

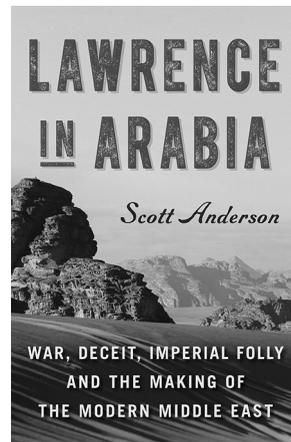
## T. E. Lawrence: Enigmatic Military Visionary

W. Andrew Terrill

T. E. Lawrence is the most well-known British national hero of World War I. In the Arabian Desert, Lawrence waged a war of movement against Turkish forces that contrasted starkly with the gruesome deadlock on the Western front. In pursuing his own version of desert combat, Lawrence was an early and important advocate of modern guerrilla warfare tactics, and his exploits during the 1916-18 desert war showed significant military gains for his highly inventive and unorthodox form of combat. Geopolitically, Lawrence's actions had a direct bearing on the formation of the modern Middle East, and his controversial legacy is still important today. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that a number of Lawrence biographies have been published during and after his lifetime. More recently, there has been a notable increase in such works in the years following the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. As the United States encountered ongoing difficulties in that country, Lawrence's actions throughout the Arab world may have seemed relevant to the important strategic and operational questions that needed answers. These questions revolved around not just guerrilla warfare but also finding ways in which Arab and Western troops could build mutual trust and function effectively as partners.

### Lawrence as a Military Thinker: Amateur Among Professionals

Former war correspondent Scott Anderson has some interesting insights about Lawrence's understanding of military culture and the conduct of military operations, including his willingness to challenge conventional wisdom. Anderson notes that Lawrence was well-read on military topics, but he had no formal officer's training prior to receiving a 1914 direct commission as an acting second lieutenant. As a junior officer, Lawrence was assigned to intelligence duties in Cairo due to his understanding of Middle Eastern cultures and the Arabic language. He developed these skills over his four years as a junior field archeologist, primarily based in Syria. In his early army career, Lawrence was a brilliant intelligence officer, but he also had a rebellious personality and maintained a dismissive attitude toward higher authority. His sometimes uncomfortable encounters with military bureaucracy and various doctrinaire senior officers also gave him serious doubts about the future of the war. Early in his military career, Lawrence provided strategic briefings to a number of senior officers assigned to the Mediterranean Expedition (MED-EX) and was appalled when he found out about their plan for an invasion at Gallipoli, Turkey, which he



Scott Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 57 pages, \$28.95.

viewed as a “despicable mess.” While Lawrence expected the landing at Gallipoli to be a disaster, even he was probably surprised by the scale of the catastrophe. The young officer was further disillusioned as evidence began to pour in that the alternative invasion site advocated by the Cairo intelligence office appeared to have been a golden opportunity for an easy victory. This alternative plan called for an invasion of Alexandretta (now called Iskenderun) which was defended by a garrison of mostly Arab conscripts on the verge of mutiny against their Turkish officers.

Lawrence had an even closer view of the next Middle Eastern disaster following Gallipoli. This was the effort to seize Baghdad from the east with an Anglo-Indian army. This force advanced deep into the Iraqi hinterland without properly protected supply lines and the Turks correspondingly surrounded and isolated it in the city of Kut. As with Gallipoli, proper military procedures were disregarded due to a prevailing belief that the enemy was “tough but slow-witted” and, therefore, did not need to be treated in the same way as a European adversary. Also like Gallipoli, there was a high price for this arrogance. Lawrence was called in from Cairo in late 1915 to help British Major General Charles Townshend negotiate with the Turks for the release of his surrounded troops. Through Lawrence and other intermediaries, the best the British commander could do was to seek to bribe the Turkish general with gold. This treasonous offer was quickly and contemptuously rejected and the entire British force of 13,000 was compelled to surrender. As a mediator brought in for the specific task of negotiating with the Turks, Lawrence was not made a prisoner of war, but he had a firsthand view of the fruits of poor planning and lofty British disdain for the enemy. Closer to the Cairo headquarters, British offensives to break through the Turkish line at Gaza failed twice. Lawrence was also deeply unhappy with what he called the “staggering incompetence” on the Western front in Europe where two of his brothers, Frank and Will, were killed in 1915 and 1916 respectively.

