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British intelligence and Arab nationalism: the origins of the modern Middle East

Steven Wagner

During 1917–18, Sir Mark Sykes represented the cabinet's Middle Eastern policy, working with members of General Allenby's staff in Cairo, including his staff intelligence and the Arab Bureau, which handled political intelligence in the region. These intelligence officers were also responsible for handling negotiations with the Hashemite chief Sherif Husayn of Mecca in 1915. Sykes and these officers had to simultaneously plan victory and Britain's postwar interests. Few British officials recognised the inherent contradiction in their promises to Zionists and Arabs between 1917 and 1919. This chapter argues that Britain's lack of appreciation for the conflict inherent in its various commitments derived more from weak assessments of Arab politics than from malevolence toward its new junior partners. By comparing what British intelligence officers believed about the relationship between Arab nationalist societies and the Hashemites against the reality of that relationship, it is possible to understand Britain's contradictory policy commitments, which were made as British war aims evolved along with the conditions produced by the conflict.

Before and during the war, British policymakers did not fear Arab nationalism, but they did worry about how to contain other forces. Some of these fears became irrelevant after the war. British officer in charge of Middle East policy, Mark Sykes, wrote in 1917:

...if we have agreements of an ancient Imperialist tendency, which the nationalities dislike it will be most probable that the Turk and German will score heavily to keep suzerainty and the Baghdad-Bahn, and land us (Great Britain) in a bad peace position in the Middle East, lacking both control and future security... I want to see a permanent Anglo-French Entente allied to Jews, Arabs and Armenians which will render pan-Islamism innocuous and protect India and Africa from the Turco-German combine, which I believe may well survive the Hohenzollerns.¹

This view referenced German and Ottoman pan-Islamic propaganda that sought to raise *Jihad*, or Islamic holy war, against Christian forces in the Middle East. Such attempts sought to consolidate Islamic unity within the Ottoman Empire and to obstruct British mobilisation in Egypt and India.² In 1917, Sykes's main aim was to defeat the enemy. In the minds of policymakers, this propaganda could remain a threat even after the war and, in fact, did until the mid-1920s. Fear of pan-Islam dominated British planning for the postwar Middle East.³

Since the Balfour Declaration in November 1917, which promised to promote the creation of a 'Jewish National Home' in Palestine through immigration and development, there remained little scepticism about the virtues of Zionism within intelligence and policymaking circles.⁴ Only by August 1919, once Britain's hold over Palestine was all but legally secured, did officers begin to understand that Britain's Arab and Zionist policies were irreconcilable.⁵

Mark Sykes had envisioned a British-Arab-Zionist-Armenian alliance to contain Turkish, German and pan-Islamic forces. In 1919 British intelligence officers were charged with implementing such a programme. The Zionist and Arab policies were seen as logical means to counter a united Middle Eastern front against the British Empire. Yet these policies would not be simple to implement; not only did the Middle East of 1919 look drastically different from

1 Mark Sykes, Memorandum on the Asia-Minor Agreement, August 14, 1917, RG65/P/349/28. Israeli State Archives (ISA), Jerusalem.

2 Hasan Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1918* (University of California Press, Berkeley: 1997) pp 187–188.

3 Steven Wagner, *British Intelligence and Policy in the Palestine Mandate, 1919–1939* (DPhil, University of Oxford: 2014) pp 26–28.

4 Gertrude Bell was one prominent figure who doubted that Arab would ever accept Zionism.

5 Wagner, *British Intelligence and Policy in the Palestine Mandate, 1919–1939*, p 52.

that of 1917, but the threat of pan-Islam was difficult to discern from other conflicts emerging in Anatolia, Cilicia, and across the Arab Middle East. Complicating our understanding of these events, in 1919 Sykes inconveniently died of the Spanish flu. Neither he nor Lord Kitchener – both responsible for Britain's Middle Eastern policies during the war – lived to see the consequences of their commitments.

