

# Modern Air Power and the 1916 Arab Revolt

## What Can the Modern Airman Do to Counter Lawrence of Arabia?

Wing Cdr Clive Blount, Royal Air Force\*

That most enigmatic and eccentric of Englishmen, T. E. Lawrence, more popularly known as “Lawrence of Arabia,” has risen in the military psyche from obscure young archaeologist to key thinker and writer; indeed, in his day, he was one of the most successful practical leaders of what has become the widespread modern phenomenon of insurgent warfare. His leadership of the uprising by Arab tribes of the Hejaz against their Ottoman overlords has been widely studied by military minds as diverse as Mao Tse-tung and John Boyd.<sup>1</sup>

Although his main works—*The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and *The Mint*—are widely known and oft-quoted, a relatively minor article of his, originally written for the *Army Quarterly* and reprinted in the 1939 volume *Oriental Assembly*, contains a treasure trove of thought on irregular warfare. It is a resource worth revisiting in the light of modern experience.<sup>2</sup> In addition to Lawrence’s introducing the notions of “eating soup with a knife” and the “kingfisher flash,” his description of the evolution of the Arab revolt, which commenced in June 1916, gives the modern military officer much to ponder when faced with today’s threat. In an effort to stimulate a debate in this journal and in the wider defence community, I discuss Lawrence’s thoughts on

insurgency from the point of view of a modern airman, and, more specifically, I turn around his exposition on irregular warfare in order to examine the possible roles of air power in countering an insurgency governed by principles that he espoused.

After generations of poor treatment by the Ottoman (Turkish) overlords, Grand Sharif Hussein, as the head of the Arab nationalists and ruler of Mecca, entered into an alliance with the United Kingdom and France against the Ottomans in June 1916. Convinced that the Ottoman government was planning to depose him at the end of the war, Hussein began an exchange of letters with Sir Henry McMahon, the British high commissioner in Cairo.<sup>3</sup> This correspondence, which has since become highly controversial, convinced Hussein that Arab commitment to the side of the Triple Entente would be rewarded by establishment of an independent Arab empire encompassing a wide swathe of the Middle East, with the exception of British imperial possessions and British interests in Kuwait, Aden, and the Syrian coast.<sup>4</sup> French and British naval forces had cleared the Red Sea of Ottoman gunboats early in the war, so the maritime flank was secure. The port of Jidda was attacked by 3,500 Arabs on 10 June 1916 with the assistance of seaplanes and naval gunfire support from British warships; the Otto-

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\*Currently, the author is the executive officer of the Test and Evaluation Division of the United Kingdom’s Air Warfare Centre at Boscombe Down in Wiltshire.

man garrison surrendered five days later. By the end of September 1916, Arab armies, with Royal Navy support, had taken the coastal cities of Rabegh, Yenbo, and Qunfida. The remaining Ottoman forces in the Hejaz numbered some 150,000 well-armed regular troops.

In October 1916, the British Army in Cairo sent Lawrence, a young officer previously employed in cartography and relatively minor intelligence roles, to assist in liaising with Hussein's Arabs. Lawrence spoke Arabic well and had travelled extensively in Arabia as an archaeologist before the war. His initial contribution to the revolt was convincing the Arab leaders (Hussein's sons Ali, Faisal, Abdullah, and Zeid) to coordinate their actions in support of British strategy. He persuaded them not to attack and attempt to drive the Ottomans out of Medina, but devised a strategy whereby the Arabs attacked the Hejaz railway along which the Medina garrison was supplied and reinforced. This tied up far more Ottoman troops, forcing them to protect the railway and repair the constant damage whilst still using up resources defending Medina against harassing attacks.<sup>5</sup> A plan called for mounting the attacks from ports along the Red Sea, initially from the coastal city of Wajh. On 3 January 1917, Faisal began an advance northward along the Red Sea coast with a force of around 10,000 men and some 1,200 camels; the Royal Navy would resupply him from the sea. However, moving such a large force took time, and the Royal Navy, in the shape of HMS *Hardinge*, arrived first at Wajh on 22 January 1917, commencing an attack the next morning. Wajh surrendered three days later to a small force of British and Arabs landed from HMS *Hardinge*, joined by Faisal's main force within 36 hours.<sup>6</sup> Following the loss of Wajh, the Ottoman leaders abandoned their intended plan to capture Mecca and consolidated their defensive position in Medina with small detachments scattered along the Hejaz railway. The Arab force deployed in three main groups: Ali's force threatened Medina; Abdullah operated from Wadi Ais,