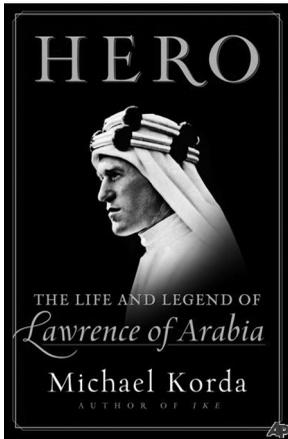
In generating his own strategic vision, Lawrence believed the British should embrace the “Arab way of war” as the organizing principle for the “Arab Revolt” against Turkey. This uprising had originated with Sherif (later King) Hussein of the Hejaz (in what is now western Saudi Arabia). In Lawrence’s view, warfare in Arabia bore a striking resemblance to the medieval warfare he had studied at Oxford with its use of multiple decentralized forces under various autonomous nobles. Arab raiders had no military discipline, no NCOs, and numerous debates among themselves over just about everything they did. In evaluating their potential against the Turks, Lawrence believed that Bedouin forces fought effectively in small groups of raiders while they were usually extremely poor raw material for training as conventional troops. In particular, he saw the potential for Arab forces to play an effective role in the war through hit-and-run strikes, long-range sharpshooting, and a tradition of surprise attacks. Lawrence felt that the Arab forces could make their greatest contribution by avoiding large battles and striking unexpectedly at weak points in the Turkish defense, particularly logistical units and facilities and most especially the Hejaz railway. Lawrence also hoped (as most competent military leaders do) to find ways to inflict the absolute maximum damage with the minimum loss of life.

Lawrence gained the trust of the Arab Revolt’s leaders in ways that went beyond simply being polite and knowing the Arabic language.

Lawrence also passionately identified with Arab aspirations for independence. While this fervor is well known, Anderson goes further than many authors and suggests that Lawrence became more loyal to Arab independence than to anything else in the war. He notes that Lawrence told the leading Arab field commander, Prince Feisal, about the Sykes-Picot Agreement for British and French domination of post-war Arab lands, while it was still a state secret and by doing so technically committed treason. This act was the beginning of what Anderson calls “a quiet war against his own government” where he “arguably betrayed his country” (486). Anderson also notes that Lawrence attempted to convince an American intelligence officer, Captain William Yale, to speak to his superiors in favor of Arab independence and push against British and especially French policies for dominating the post-war region. Viewed in this light, it is difficult to see how Feisal or the other Arab leaders could have found much fault with Lawrence. He had their political best interests at heart and he served as their strongest advocate in British circles especially when vying for British military resources including weapons and gold.

Anderson’s charge of possible treason seems vastly overblown since the future of the Arab world was yet to be decided at the Paris Peace Conference where British policies on such issues were to be finalized in coordination with the other allies. The Sykes-Picot Agreement was mostly a place holder that did not represent final or fully formed policy. Additionally, General Allenby later made it clear that Feisal should have been told about the Sykes-Picot Agreement at some point and expressed surprise in 1918 when Lawrence (dishonestly) told him he had not done so. Moreover, the British leadership knew of Lawrence’s commitment to Arab freedom, and always saw it as an asset (but not a guide for policy). Lawrence himself gave his own take on the loyalty issue in a more indirect manner. The former guerrilla leader, who was famous for his monumental self-recrimination (bordering on masochism), never indicated that he felt the slightest bit disloyal to the United Kingdom as a result of his wartime conduct. Rather, for the rest of his life, he brutally blamed himself for lying to the Arabs on his country’s behalf over the issue of Arab independence. While Lawrence was torn by conflicting British and Arab interests and priorities, he inevitably defaulted to British interests while trying desperately to help the Arabs within the constraint of these priorities. If Lawrence betrayed his country, he never knew it and never felt it.

In a departure from other Lawrence biographies, Anderson’s book also devotes considerable attention to the activities of British intelligence units in the Middle East and the various spy networks in the Middle East. The book also follows the activities of American oilman, soldier, and government official William Yale, Zionist leader Aaron Aronson, and German “orientalist” and spy Curt Prufer. These individuals were important to the history of the Middle East but mostly peripheral to the story of T. E. Lawrence. One cannot help suspecting that Anderson included their activities in such depth in order to distinguish it from the numerous other Lawrence biographies. Readers will probably view this approach as either a useful innovation or a mistake, depending on their interest in these people.



