

T.E. Lawrence: Pro-Zionist or Pro-Arab?

By Raymond Stock

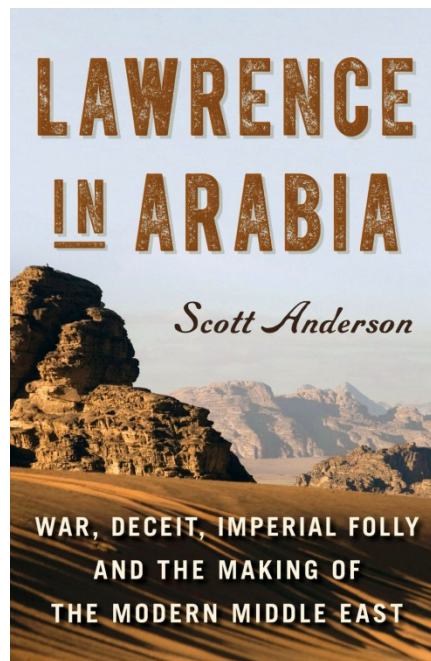
Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East. By Scott Anderson. New York: Doubleday, 2013. 577 pp. \$28.95 (\$17.95, paper).

American novelist and foreign correspondent Anderson intertwines T.E. Lawrence's well-worn, but never boring, story with those of three other intriguing personalities—Curt Prüfer, a German Orientalist and spy; William Yale, an American patrician, oilman, and spy; and Aaron Aaronsohn, a Jewish agronomist of pre-Mandate Palestine and spymaster. The result is a highly original and absorbing—but also troubling—account of an extremely familiar subject. Anderson likewise delves into imperial rivalries—British, French, German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian (as well as the bungling, neophyte Americans)—and their tragic consequences during and after World War I.

Anderson is not the first scholar to link Lawrence and Aaronsohn. Ronald Florence's *T.E. Lawrence, Aaron Aaronsohn and the Seeds of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*¹ thoroughly covered the rather scanty—and mutually rude—relations between the British Arabist and the Romanian-born Jew who laid the scientific basis for the “desert bloom” of Palestine. Similarly, correspondence between Lawrence and Yale has been noted both by Florence and by Harold Orlans in *T.E. Lawrence: Biography of a Broken Hero*² although their fleeting, sporadic, but still momentous interactions are handled much more substantively here.

¹ New York: Viking, 2007.

² Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2002.



It is the inclusion, however, of Curt Prüfer, the polyglot Near East intriguer, German soldier and airman, that is Anderson's most original contribution and one of the major strokes that makes the work such worthwhile reading. Prüfer was in more ways than one the perfect anti-Lawrence: He was an early Western student of the traditional shadow plays of Cairo's slums whereas Lawrence scorned the urban squalor of Egypt. The German diplomat was a Turkophile and an anti-Semite; Lawrence loathed the Turks and admired the Jews. Prüfer was a passionate agitator for pan-Islamic jihad against the British while Lawrence avoided direct appeals to religion. Prüfer also championed Egypt's deposed khedive, Abbas Hilmi II, who vainly hoped Kaiser Wilhelm II would restore him to his throne; Lawrence, for his part, actually put two sons of the ousted king of the Hejaz on the thrones of Iraq and Transjordan, two countries he and Winston Churchill carved out of the carcass of the Ottoman Empire.

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Both the folly and the deceit of the book's subtitle are ironically illustrated through what the author calls "the reverse symmetry of Prüfer's and Lawrence's wartime experiences." Anderson writes,

During the first two years of the war, army captain Lawrence spent most of his time deskbound in the mapping room of the Arab Bureau in Cairo while Prüfer seemed to be everywhere: launching sabotage and spying missions against British Egypt, participating in two major offensives, unmasking potential enemies of the Ottoman and German cause throughout Syria. Yet by the end of 1916, it was Lawrence who was in the field while Prüfer idled away his days in a mapping room in Berlin.

Much of the book's overall portrait of Lawrence is so correct, and the work so well-written, that it is painful to quibble with any part of it. Yet, there is a major area in which it seems to seriously err.