harassing Ottoman communications and capturing supplies; and Faisal based his force at Wajh. Camel-mounted Arab raiding parties had an effective radius of around 1,000 miles, carrying their own food—which consisted mainly of flour from which they made a simple bread—and taking water from a system of wells approximately 100 miles apart.<sup>7</sup> Air support proved most effective during the campaign, both in provision of striking power and in resupply.<sup>8</sup>

The Arab revolt tied up some 30,000 Turkish troops along the Hejaz railway, prevented a link-up between the Turkish forces in Arabia and the Germans in east Africa, and, by adopting harassing hit-and-run tactics, gradually weakened the Turkish armies by small-scale attrition. The actual defeat of the Turks, however, was directed by Britain's Gen Sir Edmund Allenby. Nicknamed "the Bull," Allenby launched a successful offensive from Sinai in the autumn of 1917, sweeping up into Palestine to occupy Jerusalem in December 1917. Severe winter weather in 1917–18 and continuing stubborn Turkish resistance delayed his advance, but in the following year, with the Arab irregulars on his right flank, he advanced to eventual victory, taking Damascus on 1 October 1918 and Beirut seven days later. The use of air power in this stage of the campaign was crucial, and *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* makes several references to its use.<sup>9</sup> Further south in the Ottoman Empire, in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), the British had overturned early disasters (in 1916, 8,000 Anglo-Indian troops had surrendered to the Turks at Kut) and, under the leadership of Gen Sir Frederick Stanley Maude, had captured Baghdad on 15 March 1917.<sup>10</sup> By the end of 1918, Mesopotamia was in British hands. The war against the Turks came to an end on 30 October 1918 when Turkey signed the Mudros armistice.<sup>11</sup> The Arab peoples of the Hejaz and Syria were justly proud of the part they had played to secure Allied victory and looked forward to the Arab homeland promised them by McMahon. However, they were disappointed as the extent of the Anglo-French Sykes-Picot agree-

ment and the ramifications of the Balfour Declaration in support of Zionist aspirations for a Jewish homeland became more widely apparent.<sup>12</sup> The scene was thus set for the genesis of the current problems in the Middle East. In addition to the cause of an Arab Palestine that sits at the centre of modern conflict, the deep-seated resentment based on the perceived betrayal by the British after the revolt provides a motivation for anti-Western sentiment. Osama bin Laden referred to this betrayal in his first public pronouncement after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001: “Our nation has tasted humiliation and contempt for more than 80 years.”<sup>13</sup>

At the end of the chapter on the Arab revolt in *Oriental Assembly* (also contained in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*), Lawrence helpfully sums up his view of insurgent warfare in 50 words: “Granted mobility, security (in the form of denying targets to the enemy), time, and doctrine (the idea to convert every subject to friendliness), victory will rest with the insurgents, for the algebraical factors are in the end decisive, and against them perfections of means and spirit struggle quite in vain.”<sup>14</sup>

So what does Lawrence mean by these 50 words? I now propose to examine some of these factors in detail, to understand fully Lawrence’s thinking before moving on to examine possible ramifications for the use of modern air power in countering such a strategy.

