi, The Modern History of Jordan, 116.
The British commander of the Arab Legion.⁴⁰

Next to the throne, find King Abdullah’s chief adviser, 
Alec Kirkbride

Or go to the Persian Gulf, to Bahrain, and find the king’s 
adviser there, Charles Belgrave, who got the job 
by answering an ad in the personals column of the 
Times.

They could claim to have done well by the states they ruled.

Visit Iraq.

– roads are being built, and buildings.

By a Public works Department run by the English.

Roads and track triple their mileage.

– two New Zealanders set up a motor route across the desert.

– Iraq has a postal service, based on British models and designs.

– telegraph lines were rebuilt and expanded.  

Go to the port at Basra, and you will find the shipping run by J. C. Ward, Port Director.

Britain actually owns the port, till all the new building in it is paid for. It becomes one of the great outlets of the oil trade.

And it was British money that dredged a deep channel through the sand bar off the coast.

Iraqi railways? British owned, and British executives held all but the figurehead jobs at the top.

As for the kind of Arabs in the public service, when Iraq became independent, they were the best-trained in the Middle East.

British training and schooling.

... you won’t find that in Syria under the French.

... you won’t even find it in British Palestine.\(^\text{42}\)

For that matter, there wouldn’t have been a vast oil field in Iraq at Mosul, if the British hadn’t insisted on Mosul being part of Iraq, when Turkey tried to claim it...

and that was a year before any oil was discovered.\(^\text{43}\)

In other words, British authorities behaved as if Iraq were their child, to be protected, rather than as if it were their milk cow.

Iraq became, of all things, a cotton producer.

Thank the British Cotton Growing Association for that.

They built cotton gins, and experimented with different kinds of

\(^{42}\) Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950: A Political, Social, and Economic History* 187-89.

\(^{43}\) Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950: A Political, Social, and Economic History*, 152-58. Mosul was heavily Kurdish, but, in the early years, this didn’t mean the ethnic cleansing that took place later in the century. On the contrary, it protected the Kurds from the kind of persecution going on in Turkey, and refugees by the thousands sought to get into Mosul, when it became part of Iraq. In the first 25 years of an independent Iraq, Kurds served in government in civil and military posts. They sat in the Chamber of Deputies, in the senate, in the cabinet. Their land was tied together with roads, the telegraph lines were furthered, and tobacco production was encouraged. Longrigg, writing in 1953, could declare “Their complete integration in the ‘Iraq State seemed a not impossible hope.”
cotton – and in the end found that the best was
the American short-staple kind.

(It can stand up to a scorcher of a summer; and Iraq
had plenty of those).

That’s why in 1921 the country made 60 bales.

... and in 1930, 3,137 bales.\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{C. A Soft Answer Turneth Away Empire}

Informal empire is still empire, but there’s a looseness about it.

You could see that in Transjordan.

On important matters, you didn’t have to tell Abdullah what to do.

He pretty much guessed what England expects.

He’d do it before the orders came – just so it looked as if it was his
own idea, not theirs.

And this was necessary, if he was going to look like a genuine,
real king to his people.

You CAN’T have the Brits call the shots too often.

But on matters that he guessed were more important, Abdullah would

“forget” to do what he was ordered to do.

Or directives would get lost.

Or he’d find reasons to drag his heels and delay so long that in
the end his British advisers would throw up their hands
and say, “Okay, okay, do it your own way!”

Now, you couldn’t do this in an uppity way.

You have to say “Yes” to anything they tell you to do.

But if you dilly dally and fumfer, that’s different.

They write it off as what a typical Arab king’s like.

You know: “languid” “indolent” “lazy.”

Yeah... lazy like a fox!\(^{45}\)

Iraq was mostly obliging.

But every so often, it went its own way.

– over English protests, it massacred the Assyrians,\(^{46}\) who were trying


\(^{46}\) The Assyrians were Christians – nestorian Christians who lived northeast of Mosul. But they called themselves Assyrians, because they insisted that their ancestors were the ancient people who once had ruled a vast Mesopotamian empire. They spoke Syriac – which was a grandchild of Aramaic, the language that Christ apparently spoke.

The Ottoman Empire considered them a separate religious community and let them pretty much run themselves under a patriarch.
to set up a government all their own in northern Iraq

It killed every Assyrian that it captured in battle.

And every other male it found.

In one village, 315 Assyrians surrendered their rifles after being promised they’d be spared.

Then they were all killed.

– it bought lots of guns and arms from Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy

After the war, those in what now was called Turkey were pushed just south of it into what now was called Iraq – where many of them had lived. None of them tried to assimilate into Iraqi society. They didn’t learn Arabic. And they became, more than any other groups, the soldiers of His Majesty’s Government in Iraq, identifying themselves with the British.