Kitchener and Sykes drastically changed the Middle East, yet it quickly became a world which they likely would not have recognised. Their understanding of Arab politics was especially limited by a few channels of information, and the biases of some officers. What they understood about the connection between the Hashemite family and Arab nationalist societies differed from the true relationship. Arab nationalist societies had spread throughout the Ottoman Empire before and during the war. Fearing pan-Islam, Britain saw nationalism as a source for partnership against the religious threat aroused by the Ottoman Empire and Germany. Crucially, intelligence officers did not see the overlap between these communities within the Arab secret societies.

In Syria and Egypt a secret society called *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa*⁶ followed the teachings of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Mohammad 'Abduh. In the late 19th century the pair produced a journal with the same name. After publication ceased, *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa* continued to teach that the prestige of Islam could only be rescued by the rebirth of the Arab nation. The movement strove to reconcile Islam and the Arab nation with modernity. It was deeply resentful of British control over Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire's weakness in the face of western powers.⁷ Pan-Islam, sometimes featuring Salafist undertones, grew in popularity in the Levant from the end of the 19th century through the First World War.

During the First World War, Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and Britain each attempted to mobilise Islam as a weapon. The Sultan called for Jihad with Germany's encouragement, while Britain attempted to undermine Ottoman influence with the prospect of an Arab caliphate. Many pan-Islamists such as 'Abduh's student, Rashid Rida, took to those promises. Others, such as Shakib

6 A nickname for Islam or its principles, meaning 'the most steadfast support'. Menachem Milson, "رَبْوَةُ الْوُثْقَىٰ", *Arabic-Hebrew Dictionary Based on the Ayalon-Sheieir Dictionary* (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), last accessed 20 November 2013, arabdictionary.huji.ac.il.; Also see Qur'an 2:256 and 31:22.

7 Eliezer Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements* (F. Cass, London; Portland: 1992) pp 22–24.

Arslan, were steadfast in their support of the Sultan. The war divided pan-Islamic and national movements and stunted their development. They were then rocked by various revolts, communal conflicts, and the war in Anatolia between 1918 and 1923. Kemal's abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 shattered Islamic unity. After the war, a marriage between pan-Islam and pan-Arab nationalism emerged. Arslan and Rida, divided over the question of loyalty to the Ottomans, now became partners in the fight against Christian imperialism. British policy ceased to care about pan-Islam. In the words of John Ferris, 'a new orthodoxy emerged' among British observers who by the 1930s, used the terms pan-Arab and pan-Islamic as almost interchangeable synonyms.⁸

This was unknowable to Kitchener, Sykes and British intelligence officers during the war. From their point of view, the division between pan-Islamists and the nationalists should be exploited to help defeat the Ottomans. Yet, in 1914, when British officials were first approached by the Arab societies, their emissaries were all prominent pan-Islamists and students of 'Abduh and therefore were viewed with deep suspicion.

Pan-Islam was later transformed under the leadership of Arslan, Rida, and others, who politicised that movement, and allied it to Arab nationalism. Before the war, 'Abduh varyingly taught, mentored, and collaborated with figures including Sheikh Kamil al-Qassab, Rashid Rida, and Shakib Arslan. Qassab was the first to make contact with British officers in October 1914 when the Damascus branch of *Jami'at al-Arabia al-Fatat*, or the Young Arab Society (henceforth Fatat) sent him to contact the British residency. Fatat was one of a number of Arab societies founded before the war. They did not demand independence for Arabs until after the war broke out. Britain made no commitments to Qassab, and certainly would not agree to any limitations to France's ambitions in Syria. He left Egypt empty-handed, was arrested by the Ottomans upon his return to Damascus and released without charge after nearly a month. The next year, Qassab was instrumental in pressuring Husayn into alliance with Britain.⁹

Rashid Rida followed a similar pattern. Since 1911, Rida, worked to achieve unity against the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) amongst Arab chiefs in the peninsula, to little avail, and was founder and head of a Cairo-based

8 John Ferris, 'The Internationalism of Islam': The British Perception of a Muslim Menace, 1840–1951', *Intelligence and National Security* 24, no. 1 (2009) pp 62–64, 70–72.