Michael Korda, *Hero: The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011), 762 pages, \$17.99.

## Lawrence's Personality: Strengths and Weakness

A different kind of book is *Hero* by best-selling author Michael Korda. This work serves as a comprehensive biography of T. E. Lawrence from his childhood until his death in a 1935 motorcycle accident. The title clearly indicates Korda's reverence for Lawrence, whom he refers to as both a hero and a genius. In contrast to the evaluation put forward by Anderson, Korda states, "It is worth noting that even though Lawrence wanted the Arabs to win, and hoped by getting to Damascus first to invalidate the Sykes-Picot Agreement, he never forgot that he was a British officer first and foremost" (400). In a slightly more equivocal statement he also claims, "No man ever tried harder to

serve two masters than Lawrence" (400). This argument may be more defensible than Anderson's technical treason argument for reasons already discussed. Additionally, Lawrence was certainly hostile to the Middle Eastern aspirations of the United Kingdom's French ally, but he would hardly be the first Briton to view the interests of the United Kingdom and France as divergent. He further assumed some sort of post-war association between the Arabs and the United Kingdom and saw this as good for both parties.

A recurring point in this study is that Lawrence, by purpose or happenstance, had something approaching the perfect background for his role as a driving force for the revolt in Arabia. Lawrence's credentials included his years in the Arab world, understanding of Arab social structure, language, and culture, and wide-ranging reading on military topics. Lawrence's undergraduate passion for medieval fortifications gave him a "feel for topography," which he developed even further as an intelligence officer and mapmaker for British intelligence in Cairo. While still an undergraduate working on his thesis, Lawrence walked over 1,000 miles throughout the Middle East visiting 36 castles dating back to the crusades. Lawrence was even a crack pistol shot, although he later fell short on this count when he accidentally killed his own camel while participating in a charge against Turkish forces around 40 miles from Aqaba. Lawrence also had a high tolerance for hardships and a dismissive attitude toward creature comforts that served him well as a guerrilla leader. He had no trouble existing on small amounts of bad food and was able to go without sleep for days at a time. He tolerated repeated bouts of malaria, dysentery, infected boils, and other ailments. According to Korda, Lawrence, "lived at some point beyond mere stoicism and behaved as if he were indestructible" (198). This endurance gave him the ability to inspire others and earned him the respect of very tough Bedouin leaders such as Auda Abu Tayi of the Howitat tribe.

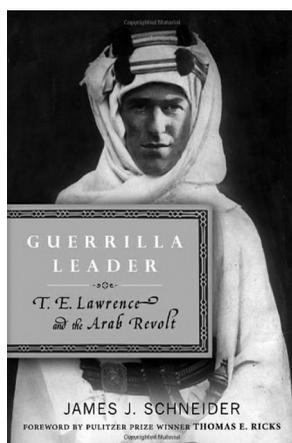
Korda's detailed consideration of Lawrence's personality and pre-war background may be especially useful for military audiences interested in questions of leadership. Lawrence had a great deal to offer the military

but was sometimes a difficult officer to manage. He often assumed (correctly) that he knew more than his superiors and had very little regard for military rank. Yet some leaders, including Brigadier General Clayton of the intelligence service and especially General Edmund Allenby commanded Lawrence's deep respect and loyal service. General Allenby, and Lawrence maintained an especially strong relationship based on mutual trust. Lawrence made significant promises to Allenby and then endured tremendous hardship to keep them to the extent he could do so. Lawrence was always attentive to the danger of disappointing Allenby and on occasion took very serious personal risks to avoid letting his commander down. Allenby in turn "rode Lawrence on the loosest of reins" (196). He provided him with goals and objectives and then allowed the young commander to reach them in his own way. In first meeting with Lawrence, Allenby was clearly on the same page as the emerging guerrilla leader. As a former horse cavalry officer, he quickly saw the potential of Lawrence's mobile force for conducting hard-hitting raids. Allenby's support for the Arab Revolt remained unequivocal, although London showed uneven interest, and the British government in India was concerned about its potential to inspire rebellious Muslims in India.