By *mobility*, Lawrence is seeking for his insurgents the ability to move at will across the battlespace in which they operate. He points out that the number of conventional troops required to secure the Hejaz was huge—over 600,000—so the Turks could occupy only certain areas. The success of the insurgency depended on his ability to bypass these points and operate fluidly in the interstitial space. He likens the Turkish Army to “plants, immobile as a whole, firm-rooted, nourished through long stems to the head” whilst the insurgents “were an influence . . . an idea, a thing invulnerable, intangible, without front or back, drifting about like a gas.”<sup>15</sup> As his early recommen-

dation not to recapture Medina shows, he has no use for territory; rather, he exploits the enemy’s conventional approach of dominating ground to tie up forces and to create a logistical drag on the enemy system. Attacks on Medina continued, but solely to force the enemy to use up ammunition and supplies, heightening the importance of the Hejaz railway, which itself then became another burden for the Turkish Army. Air Commodore Julian Stinton, in his otherwise excellent “Viewpoint” in *Air Power Review*, discusses modern counter-improvised explosive devices (IED) operations as a “critical tactical facet”—which such operations undoubtedly are—but then dismisses the movement of land forces by air as surrendering the ground to the enemy and fixing “us” further.<sup>16</sup> I would take issue with this last point and argue that the reliance on land lines of communications (LOC) and the slow speed of movement on land is becoming our Hejaz railway. As a historical aside, the Turks used many methods, including primitive air power, in a “counter-IED campaign” to keep the Hejaz railway open.<sup>17</sup>

I appreciate the fact that current doctrine requires “boots on the ground” to win “hearts and minds” and to provide security for other government department (OGD) and other nongovernmental organisation (NGO) activity, but at what stage do boots on the ground become part of the problem, and when does the activity required to protect such a force, with its inevitable collateral damage, lead to alienation, with “liberators” becoming “invaders”? Recent attacks on North Atlantic Treaty Organisation convoys and bridges in the Khyber Pass region have further illustrated this point—that a land force requires much heavy materiel and that we have no Red Sea maritime flank! Any opportunity to reduce our physical footprint by the use of air power is surely a good idea. In the same edition of *Air Power Review* as Air Commodore Stinton’s “Viewpoint,” Group Capt Carl Scott clearly articulates the advantages of air over soldiers on the ground in terms of persistence, tactical

surprise, and collateral damage, among other factors.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to reducing the reliance on land LOCs, modern air power can seriously hamper the insurgents' ability to "drift about like a gas." The use of striking power from the air is well documented and, indeed, played a successful part in "air policing" operations in the Middle East very early in air power's history. However, for various reasons subject to endless debate, more modern use of air power in asymmetric warfare has been somewhat inconsistent in its contribution to campaign success and has failed to provide "what it says on the tin." Recent advances in technology have enabled rapid, tailored effects with unprecedented accuracy, and, coupling reach and persistence with this increasing technical capability, the utility of striking power from the air is developing apace. However, we need to be much smarter about how we use air power in order to give the commander a far more useful capability against Lawrence's strategy—the ability to know what is going on across the battlespace. The commander can therefore "fix" the insurgents—not in the traditional physical sense of pinning them in space but by dislocating their decision cycle after having destroyed their *mobility* and denied them the opportunity to move undetected and strike at will. Air power then becomes the "gas," particularly against an asymmetric opponent with no air capability, and the enemy becomes increasingly rooted. As Air Commodore Stinton states in his article, the *find* function has become a key role although *understand* may be a more accurate descriptor. According to Lawrence himself, "The corollary of such a rule was perfect 'intelligence', so that we could plan in certainty. The chief agent must be the general's head; and his understanding must be faultless, leaving no room for chance."<sup>19</sup>

So what does Lawrence mean by *security*? He states that "rebellion must have an unassailable base, something guarded not merely from attack, but from the fear of it."<sup>20</sup> Lawrence used the Red Sea ports as a

start point and relied on the Royal Navy's dominance of the area to secure his base. The Arab revolt is one of several examples in modern history. In the early stages of the Vietnam War, North Vietnamese forces used bases and supply routes in neutral Cambodia and Laos to support the insurgency by the Vietcong in the South. This forced the United States into the first of several difficult moral dilemmas that it had to face during the conflict—to maintain international legitimacy and the moral high ground or to interdict targets in neutral territory. Currently, our opponents in Afghanistan clearly rely on their influence in the northwest tribal areas of Pakistan as a neutral secure base.<sup>21</sup> Any damage to international relations with the (unwilling?) host nation is a "win" for the insurgent who can add more allies to his cause.