9 Eliezer Tauber, *The Arab Movements in World War I* (Routledge, London; New York: 1993) pp 58–59.

Arab society and was a member of others. After the war broke out, he and his compatriots began to work towards Arab independence. Rida secured funding for their emissaries from the British, who were no admirers of Rida but wished to maintain contacts with Syrian secret societies. Rida sent emissaries to the gulf, who were arrested by the British in Basra in possession of subversive anti-Christian propaganda.¹⁰ British officials were also approached by 'Aziz 'Ali al-Misri – a hero to Arab nationalists for his participation in the Senussi campaign against the Italians in Libya during 1911–13. He had co-founded secret societies of military officers, called *al-'Ahd*, or the covenant, and another earlier iteration called *Qahtaniyya*. Upon Misri's return to Istanbul in 1913 he founded *al-'Ahd* and was arrested soon after by the Ottomans. The British ambassador's intervention rescued him from the death sentence. In August 1914, Misri reported to the British that he was asked by Enver Pasha to form a joint Turkish-Arab action against Egypt, but that he rejected it. In August 1914 he asked for British support in founding an Arab empire under British control. He admitted that he was head of a secret society concentrated in Baghdad ('Ahd), which could raise forces amongst the tribes in the peninsula, Iraq, and Syria. He was rebuffed, his British handler believed this was too dangerous a scheme – especially since the Ottomans had not yet entered the war. Misri instructed *al-'Ahd* not to take any action until there was a guarantee against any new foreign occupation.¹¹

Historians have not provided an explanation of Anglo-Arab relations which examines why Qassab, Rida, and Misri were rebuffed so early on. This is significant since, at the exact same time as the Ottomans entered the war and serious approaches by Fatat began, Lord Kitchener gave an overture to the Hashemite family. On 31 October 1914, days after the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War, Lord Kitchener, Minister for War, sent the following message to Sherif Abdullah, 'It may be that an Arab of true race will assume the Caliphate at Mecca or Medina, and so good may come, by the help of God, out of all the evil that is now occurring.'¹²

This might be one of the more important announcements affecting the Middle East during the war. The Foreign Office recognised the danger inherent in promoting an Arab Islamic authority in Mecca to rival the Sultan. It would

10 Ibid., p 18; Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements*, pp 281–282, 315–316.

11 Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements*, pp 219–230, 233–234.

12 *Memorandum*. Damascus consul. 14 March 1924, FO 684/2. F01.28, The National Archives, Kew, London (hereafter TNA).

divide the Muslim world and could threaten a future peace settlement. In April 1915, the Foreign Office cabled Henry McMahon, High Commissioner in Egypt, saying:

His Majesty's Government consider that the question of Caliphate is one which must be decided by Mahommedans themselves, without interference of non-Mahommedan Powers. Should the former decide for an Arab Caliphate, that decision would therefore naturally be respected by His Majesty's Government, but the decision is one for Mahommedans to make.¹³

Sherif Husayn of Mecca had already garnered some popular support for an Arab Caliphate, which generally came from within the British sphere of influence in Egypt and Sudan. There had been numerous schemes brought to the attention of British officials in Egypt which envisioned alternative Arab caliphates. Certain ones led by Rashid Rida began before the First World War – possibly with the encouragement of British policy, which saw the Berlin-Baghdad railroad as a threat. As a concept, Arab independence originated as a source of defiance to the Ottoman government in view of its weaknesses.¹⁴ British policymakers were attracted the notion of an Arab Caliphate, but were also deeply suspicious of any pan-Islamic iteration thereof. They preferred that an Arab Caliph be a spiritual, rather than a temporal head of Islam.

The Caliphate question remained part of British policy through 1917, although in a much more considered way than Kitchener's first approach. A memo by Arthur Hirtzel of the India Office's political department examined British interests in Arabia in 1917. He stated that the ultimate success of Britain's policy in the Middle East 'depends to a large extent on the transfer of the caliphate from Turkey to Arabia. This in turn depends on the possibility of making the ruler of the Hejaz sufficiently strong to be able to pose as an independent sovereign. This again depends on keeping the Christian powers at a sufficient distance.'¹⁵ Hirtzel was arguing for the exclusion of Italy from Yemen, but it is significant that in 1917, Britain expected an Arab-Islamic empire to take shape.

13 Ibid.

14 Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks*, pp 181–182.

15 Sir Frederick Arthur Hirtzel. British interest in Arabia. 20 January 1917, L/PS/18/B247, India Office Records (hereafter IOR), London.

