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## Lawrence of Arabia and the Perils of State Building

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Since the end of the Cold War, America's efforts at state building—be it in Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia, Afghanistan, or Iraq—have suffered from a tendency to reinvent the wheel. That is, policymakers have acted as if these efforts have never been tried before, and consequently, vital lessons that might have been learned as to how the process might better work have instead been neglected. For example, the United States is not the first country to try to forge stable political entities in the Middle East: The lessons of British efforts at state building in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during World War I have been almost entirely neglected, to our peril.

With serious problems arising from the efforts to transform Iraq into a stable democratic society, it pays to look at the lessons of history—which leads us to Lawrence of Arabia and British efforts in the Middle East in the early 20th century.

### The Early Career of Lawrence of Arabia

In his time, in the flower of his youth, T. E. Lawrence was one of the most famous men in the world, the conqueror of Aqaba at 29, Damascus at 30, and a major leader of the wildly romantic and improbably successful Arab Revolt of Emir Faisal against his Turkish overlords during World War I.

There is no doubting Lawrence's military achievement. During the war, 50,000 Turks were pinned down east of the Jordan by an Arab force of 3,000 operating under his immediate direction. A further 150,000 Turks were spread over the rest of the region

### Talking Points

- The experience of T. E. Lawrence in the early 20th century provides policymakers with a model of state building.
- State building should be attempted only when the United States' primary national security interests are at stake.
- T. E. Lawrence teaches us that state building should always be approached from the bottom up, never from the top down; local elites must be stakeholders in the process, far more than people in faraway Washington.
- It is crucial that policymakers first understand the history and culture of the region that they are attempting to improve.
- The foundation of any state-building exercise lies with its indigenous elements, not with the United States.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/middleeast/iraq/hl900.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/middleeast/iraq/hl900.cfm)

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in a vain effort to crush the Arab Revolt, so that little more than 50,000 were left to meet Sir Edmund Allenby's assault. (Allenby was the Senior British Officer in Theater and Lawrence's commanding general.) As the British historian and friend of Lawrence, Basil Liddell-Hart, sums up, if it is unlikely the Arab forces could ever have overcome the Turks without the help of British forces, the figures make it quite clear that Allenby could not have defeated the Turks without Lawrence.

Lawrence did not come to his philosophical insights through prolonged study in some academic cloister. Rather, they came as the result of day-to-day experiences during the revolt.

For Lawrence, it was axiomatic that a profound knowledge of the culture of the people one was working with was a prerequisite for success. For Lawrence took an essentially ethnological approach to his role as primary facilitator of the revolt in the desert; for him, local culture and the politics that flowed from it were of supreme importance. He noted at the time that he met Faisal that no attempt had been made to find out the local conditions and adapt existing British resources to suit these specific needs.

Over time, bit by bit, as Lawrence's contact with the people of the rebellion increased, he began to realize that he was operating in Arabia in a very different manner. As he told Liddell-Hart in 1933, when he took a decision during the war, it was after studying every factor. Geography, tribal structure, religion, social custom, languages, appetites, standards—all were at his fingertips. Lawrence's fame grew among the Arabs, both for his military prowess and for his astounding knowledge of their culture. This cultural understanding was symbolically rewarded by his assumption of their mode of dress.

### **Lawrence's Genius in Dealing with the Arab World**

Arab acceptance of Lawrence underlined for others that, by his understanding of Arab culture, he had come to be seen at least in part as a component of that very culture. Of course, the psychological and political advantages this gave him were profound. This cultural approach was one of Lawrence's great insights and stands in marked

contrast to failed modern efforts to impose Western values as a one-size-fits-all strategy for state building in non-Western cultures.

A key part of understanding local culture lay in discerning the local unit of politics. Only by working with these essential building blocks—the DNA that is political culture—could Lawrence hope to be successful. He instinctively saw the importance of the tribal political structure rooted deeply in Arab culture.

As Lawrence noted, the Arab's idea of political loyalty and legitimacy was located at the level of clans, tribes, and villages. The liberty of these relatively small political building blocks was what mattered most in Arab society, the very opposite of many modern Western states, with their emphasis on collective national discipline rather than local and personal loyalties. As Lawrence famously put it, in the East, persons were more trusted than institutions.

The importance of localism for the Arab people remained an organizing principle of Lawrence's actions throughout the war. As the revolt gathered pace and entered Syria, he noted that localism, as in Arabia, remained the primary political unit of expression, with no indigenous political entity being larger than the village and social grouping more complex than the clan.

This had obvious operational significance for Lawrence. It meant that the method by which he and Faisal had strung together the disparate tribes of Arabia to attack Aqaba could be used again in a new context. Lawrence went about constructing another alliance, this time of Syrian tribes, including the Howeitat, Beni Sakhr, Sherrat, Rualla, and Serahin.