How can modern air power be used to attack the insurgent's security? Well, again, it comes down to the "find" function. The domination of the high plateau of air and, indeed, space enables the construction of complete situational awareness. Traditional properties of air power—technological capability, ubiquity, and reach—must be increasingly supplemented by persistence and backed up with vastly enhanced processing and analysis to ensure that the enemy cannot "hide," enabling us both to strike whenever we want and to use the most appropriate strike assets. Perhaps more importantly, it also gives us the option to strike only *if* we want to: reliable situational awareness may mean that our cause may be better served by *not* striking, thus preserving intelligence sources, keeping the "known" enemy guessing, and reducing the risk of collateral damage, which could hand the enemy a propaganda coup. A neutral base is useless to insurgents if they can be targeted the instant they leave its protection. The psychological effect of attack from the air is also significant. Group Captain Scott quotes an insurgent speaking to the *New York Times*: "We pray to Allah that we have American soldiers to kill . . . these bombs from the sky we cannot fight."<sup>22</sup> The psychological

effect is more than a security issue; it also reaches doctrine.

When Lawrence talks of *doctrine*, he clearly means ideas—to unify and motivate his force, and to motivate the support of the population at large. Lawrence asserts that a rebellion can be successful with only 2 percent of the population active in a striking force as long as the remaining 98 percent is passively sympathetic.<sup>23</sup> He goes on to state that “We had [not] won a province [until] we had taught the civilians in it to die for our ideal of freedom: the presence or absence of the enemy was a secondary matter.”<sup>24</sup>

The battle for the hearts and minds of the indigenous population is a well-understood and permanent fundamental of Western counter-insurgency doctrine, but the methods of winning this battle are many and varied. I have argued the strengths of air power to provide a “hands off” capability and reduce the footprint of the “foreign soldier,” adding to campaign legitimacy and popular support. The presence of foreign troops hands a potential propaganda victory to the insurgent: “How can this government be legitimate if it relies on the infidel?” We must also not dismiss the moral effect. Strike from the air is difficult for the insurgent to counter and thus badly affects morale—particularly if the strike is unexpected and in an area thought safe. John Boyd, creator of the observe, orient, decide, act (OODA) loop, clearly indicated that the aim was to create “moral conflict”—“to increase menace, uncertainty and mistrust in the mind of the enemy whilst increasing initiative, adaptability and harmony within friendly forces.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, he quoted Lawrence as stating that the commander must “arrange the mind” of the enemy.<sup>26</sup> It is in this area that the primacy of emerging information operations becomes apparent. Thomas Hammes suggests that his fourth-generation warfare takes place tactically in a low intensity conflict but that at the operational level, “all an opponent has to move is ideas.”<sup>27</sup> Again, Lawrence was a trendsetter: “The printing press is the greatest weapon in the armoury of the modern commander.”<sup>28</sup>

An enigmatic character, T. E. Lawrence was the subject of much controversy in his lifetime. On return from the war and having been dismayed by the British and French attitude towards Arab independence during the Paris peace talks, he eventually shunned publicity and in 1922 enlisted in the ranks of the Royal Air Force (RAF) as Aircraftman John Ross. Soon discovered and forced to leave the RAF, he enlisted as a private in the Royal Tank Regiment. After two years’ service, friends in the prime minister’s office enabled a transfer back to the RAF, and Lawrence was posted as an airman to RAF Cranwell. He retired from the RAF in February 1935 and died only two months later in a motorcycle accident near his home in Dorset.<sup>29</sup> Basil Liddell Hart argued that “Military History cannot dismiss him as merely a leader of irregulars; he is . . . a strategist of genius who had the vision to anticipate the guerrilla trend of civilised warfare that arises from the growing dependence of nations on industrial resources.”<sup>30</sup>