The fact that this came to be part of British policy at all is astonishing given Britain's hostility to pan-Islam during 1914–15. British policymakers were never fully aware of the social and political connections between the Hashemites, Fatat, 'Ahd, and the pan-Islamists. This is because they did not understand, or chose to overlook, how deeply engrained religious notions of power were within the secret societies. Months prior, Fatat and 'Ahd leaders gathered to formulate this programme. Many of these leaders wanted 'Abdul 'Aziz ibn Sa'ud to be the standard-bearer for their movement. He was popular for his military victories during previous years and was seen as a potential 'Bismarck of Arabia' who could unite the Arabic speaking peoples. Ibn Sa'ud rebuffed emissaries from al-Fatat, likely because his own military situation vis-à-vis his rival, Ibn Rashid, remained delicate. Sherif Husayn was their next choice. According to Eliezer Tauber, 'His noble ancestry, his status as guardian of the holy places of Islam, and the distance of the Hijaz from the main Ottoman forces made him a suitable candidate to lead the planned revolt.'¹⁶

Faysal bin-Husayn went to Istanbul in March 1915 and stopped in Damascus to meet with Fatat along his way. Faysal told them of Kitchener's letter to his father in October 1914, and stressed that no revolt would be possible without European assistance. On his way back in May 1915, Faysal saw them again – this time ready to accept the possibility of organised revolt. Fatat issued him with the 'Damascus Protocol' – a programme for Arab independence under Hashemite leadership. The scheme provided for Britain's recognition of Arab independence along specific boundaries, the abolition of foreign Capitulations, the conclusion of a defensive alliance between Britain and the Arab state, and the granting of economic preference to Great Britain. Faysal handed the Damascus Protocol to his father and recommended that he agree to lead the revolt. Husayn entered negotiations with Britain, but the Syrian soldiers with membership in Fatat and 'Ahd were sent to the Gallipoli front with the Ottoman Arab divisions after their mutinous plans were discovered by the Ottoman secret service. This delayed the possibility for revolt, but left time for British authorities and Husayn to reach terms.¹⁷

Britain remained hesitant to enter an Anglo-Arab alliance until one of the aforementioned Arab officers at Gallipoli defected to the British. This was 1st Lieutenant Muhammad Sharif al-Faruqi – a junior member of 'Ahd. Faruqi told

16 Tauber, *The Arab Movements in World War I*, p 61.

17 *Ibid.*, pp 63–65.

the British everything about his secret society – its membership and leaders, their enciphered communications, and their ambitions. India Office papers with records of Faruqi's debrief at the Arab Bureau in Cairo contain some additional insight to his role in changing British minds. Underlined in the text was the society's wish to 'establish an Arab Caliphate in Arabia, Syria and Mesopotamia.' Also, significantly, the Arab Bureau recorded,

el Farugi states that a guarantee of independence of the Arabian peninsula would not satisfy them, but this together with the institution of an increasing measure of autonomous government, under British guidance and control, in Palestine and Mesopotamia would probably secure their friendship. Syria is of course included in their programme but they must realise that France has aspirations in this region, though el Farugi declares that a French occupation of Syria would be strenuously resisted by the Mohamedan population.¹⁸

A minute covering Faruqi's description of the pan-Arab movement explained why this news was promising for British policy. Faruqi's story fitted what was already known from other sources. He offered a new bargain. McMahon examined the text of Faruqi's interrogation concluding, 'Interesting, if only because it may be merely a bait for us, is the idea that the Arab "Empire" is to be "national" and not religious in "accordance with the spirit of this century" and again "although the new Empire we wish to establish is to be headed by a Khalifa, its basis will be national and not religious. It will be an Arab not a Moslem Empire.' Importantly, the minute concluded: 'This is in striking contrast with the fanatical Islamism of Rashid Riza's [Rida] memorandum.'¹⁹ Rida, previously had demanded absolute independence and a Caliph with temporal power. Faruqi gave the impression that Fatah and 'Ahd had adopted a realist policy: 'We would sooner have a promise of half from England than the whole from Turkey & Germany. We will accept reasonable terms from England, but nothing short of our entire programme from any other power.' The India Office noted that McMahon's assurances of Arab independence went 'considerably beyond the necessities of the case' and that Edward Grey, foreign minister, did not think that McMahon's assurances