Which made their betrayal by British inaction in 1933 all that more shameful. The Iraqi government couldn’t believe there wouldn’t be a British reprisal. If Britain wasn’t going to back up its closest allies in Iraq, then who would it back up?
– it made a violent war of words on Kuwait’s sheik, who was another English client.

And as Germany rose, Iraq got less and less cooperative.

It could always find a new master – one ready to chase the British meddlers out of the Middle East.

And really, can we blame them?

Kings that had no tradition to back them up – no history – no heritage – who owed their throne to the British putting them there...

they were sitting ducks.

Every nationalist would point fingers at the strings that made their heads bob up and down –

or wave fists at the kings as tools of the British Crown.

No Arab king could afford to give undying support to England –

unless he wanted to do a little dying himself.

D. EGYPT

Egypt was nowhere near so comfortable a protectorate.

It was “independent” – but every time anyone tried to act independent, by an uprising, the British forces were upon them.

Egyptians didn’t model themselves on the English, but on the French.
English residents disliked the “wogs” intensely.

Howling hell of every breed,
Every color, every creed,
Indigo, Nubian,
Swarthy Greek;
Over all that garlic reek;
Shouting vendors seeking trade;
Beggars sleeping in the shade;
Clanging tram;
Raucous horn;
“Backsheesh!” from the newly born.

– J. Broome

III. THE PROMISED LANDLORDS

A. A MANDATE IN PALESTINE

As of 1919, there were just 66,000 Jews in Palestine.
and 600,000 Arabs.

In the 1920s, Britain helped return Israelites to the Promised Land.

The Balfour Declaration effectively promised a Jewish national home. Not a nation of Israel. Not even a separate colony. But a homeland.

There were a lot of reasons for it.

1. The Turks had gone a-persecuting of the Jews in wartime, and something simply had to be done for them

2. To swing American public opinion behind the war, the British were sure that an appeal ought to be made to American Jews, including those close to the President, like Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis

3. Everyone “knew” that Russia was run by Jews; everyone knew that Germany was heavily influenced by Jews.

   You want to keep Russia in the war? You want to give the Jewish people in Germany another reason to down tools?

   A Jewish homeland is the lure of lures.

4. But finally, there’d been a long streak running through English Protestantism of reviving the homeland of the Jews.

   It went all the way back to the Puritans.

   Lord Palmerston had tried to coax the Sultans into making a homeland.

   And Lloyd George had a deep religious streak, one that saw him as the person who restored what for 1900 years had been lost.
Besides, everyone knows that the Jews are the brains of anything they are involved in.

Put them into the Holy Land, and they’ll make the Arabs go along with the British empire and its needs!

Yes, it conflicted with the British wartime pledges to the Arabs.

But, hey... the War had freed so much land from the Turks.

Would the Arabs, who got most of it, begrudge a little share for Jews?

In fact, Britain’s main concern wasn’t that too many Jews would come, but too few.

The Jews would develop Palestine’s backward economy.

Arabs couldn’t.

If you want to make this a land of milk & honey, the more of the children of Moses, the better.

And the real fear was that when they came and saw what a rotten, dry, harsh landscape it was, they wouldn’t stay.

But they did come – all through the 1920s.

The population doubled in ten years, of Jews.

Things worked too well, in some ways. Take the matter of land.
There was plenty of land in Palestine for people to farm.

There just wasn’t much good, well-watered land.

Most of it, a handful of Arab landlords held, while the mass of Arab peasants worked on pretty eroded little spit-spots of ground.

The Zionists didn’t mean to take either the good land or the bad. Arabs could keep what they had.

What they would concentrate on was land NOBODY had used yet; turn it into farmland, and by using scientific agriculture, take the wasted, eroded lands, and make them fertile again.

But, to their surprise, they found that not only were the Arabs willing to sell some of their land. They were eager to.

And who wouldn’t, when you could sell it for 4 to 80 times what you bought it for?

Arabs were so eager to sell that the problem wasn’t finding land; it was finding Jews with enough money to buy all that was out there on the market.

In fact, considering how hard it was to make a profit off the land, the biggest Arab landowners often only kept out of the red by the money they made selling part of their holdings to Jews.  

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The Zionists weren’t taking all the good land; they were being given it.

And they weren’t out to drive the Arabs away.

In fact, as they saw it, they were doing more than enough to be accommodating.