One of the larger goals of the author—to cast Lawrence of Arabia as an anti-imperialist hero—becomes enmeshed in a misplaced appraisal of Lawrence's attitude toward and actions on behalf of the British role in the Zionist enterprise. Certainly, Lawrence labored famously against Britain's (alleged) betrayal of its Arab allies epitomized in the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916. But it is a dubious contention at best that Lawrence, as part of this effort, publicly offered only limited, even disingenuous support to Zionism (and then primarily for tactical purposes) while urging its frustration and defeat to his superiors in London in private.

Thus, in describing Lawrence's early encounters with Zionism, Anderson offers a sardonic assessment of a meeting between Lawrence and Chaim Weizmann in Aqaba in June 1918. Weizmann at this time

was head of the Zionist Commission sent to Palestine by the British to advise on the future development of the country. Anderson de-

scribes the meeting as "one schemer sitting across the table from another," adding that although Lawrence had an "apparent conversion to Zionism, there was a marked limit to that conversion." But the evidence for this equivocation is both scanty and contradicted by Lawrence's later public statements on behalf of Zionism.

Anderson contends that Lawrence "saw a potentially pivotal role the Zionists might play in postwar Syria" in an effort to rescue Britain's client Faisal. Anderson quotes a secret report submitted to the Foreign Office by Lawrence on June 16, 1918, which states that "the effendi [landowner] class, the educated class, the Christians, and the foreign elements will turn against [Faisal]." According to Anderson, Lawrence, nevertheless, advised that, in Anderson's words, "the Arabs should never seek nor accept Zionist aid, nor should Weizmann be given the meeting he urgently sought—an audience with [Faisal's father] King Hussein." However, Jeremy Wilson's *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography*³ notes that Lawrence dictated a contrary appraisal regarding the potential for Arab-Zionist cooperation—especially in the postwar period—to writer G.S. Symes at the Aboukir aerodrome in mid-June 1918 for Symes' book, *Tour of Duty*.⁴

Wilson also quotes G.F. Clayton, head of the British intelligence unit in Cairo, who wrote at that time, "Weizmann ... has done very well with Faisal and at least has established excellent personal relations. He has also had long discussions with Lawrence, and they seem quite agreed on

³ New York: Atheneum Books, 1990.

⁴ London: Collins, 1946.

main principles.”⁵ But Anderson, who argues that Lawrence would not have shared Clayton’s optimistic expectations from the Weizmann-Faisal relationship, omits this report as well.

Moreover, if Lawrence were purely cynical and had strictly utilitarian views of Zionism, why not characterize Faisal and Weizmann in the same fashion? Speaking of the joint declaration the two issued on the eve of the postwar Paris peace conference of 1919, in which Zionist support for Syrian independence would be rewarded with Hashemite backing for the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine, Anderson casts it, quite accurately, as a “mutually beneficial relationship,” without the stain of opportunism he applies to Lawrence.

More troubling is the author’s omission of strong and available evidence that contradicts his view that Lawrence’s embrace of Zionism was false and expedient. In his 2009 article, “Lawrence of Judea,” Sir Martin Gilbert appears to prove that Lawrence was actually a Zionist as well as an Arab nationalist⁶—especially as seen in his writings and statements from shortly after the time Anderson’s narrative on this issue ends. Why then did Anderson stop there, omitting critical later material that undermines one of his central findings about Lawrence?

Gilbert summons numerous sources, both public and private, to prove his point. An important one, for example, is a 1920 essay

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Lawrence published in the influential British periodical *Round Table* assessing the Zionist project in Palestine: “The

success of [the Zionists’ settlement plan] ... will 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.”

One can hardly be more pro-Zionist than that—and arguably, no more pro-Arab, either. By placing Lawrence—a champion of both causes—essentially on just one side of that tragic divide, at least in his heart of hearts, Anderson has rendered his adventurous and eloquent inquiry into a less than reliable narrative. That is a pity, for the complex—and balanced—message of this enduringly enigmatic figure has great value both for his time, and our own.

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⁵ G. F. Clayton to G. A. Lloyd 18.6.1918, Lloyd papers, GLLD 9/3, Churchill College, Cambridge.

⁶ Sir Martin Gilbert, “[Lawrence of Judea](#): The champion of the Arab cause and his little-known romance with Zionism,” *Azure*, Autumn 2009, reprinted at aish.com, Jerusalem, July 9, 2011.