18 McMahon to Grey. 12 October 1915, L/PS/10/523, (IOR), London.

19 Hirtzel, Coversheet 4024 1915, Arabia Pan-Arab Movement Treatment of Mohammed Sherif el-Faruqi. 1 November 1915, L/PS/10/523, (IOR), London.

mattered much because he did not believe that the pan-Arab scheme would materialise.²⁰

Britain could not enter into an agreement with Husayn without first dealing with the interests of its main ally in the war, France. Muslim resistance to the prospect of French occupation after the war was the main motivation for the subsequent Sykes-Picot negotiations, which divided the region into spheres of influence, but not borders. Faruqi's description of his organisation's scheme appeared remarkably compatible with the India Office's strategy, which never wanted to occupy the interior of the region – just key points on the coast. Until Faruqi's revelations, the India Office saw British occupation of the hinterland of Arabia, Syria or Mesopotamia as wasteful. Moreover, the creation of an Arab state in Iraq had the potential to become a menace to Indian and British imperial interests. India was suspicious of McMahon's promises to Husayn about an Arab state, but accepted them believing it would hasten an end to the war. British policymakers preferred to maintain a stronger hand in governance within any prospective Arab state.²¹

The India Office was dubious about occupying large territories but policymakers in Egypt and London both favoured the occupation of Palestine. After the Ottomans nearly destroyed the canal in 1915, the army, foreign office and a number of ministers all saw Palestine as a flank defense to the Suez Canal. Along with the army, they wished to prevent any future threat to this vital strategic asset. Kitchener himself had long perceived this need, and had backed surveys of Sinai and the Negev while based in Egypt in the years before the war. His maps were later used by the army and planning staff.²²

Kitchener viewed a pro-British Arab kingdom in Arabia, Syria and Iraq as cognate to Afghanistan's relationship with India: 'uncontrolled and independent within, but carrying on its foreign relations through us, we should be giving a maximum of satisfaction and assuming a minimum of responsibility; but this plan is not feasible unless we hold Syria.'²³ Compounding the perceived need to occupy territory east of Egypt, the Sherif's son Abdullah met British officials

20 Ibid.

21 Hirtzel, British interest in Arabia, 20 January 1917, L/PS/18/B247, (IOR), London.; Fol 16. Viceroy to India Sec. ca. October 1915, L/PS/10/524, (IOR), London.

22 Yigal Sheffy, *British Military Intelligence in the Palestine Campaign, 1914–1918* (Frank Cass, London: 1998) pp 21–22.

23 Elie Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: The McMahon-Husayn Correspondence and Its Interpretations, 1914–1939* (Frank Cass, London: 2000) p 33.

in Egypt in April 1915 saying that his father had asked him to approach Kitchener 'with a view to obtaining with [sic] the British Government an agreement similar to that existing between the Amir of Afghanistan and the Government of India, in order to maintain the status quo in the Arabian peninsula and to do away with the danger of wanton Turkish aggression.'²⁴ The Hashemites had been worried for a number of years that the Ottomans aimed to replace their control over Hijaz.

In December 1915, the cabinet invited Mark Sykes to discuss Middle East policy and his negotiations with France. Among other things, he recommended holding territory beyond the Sinai Peninsula, which Arthur Balfour said was normally regarded as a stronghold of Suez. Moreover, he recommended a large scale invasion of Ottoman territory east of Suez, especially since France would not agree to a landing at Alexandretta – which was meant to signal widespread revolt.²⁵ By this time the cabinet was well-disposed to the idea of occupying Palestine as a buffer state. Kitchener was war minister and British policymakers had long been exposed to the prospect of a British occupation from Suez to Haifa and the Judean desert.²⁶