– they supported Arab aspirations in Syria, against the French
– they were willing to offer certain protections to Moslem rights in a new Jewish state
– they were willing to allow the Arabs to have self-government in some parts of Palestine.

– and they had let 3/4ths of Palestine be handed away to the Arabs, as Transjordan.

Originally it would have been part of the land that would have been allotted for a Jewish state.

So had much of what the British gave to the French, to make into Lebanon.

All these, the Arabs had been allowed. Was it too much to ask that what was left of Palestine – the western 25% of it – or some part of that 25% be given to the Jews?\(^{49}\)

Arabs thought it was; and they had a lot of friends in the Mandate administration.

\(^{49}\) Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 521.
British policy makers in Palestine started in with a strong bias against the Jews.

– most of the Foreign Office men, after all, had trained for the Middle East by learning Arabic, not Hebrew, and sinking themselves deep in Arab custom.

– the gentlemanly tradition of England was so much closer to the ways of Arabs...

A society where you go in for the manly pursuits –

like hunting and sport
and war

That bias never left them. For the most part, the believers in the Balfour Doctrine stayed in London.

When Arabs went on a three day pogrom through the Jewish section of Jerusalem in 1920, killing some, wounding hundreds of others, the mobs shouted, “The Government is with us!”

And they had every right to think so.

All the killing happened in the Old City.

That was because British troops wouldn’t interfere.

In the New City, the Jews had their own private army.
And the Arab mobs weren’t about to mess with them.

When the Jewish militia tried to go to the rescue of their people in the Old City, they were barred out by British guns.
And who got punished when the rioting was over?

Just about none of the rioters.

No, most of the people put on trial were Jewish leaders, for
having passed out arms to their followers for
self-defense.

In fact, when British officials sent a fact-finding investigation to Palestine,
they found that leading military officers were working with the
Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, to set off new riots against the Jews.

The whole military administration had to be scrapped and a civilian
government put in its place.\textsuperscript{50}

Hitler’s rise added to the impulse.

By 1935, sixty thousand Jews came every year to Palestine.

\textbf{B. THE ARAB REVOLT, 1936}

Arabs couldn’t stand that. In 1936, they broke out in revolt.

It took two British divisions of troops, before the revolt could be
suppressed, and more than two years.

\textsuperscript{50} Fromkin, \textit{A Peace to End All Peace}, 447-448.
Britain had the muscle to have its way.

Or, more to the point, the technology.

Special thanks to the air force, fighter planes and bombers alike.

Within a month of Munich, the army got the authority it wanted to put down the Arab uprising:

Palestine was put under martial law.
All the people there had to have identity cards.

The press was censored

Court martials could try and sentence terrorists to death, or those bearing arms.

Most of the Arab leaders were deported to the Seychelles.

Anyone found carrying arms was put to death.

C. PROMISE BROKEN: THE WHITE PAPER

But it also made Britain timid about its promise of a Jewish nation.

The apparent solution was partition.

A Royal Commission was given the task.

But Britain dropped the idea quietly, and went for a federated Palestinian state.

One with special protections for minority rights.
This was the March 1939 White Paper.

And, to make the handwriting on the wall plainer, it kept Jewish immigration to 15,000 a year for the next five years.

There would be no more Arab threat to British rule.

From now on, it was the Jews who led the fight.

And the White paper in 1939 was the tip off.

A) restricting Jewish immigration to 75,000 over five years

B) shutting it off completely thereafter, unless the Arabs said yes to it.

C) setting up institutions of self government that would bring about a Palestinian state in ten years, with Jewish consent

Britain’s plan was to make the Jews and Arabs cooperate.

If Arabs could nix Jewish immigration, and Jews could nix a Palestinian state, they’d have bargaining chips for each other.

But the talks never happened, and neither did the deals.

In fact, the White Paper was staggeringly unpopular in Palestine
in the United States

and even in Parliament.51

CODA: CHOSEN PEOPLE?

For thirty years, Britain commanded the destinies of the Middle East.

Their legacy was peace and order, but the price was high:

– it was the order of feudal chiefs and princes

– there would be no democracy, no training in representative government

– and every year, holding on became harder.

Because the kings were never popular.

They ruled half-nations with no heritage, no past.
Their right to the throne had been dictated in the Foreign Offices of Paris and London.

What right had kings like this to rule?

They were British puppets... and that was enough to make their title – even if they could trace their royal ancestry back to Solomon and Cleopatra – a defiled, discreditable thing.

So this Empire outside the Empire was as unstable as a Colonial Office built on Arabia’s sands.

– a revolt this year
– a mutiny in Iraq
– an assassination in Egypt
– a riot in Palestine...

always there was an undercurrent of unease.