The reason for Lawrence's very different approach was that he had seen first-hand the limited efficacy of a top-down approach in dealing with the Arabs. At the time of his first meeting with Faisal, the rebellion was at a low ebb, as the Arabs had failed to capture Medina, in present-day Saudi Arabia. With morale low, other British officers were openly questioning whether supporting Faisal and his aging father, the Sharif of Mecca, was worth the expenditure. Clearly, the policy by which the Arabs functioned merely as undersupplied adjuncts of the British army was not working.

In pursuing a bottom-up approach to state building, Lawrence never forgot that Faisal and his Sharifs, and not Lawrence, were ultimately running the show. It is to his credit that, whatever the frustrations such a strategy presented him with, Lawrence never deviated from this position. As he said, Faisal's one idea was making his ancient race win freedom with its own hands; his part was only synthetic. Lawrence was the enabler, never the protagonist, in the Arab drama. His talent was in energizing and enthusing people; he was best of all at influencing others.

Lawrence was able to do this successfully because he was well aware of the motivations and the psychology of his Arab companions. The revolt was ultimately successful because a local leader with undisputed ultimate authority, Faisal, and not a British serving officer, Lawrence, ran it. Operationally, this enabling subordinate status was illustrated by the common British practice of issuing orders to the Arabs only through their own chiefs, and only when agreed upon.

Over time, Lawrence rightly judged that the ultimate advantage of a bottom-up approach was to make stakeholders of the indigenous people. As he said, for him the best value of the revolt lay in the things the Arabs attempted without British aid. Ultimately, Lawrence's gift lay in seeing that the essence of the Arab rebellion against the Turks was not about the number and quality of British arms they procured, the number of British officers that would teach them to fight in a "modern" style, or its importance to London as a successful sideshow within a sideshow of the Great War. It lay in local Arabs securing political goals for themselves, with gifted outsiders like Lawrence playing the role of facilitator rather than doer.

The military manifestation of this political philosophy is illustrated by the style in which Lawrence urged Faisal to wage war against Istanbul. Rather than aping modern British tactics as the standard top-down approach called for, Lawrence urged the emir to fight as his people always had, waging a guerrilla war against the Turks. This proposal had several advantages. First, it played to local strengths, as the Bedu of Arabia could move far more quickly and unpredictably in the desert by

camel than the fortress-bound, largely immobile Turkish garrisons in Arabia. Second, Lawrence proposed using this advantage in mobility to cripple the Turks' lifeline, the Hejaz railway, which was the only connection between the isolated Turkish garrisons in Arabia and the rest of the crumbling empire.

This brilliant strategy relied critically on the political goodwill of the local populace, reinforcing Lawrence's emphasis on convincing the indigenous population that they were the pivotal actors in the revolt. Using localism to make stakeholders of the Arabs in the revolt was Lawrence's ultimate aim, more political than military, more about psychology than objective military realities.

Independence is something that usually has to be won, not granted. Lawrence's genius lay in recognizing that if the Arabs came to believe they were not the vassals of either Istanbul or London, that they themselves liberated the desert all the way to Damascus, such stakeholding would be the glue that would bind Faisal's new nation together.

### **Working with the Grain of History: Lawrence's Political Philosophy**

Lawrence's philosophical and policy alternatives are an essential resource for 21st century policy-makers. Encapsulated in an August 1917 memo he wrote for British serving officers with Faisal's legions and in a September 1920 article he wrote anonymously for the British magazine *Round Table*, these primary sources spell out that Lawrence was advocating a dramatic break with state building as it was then practiced and has continued to be implemented to this day. This vital forgotten strategy must be rediscovered by today's policymakers, for it provides relevant answers as to why state building has proved so problematic in the post-Cold War era and offers an approach that far better suits future efforts to deal with this most difficult of problems.

In August 1917, at the height of the Arab war for independence from the Turks, Lawrence prepared his "Twenty-seven Articles" for British military intelligence as a practical manual for political officers, explaining how best to work with their Arab allies. In so doing, Lawrence did nothing less than

create a template for working with developing peoples in times of both war and peace.

The “Twenty-seven Articles” were personal conclusions arrived at gradually while at work in the Hejaz and put on paper for British beginners in dealing with Arab armies. I think it is clear that they have a far broader application for use today. For what makes the “Twenty-seven Articles” so arresting is that Lawrence accomplished something too often neglected by today’s policymakers: He grounded high political theory in the Burkean soil of very practical day-to-day operational examples. In other words, theory flowed from practice, and not the other way around.