Bearing in mind Britain's desire to occupy southern Palestine and create an Arab buffer state beyond, it is easy to understand how British officers warmly received Faruqi's claims. He confirmed what they previously had been told by figures such as al-Misri, Qassab, and Rida, while mitigating suspicions about them. Faruqi told them what they wished to hear. He confirmed the existence of Fatat and 'Ahd, described their connections to Sherif Husayn and their desire for independence from the Ottomans, and emphasised their ability to support Britain's war effort. Yet, Faruqi had exaggerated the strength of his movement, especially its ability to harm the Ottomans. He also never described in detail how the Damascus Protocol came into existence. There is little evidence that Britain knew about the Damascus Protocol until negotiations between McMahan and Husayn were rather advanced. After Faruqi's defection, the Sherif sent a messenger to Egypt to continue the negotiations and report on the military situation in Hejaz. Cemal Pasha had hanged fifteen leading members of the Arab movements in in Syria – a move which pushed

24 *Ibid.*, p 7.

25 War Committee – evidence of Sykes on Arab Question, 16 December 1915, TNA CAB 24/1/51, (TNA).

26 One Egypt-based official's views on who should occupy the buffer state are telling: Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*, p 34.

Fatat and 'Ahd closer to the Hashemites as their main lifeline to Britain. The messenger reported that 'the Arabs in Syria were under a signed compact to follow [Faysal].'²⁷ Britain was no longer afraid of Rashid Rida's influence over Husayn. The India Office noticed the similarities in Rida and Husayn's demands after the latter first approach to McMahon in July 1915.²⁸ By autumn 1915 the danger of that was overshadowed by the partnership between the Arab movements in Syria and Husayn. Few officials considered how many members of the Arab movements subscribed to Rashid Rida's pan-Islamic ideals, even if they were confident that Husayn and his sons did not.

The Sherif was portrayed as a capable leader of a disciplined movement when, in fact, he was their second choice. It was never clear to British observers what drove the unity amongst the Arab movements, which were more heterogeneous than British officials had realised. Most misleading of all, Faruqi told British officials that his movement saw the future Arab state as a secular one. British soldiers and diplomats alike believed this because they had long been searching for a way to neutralise the Ottoman pan-Islamic weapon. Now, it seemed that Arabs were promising to form a state – part of the British Empire – governed according to the modernising principles which had been learned from Europe over the prior decades, which particularly impressed British officials.

Most assumed that the limitation of demands by Faruqi, and subsequently Husayn, was driven by Cemal's suppression of the Arab movements and execution of its leadership. Meanwhile, there were benefits to the proposed alliance: Ottoman authority would be limited by a transfer of national-religious authority to Hijaz and away from the Sultan. Simultaneously, British officials believed that the Sherif's spiritual authority would be tempered by his own views and those of the Orthodox schools of Islam in Egypt which had opposed Ottoman pan-Islamic propaganda. Most British officials in Egypt, such as Reginald Wingate, believed that even if there were one Arab claimant to the Caliphate, 'an Arab "pope"... will appeal to Moslems nowhere.' Besides, a partnership between Britain and pan-Arabism could possibly be 'the foundation of a really constructive scheme for the future.'²⁹ The Arab Bureau in Cairo strongly favoured the Anglo-Hashemite alliance: Husayn wanted to create a