As noted, Korda's book is the only study under review that provides a comprehensive examination of Lawrence's post-war activities. In the years following the war, Lawrence moved forward some important tasks before seeking obscurity. He played a key role at the Paris Peace Conference as an advisor to Feisal and advocate of Arab goals. He further served for a year as a senior official of the colonial office working with Winston Churchill and others to help establish the new states of Iraq and Transjordan (later Jordan). The part of his life that is more difficult to understand is his decision to serve in the Royal Air Force, and more briefly in the Royal Tank Corps, as a junior enlisted man for a number of years. Surely his efforts to help the Arab people achieve greater autonomy and eventual independence could have continued after the war with him serving in progressively more responsible positions. In some ways, Lawrence seemed more interested in atoning for his perceived sins than seeking to mitigate them. Korda has more difficulties with this part of the book, sometimes maintaining that Lawrence's decision to seek obscurity was rational, understandable, and based on wartime trauma. He also somewhat defends the way in which Lawrence rode his motorcycle ("motorcycles always appear suicidal to those who don't ride one" (590), while also noting that many of Lawrence's friends were mortified at what they saw as his daredevil ways. Lawrence had already had two potentially fatal accidents with his motorcycle before a third accident claimed his life in 1935.

### **Lawrence and Guerrilla Warfare**

James Schneider's book is an examination of Lawrence's role in revolutionizing irregular warfare. It deals almost exclusively with the desert war and gives no attention to Lawrence's activities before or after the war. This is not a book based on newly uncovered information or sources on Lawrence's life. Rather, it is a commentary and elaboration on the reasoning behind Lawrence's military theories and actions by a professor emeritus of military theory at the School of Advanced Military Studies of the US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth.



James Schneider, *Guerrilla Leader: T. E. Lawrence and the Arab Revolt* (New York: Bantam, 2011), 328 pages, \$28.00.

This analysis is often conducted effectively with Schneider teasing out the implications of Lawrence's views and analyzing why they were effective in directing desert warfare against conventional adversaries. He also indicates the ways in which the Arab guerrilla forces were able to support General Allenby's conventional army as part of the overall campaign. Schneider considers Lawrence's ideas about guerrilla warfare to be a revolutionary reframing of the Arab revolt. This reframing involved turning the uprising into a war designed to exhaust the Turkish enemy rather than seize territory or capture cities such as Turkish-held Medina.

Throughout this study, Schneider displays a recurring interest in the concept of military leadership. He provides a particularly good critique of General Allenby, who despite early difficulties in Europe became one of the war's best generals. Schneider also considers the role of Prince Feisal as a leader, although his most detailed consideration is naturally directed at Lawrence. Lawrence served as a key decisionmaker on the distribution of British gold, weapons, and other forms of support. Such responsibility creates leverage and opportunities but only makes one a transactional military leader if it remains the sole source of authority. Lawrence, however, quickly emerged as an inspiring leader through his intelligence, bravery in battle, soaring oratory, and total identification with their struggle against the Turks. Additionally Schneider states that Lawrence increasingly relied on outstanding tribal leaders for tactical leadership, thereby freeing him to provide purpose, direction, and motivation to the Arab Revolt.

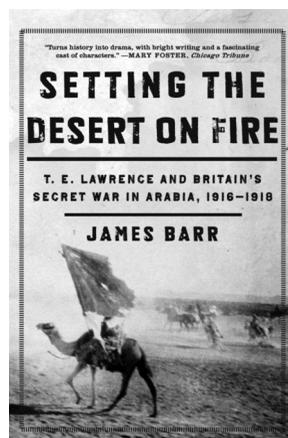
Schneider maintains that Lawrence was an effective leader because he empathized with not only the wider goals of the Arab revolt, but also with the needs of his own troops. Lawrence was sometimes reckless with his own life, but never wasteful of the lives of the fighters who served with him. The casualties inflicted on his forces troubled him deeply, especially high among his personal bodyguard, who fought beside him and were also needed due to the price on his head of twenty thousand pounds alive or ten thousand dead. Schneider maintains that Lawrence's sensitivities dovetailed closely with the Arab view of warfare. He notes that in Western militaries, the mission assigned by higher headquarters almost always takes precedence over efforts to keep casualties low. In contrast, among Arab raiders the welfare of the unit is almost always more important since the fighters were often irreplaceable. If a mission becomes too potentially costly in human lives, it is simply abandoned. While Lawrence never willingly abandoned important missions set by higher authority, he was careful to avoid striking well defended areas and may have missed some lucrative targets of opportunity to protect his own forces.