Conventional employment of a modern expeditionary force has proved an expensive and controversial means of countering modern insurgencies and historically has had, at best, mixed success. The “traditional” use of air power as a panacea to an unconventional threat has also proved problematic and of limited effectiveness. By examining the concepts espoused by T. E. Lawrence for the conduct of irregular warfare and by careful consideration of historical campaigns, I propose that imaginative application of modern air power—in particular, air power as a provider of the “find” and, where possible, “understand” functions—holds the key to countering future insurgencies. As airmen we must be bold, both in pushing the boundaries of new air capabilities and in thinking more radically than we have ever done in the past about our way of doing business. We must also seek to truly understand the motivation and mindset of potential adversaries so that, if we need to, we can fight on our terms and at our pace. John Nagl quotes former US secretary of defence

Donald Rumsfeld, referring to the “charge” of US special forces cavalry at Mazar-i-Sharif in November 2001: “The Lesson . . . is not that the US Army should start stockpiling saddles. Rather it is that preparing for the future will require new ways of thinking, and the development of forces and abilities that can adapt quickly to new challenges and unexpected circumstances.”<sup>31</sup>

The fundamental air power properties of flexibility, reach, ubiquity, and speed of response, combined with the development of a persistent presence in-theatre and mini-

mal tactical footprint, will allow air power to play a much greater role in denying an insurgent enemy the requirements stated in Lawrence’s “50 words” without providing the target set, political problems, and risk of casualties that the “boots on the ground” of a conventional joint force may attract. It is my view that with an innovative approach, air power is on the verge of delivering what we airmen have always promised. ✪

Boscombe Down  
Salisbury, Wiltshire, United Kingdom

## Notes

1. Robert Coram, *Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002).
2. T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935); T. E. Lawrence, *The Mint* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973); and T. E. Lawrence, *Oriental Assembly* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1939).
3. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 50.
4. William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 157–60.
5. Adrian Greaves, *Lawrence of Arabia: Mirage of a Desert War* (London: Phoenix, 2007), 88.
6. James Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain’s Secret War in Arabia, 1916–1918* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 91–93.
7. Lawrence, *Oriental Assembly*, 124.
8. Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, 145; and Lawrence, *Oriental Assembly*, 127.
9. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 613–15.
10. Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, 120.
11. Cleveland, *History of the Modern Middle East*, 155.
12. The Sykes-Picot agreement was a secret treaty signed between Britain and France in May 1916, in essence agreeing upon a division of former Ottoman lands in the Middle East between the two countries. See Cleveland, *History of the Modern Middle East*, 163. The Balfour Declaration was contained in a letter from Arthur Balfour, British foreign secretary at the time, to Lord Montagu, a leading British Zionist, on 2 November 1917, affirming Britain’s future support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. See Cleveland, *History of the Modern Middle East*, 244.
13. Quoted in Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, 314.
14. Lawrence, *Oriental Assembly*, 134; and Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 193–97.
15. Lawrence, *Oriental Assembly*, 113.
16. Air Commodore Julian Stinton, “Viewpoint: Integrated Air Operations—Some Ramifications for Our Modus Operandi,” *Air Power Review* 11, no. 3 (Winter 2008): 106, <http://www.raf.mod.uk/downloads/airpowerreview.cfm>.
17. For example, see Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, 110.
18. Group Capt Carl Scott, “Letter from America,” *Air Power Review* 11, no. 3 (Winter 2008): 80, <http://www.raf.mod.uk/downloads/airpowerreview.cfm>.
19. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 193–97.
20. Lawrence, *Oriental Assembly*, 133.
21. For recent analysis, see “Knocking Heads,” editorial, *The Times*, 7 May 2009, [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading\\_article/article6236561.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading_article/article6236561.ece).
22. Barry Bearak, “A Nation Challenged: Death on the Ground,” *New York Times*, 13 October 2001.
23. Lawrence, *Oriental Assembly*, 134.
24. *Ibid.*, 118–19.
25. Coram, *Boyd*, 337.
26. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 193.
27. Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2006), 218.
28. Lawrence, *Oriental Assembly*, 118.
29. Greaves, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 230.
30. Basil Liddell Hart, *T. E. Lawrence in Arabia and After* (London: Cape, 1948), 438.
31. John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), xxi.