27 McMahon to Viceroy, 22 October 1915, L/PS/10/524, IOR, London.

28 Note on communication from the Sherif of Mecca, ca. August, 1915, L/PS/18/B215, IOR, London.

29 Note on a British policy in the near east, 26 August 1915, FO 882.13/ ff 379–380. MIS/15/9A, (TNA).

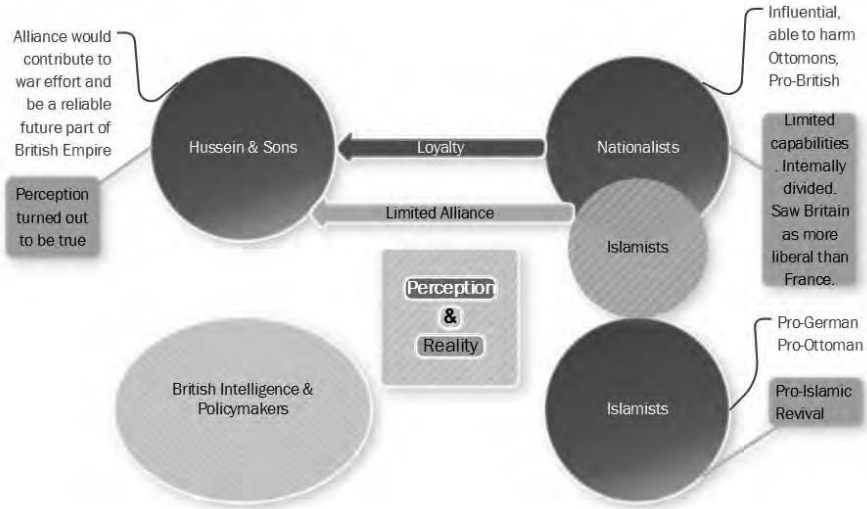


Figure 1: Intelligence Perception and Reality of Anglo-Arab Relations

pro-British buffer state in western Asia. Only the India Office saw the potential danger in a new pan-Islam under the Arab banner – but they were hushed by cabinet because the war needed this alliance.³⁰ Officers of the Arab Bureau investigated the truth of Faruqi’s claims. Unsurprisingly, Husayn and various members of Fatat and ‘Ahd confirmed what they long wished British officers to understand, and likewise, what those officers wished to hear.

Britain’s support for an Arab revolt against the Ottomans aimed to create an Arab state which would fall within the British and French Empires as both an ally and junior partner. This vision was based on a skewed understanding of the relationships between the Hashemites, the Arab movements, and the pan-Islamists. After the war, Britain’s policy for the region fell apart as the heterogeneous Arab movements clashed amongst themselves, and with Britain and France over the issue of independence. In 1919 members of al-Fatat founded the *Istiqlal* (independence) party to expand its influence over other classes of society. In early 1920, the independence movement split into three. Kamel al-Qassab, who in 1914 risked much to approach Britain for an alliance, led a faction of dissenters who vehemently opposed British and French colonial

30 Minute by T.W.H. 9 November 1915; Minutes fol 34–35, reg no 3935:1915, L/PS/10/523, IOR, London.

policy. Qassab accused members of the Damascus administration of 'neglect of national interest'.³¹ France's defeat of Faysal in 1920 was the result of a concatenation of misunderstandings. Received wisdom dictates that British policy aimed to divide the Arab movements when, in fact, it tried very hard to keep them together. Likewise, it is not entirely clear that France planned to occupy the Syrian hinterland, against its understanding with Britain and Faysal.³² British officers believed that Britain's Arab policies would be realised largely because what they understood in 1915 about the Arab movements' demands had not evolved with the war. Then, they seemed to support an Arab state as a pro-British buffer state, agreeing to limited French and British control along the coasts. After the war, when Qassab helped to found *Istiqlal*, it was because he and other prominent leaders in fact held a maximalist policy.

The difference between the perception of British officers and the realities they faced was vast. This was caused by a mix of wishful thinking, some slight disinformation, but mainly by an overwhelming focus on winning the war. The Anglo-Arab alliance was correctly seen as an expedient towards a favourable outcome for Britain, whether the Ottomans sued for peace or were defeated. During 1914–15, Britain had to contend with the possibility of competing great powers such as Germany or Russia having dominant influence in the Middle East. Assessments from the Arab Bureau never anticipated that the Arab movements might revert to their original demands for absolute independence. That threat was masked by concern for pan-Islam. The ideology was more pervasive than could have been realized at the time, but its true threat to British interests was poorly grasped. Mark Sykes, in an analysis of modernisers and orthodox authorities in Islam, counted Mohammad 'Abduh among the apolitical Orthodox type in Cairo, despite his past association with pan-Islam and also despite the fact that his students included the pan-Islamists such as Rashid Rida and Shakib Arslan.³³ Sykes and other figures did not realise that their appreciation of the social and political connections within Islam and the Arab world was temporary, and conditioned by the circumstances of the war. The end of the war therefore radically challenged the basic assumptions of British policymakers and led to violent results.

31 James L Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Univ. of California Press, Berkeley: 1998) pp 59–62.

32 Wagner, 'British Intelligence and Policy in the Palestine Mandate, 1919–1939', p 54.

33 The text contains a number of other significant misapprehensions. TNA, FO 882/13. MIS/15/8. Sykes to Callwell, DMO. 2.8.1915. p.2.