Schneider also states that Lawrence failed as a leader near the Arab village of Tafas when, according to his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence issued a "no prisoners" order to Arab forces moving against

a retreating Turkish force after it had committed atrocities against Arab villagers. Schneider maintains that at this point, Lawrence had lost his “moral compass” and, therefore, his capacity for leadership. There are, nevertheless, some uncertainties about this incident that Schneider does not seem to consider. As is well known, Lawrence was a man of extremely strong views about the Arab Revolt to the point that some scholars view his writings as “sanitized” to portray the Arab army in the best possible light.<sup>1</sup> At no time was his version of events more suspect than in the Tafas incident where he had been accused of being “transparently tendentious and misleading” for such factors as overemphasizing the innocence of the Arab villagers, who were most likely well-armed and in open rebellion against the Turks.<sup>2</sup> James Barr (see below) has additional reasons for doubting Lawrence’s account of Tafas based on other eyewitness descriptions of the events there. Lawrence’s empathy, which Schneider repeatedly notes as an asset, makes his acceptance of the blame for this incident at least somewhat suspect. Events in Tafas may have occurred despite Lawrence’s orders, and avenging Arab tribal forces may have been uncontrollable by any one person at this point regardless of leadership skills.

### The Meaning of the Arab Revolt

Former journalist James Barr’s *Setting the Desert on Fire* is a focused and thoughtful consideration of both the Arab Revolt and Lawrence’s role in the uprising. More than any of the other books under review, Barr considers the context and geopolitical consequences of Lawrence’s actions by noting overlapping and clashing interests among a variety of individuals, groups, and countries associated with the Middle East theater. Like Anderson, Barr spends considerable effort sorting out the motives and disagreements of a variety of nations and individuals. Imperial powers like the United Kingdom and France had a number of global interests and priorities, and many of them were in contradiction. Adding to the richness of the work, Barr is particularly nuanced in his understanding of Arab tribal, regional, and other differences. He also notes Lawrence’s own subtlety of mind when considering intersecting political and cultural/religious problems that came up during the war. An important example of Lawrence’s good judgment was his opposition to sending a British brigade into the heart of the Hejaz. Non-Muslims are not welcome in the Hejazi cities of Mecca and Medina, but Lawrence believed that British troops in this region were more of a political than a religious problem for the Arabs. While religion might offer a strong religious justification for excluding Western troops, Lawrence also knew that even Muslim troops from the British Empire would be



James Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009), 362 pages, \$27.95.

1 John D. Grainger, *The Battle for Syria, 1918-1920* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2013), 176.

2 *Ibid.* p. 166.

equally unwelcome in such large numbers. His judgment was allowed to prevail in this instance because of the agreement of a number of senior officers.

Barr notes that one of the first guerrilla raids against the Hejaz railway was conducted by Arab forces accompanied by Major Herbert Garland, a British explosives expert, who eventually taught Lawrence about techniques for using mines and bombs. Garland's raid was a success, destroying an irreplaceable Ottoman locomotive and seriously disrupting rail traffic between Anatolia and the Hejaz. Yet Garland returned to the base at Wajh hating everything about working with Arab forces. In particular, he viewed Arab raiding forces as insufficiently committed to the missions they were given, unwilling to move quickly, constantly diverted by efforts to find forage for the camels, and democratic to a fault so that nothing gets done until considerable squabbling is worked out. A variety of other British officers were equally appalled by the Arab propensity for looting and belief that they were entitled to go home after they had acquired a sufficient level of booty. British complaints are easily understood, but the culture clash also presented a serious problem for British-Arab unity of effort. Lawrence, in contrast to many of his contemporaries, attempted to immerse himself in Arab culture, accepting delays and other problems as the cost of doing business. Lawrence stated that he wanted to "rub off his British ways." He endeavored to act according to tribal values even when, as a foreigner, he would have been easily forgiven for not doing so, at least in small matters. He also dressed in Arab clothing, unlike other British officers.

Barr further displays a strong understanding of the nature of the Arab military campaigns and probably does the best job of explaining the evolution of Arab tactics in this conflict. Lawrence started by attacking trains with explosives, destroying train tracks, and demolishing telegraph wires and poles. He also attacked Turkish patrols, and Arab raids became larger and struck at more important targets over the course of the war. On one important occasion, he changed his approach to defend the town of Tafileh which was threatened by conventional Turkish attack. Lawrence's victory at Tafilah gave the Arab army some increased credibility, but it never really outgrew its raiding heritage or developed into an effective force for seizing and retaining territory. It was not easy to guide an Arab army during this period, even when many differences could be overcome with liberal amounts of gold. Among the "regular troops" who had defected from the Ottoman army, Syrian and Iraqi factions were often angry with each other and required constant mediation. Likewise, the inexhaustible capacity of Bedouin troops for looting often made this a higher priority for them than externally imposed military objectives. Some would even seize booty while they were under fire. Accountability for British-provided gold and supplies was often maddeningly nonexistent.

Barr agrees with Anderson who states that Lawrence was a "booster" and an "apologist" for the Arabs with whom he served. The most striking example of this behavior occurred during the previously noted incident near the village of Tafas shortly after a Turkish brigade committed a number of atrocities, including the murder of children. Furious Arab leaders, and especially the Howeitat chieftain, Auda abu Tayi, demanded revenge and wiped out the entire force, killing the

wounded where they had fallen and refusing to allow enemy troops to surrender. According to Barr, and in contrast to Schenider's analysis, Lawrence seems to have had nothing to do with the decision to kill the wounded Turks, although he did take responsibility for it. Barr quotes Lawrence as stating, "We ordered 'no prisoners' and the men obeyed" (287). Other witnesses do not remember it that way. Ali Jawdat, a future Iraqi prime minister, described how Lawrence attempted to save a group of prisoners but was unable to do so in the face of Arab forces bent on revenge. Another British officer, Frederick Peake, who worked closely with Lawrence stated that he was certain Lawrence did all he could to stop the massacre but the tribal force was "beyond control." As overall victory approached, Lawrence may simply not have been prepared to see the Arab army criticized or portrayed as an avenging mob so he changed the story to assume the blame himself.

In the final campaigns of the Middle East theater, Allenby continued to view Lawrence as indispensable. The squandering of vast amounts of gold by Prince Feisal's younger brother Zaid convinced him that while the Arabs had been doing "pretty well," they were also an "unstable lot" who needed British leaders "they know and trust" (224). In Allenby's scheme of action, Lawrence not only had to cut important railroad links and destroy key bridges, but he had to do so at precise times so the Turks would lose capability to move troops exactly when these troops were needed. Often he accomplished these goals, although setbacks occurred. The Arab army was also important in supporting Allenby's deception plan, which sought to convince the Turks that the main allied force arrayed against them would not strike on the coast. In late 1918, Arab forces severely disrupted railroad activity at the important railroad hub of Deraa and moved on to play an important role in the liberation of Damascus.

## Conclusion

Obviously, one will find a tremendous degree of overlap in four recent books on T. E. Lawrence, although the same story can appear quite differently from alternative vantage points. Scott's book may annoy some readers by its continuous biographical forays into the lives of people Lawrence barely knew, but it is exceptionally strong in other respects including the discussion of Lawrence's personal growth as a strategist and leader. Korda's book is outstanding as a childhood-to-grave biography, although the author's great regard for Lawrence may have caused him to appear a little too apologetic for some of Lawrence's more eccentric decisions. The Schneider book is interesting as an intellectual exercise, but Barr's study is probably most valuable for a military audience due to its detailed description of the military campaigning associated with the Arab revolt and the political context in which this struggle was conducted. The strong link between military actions and political outcomes is clear in all these books but is especially nuanced in Barr's study.

Surprisingly, US military personnel seeking answers about contemporary problems through the prism of Lawrence's life may find such answers elusive when examining what Korda presents as his almost perfect background and preparation for his task of supporting the Arab Revolt. Beyond Lawrence's linguistic skills and his understanding

of Arab history and sociology was his total identification with Arab goals. Lawrence believed in Arab independence and was continuously searching for ways to achieve this goal through Arab battlefield accomplishments. Without this total commitment, Lawrence would never have been fully trusted by leaders such as Prince Faisal no matter how well he could conjugate Arabic verbs. As fearless and knowledgeable as he was, T. E. Lawrence could never have become Lawrence of Arabia if he felt his mission was to convince the Arabs that they had no interests apart from those of the United Kingdom. He knew better, they knew better, and this understanding was the basis of brilliant wartime collaboration.