For Lawrence, this meant that all British temptations to “modernize” Arab culture by imposing British military regulations ought to be quashed. This was to be done for the simple reason that Lawrence had grasped perhaps the seminal operational fact in dealing with developing peoples: Legitimacy flowed through working with their cultural norms, not setting up Western efforts as a threat to their continued viability. Lawrence wanted to work with local culture, history, political culture, sociology, ethnology, economic status, and psychology—not against them, either through design or ignorance.

For example, as he wrote in his eleventh article, “Wave a Sharif in front of you like a banner, and hide your own mind and person.” Lawrence favored this approach for the commonsense reason that the Sharif, and not he, had local legitimacy. For his efforts at partnership to prove successful, it was vital that local leaders gave the orders, agreed upon the tactics, became stakeholders in the common endeavor. Lawrence did not advocate this approach out of some romantic belief in the unspoiled ways of the Arabs versus the decadent West. Rather, he saw it as the only practical way to achieve results.

This approach was based upon a few simple but vital first principles. First, Western outsiders must understand local culture as best they could in dealing with developing peoples, because only by working with the indigenous people as they are, and not trying to socially engineer them into something they are not, could success be possible. As

Lawrence put it in Article 2, “learn all you can about your Ashraf and Bedu [the names of Arab tribes]. Get to know their families, clans and titles, friends and enemies, wells, hills, and roads.”

Second, in deference to local primacy, the Western outsider’s place was to advise, to facilitate, but never to dominate. As Article 14 argues, “while very difficult to drive, the Bedu are easy to lead; if you have the patience to bear with them. The less apparent your interferences, the more your influence.”

Third, above all, this meant never picking political winners and losers. As Article 8 makes plain, for Westerners, “your ideal position is when you are present and not noticed.... Avoid being identified too long and too often with any tribal sheikh.... [T]o do your work you must be above jealousies, and you lose prestige if you are associated with a tribe or clan, and its inevitable feuds.” I doubt the erstwhile backers of Mr. Ahmad Chalabi in present-day Iraq read Article 8.

Finally, by really understanding that local culture must be worked with and not against, as legitimacy flowed from its particular structure, and that the place of the Westerner was to advise and not to dictate, as indirect influence over developing peoples was the most lasting, Lawrence’s philosophy reached its conclusion. In Article 15, he urges, “Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably well than that you do it perfectly. It is their war and you are to help them, not to win it for them.”

Success was finally dependent on making the Arabs stakeholders in the process—in this case winning their own war of independence against the Turks. For to achieve permanent political results with developing peoples, the specific organic nature of their society has to be recognized. The plant “takes” only if it becomes embedded in the soil of local culture; anything else is rejected, and the plant withers and dies. In the end, all efforts at state building must be judged by this standard: whether they are continued by an indigenous society long after Western outsiders have left for home.

Lawrence published the second seminal expression of his philosophy anonymously, in the British journal *Round Table*, in September 1920. As he



wrote in a letter to that arch, top-down imperialist, Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon, Lawrence's ambition was that "the Arabs should be the first brown dominion, rather than the last brown colony."

The *Round Table* article took what Lawrence had advocated personally and locally for the Arab Revolt in the "Twenty-seven Articles" and extrapolated it onto the global strategic level. Espousing what he called the "New Imperialism," Lawrence called for an Arab dominion within the British Empire, meaning the new state's political status would be similar to that of Canada, Australia, and South Africa. It would ally with and be subordinate to Britain in military matters, but domestically remain largely politically autonomous within the empire. To accomplish this political goal, Britain would have to encourage the Arab assumption of local political responsibility and accordingly pull back from a governing to largely advisory position.

As Lawrence made clear, this was not a strategy of withdrawal and neglect of the British Empire. Rather, as he put it, "it involves an active side of imposing responsibility on the local peoples. It is what they clamor for, but an unpopular gift when given.... We can only teach them by forcing them to try, while we stand by and give advice." Lawrence strongly believed that this strategy of more indirect influence could prove the salvation of the British Empire by encouraging, rather than standing in the way of, the universal yearning for local control based on local legitimacy.

As Faisal's men were brushed aside by French troops on the outskirts of Damascus in 1920, it signaled more than the ruination of the Hashemite dream for the foundation of a unified Arab state. Among the ruins lay Lawrence's hope for a very different sort of Western strategy for dealing with developing peoples around the world. This tragedy was to have repercussions that echo to this day.

### **The Ghost of Lawrence: Explaining the Difficulties of America's Efforts at State Building in Post-Saddam Iraq**

In assessing America's present-day experience in democracy building in Iraq, it is important to keep Lawrence's general lessons regarding state building in mind.

#### **Lesson #1: It is critical to accurately assess the unit of politics in a failed state.**

In the case of modern Iraq, the unit of politics is religious and ethnic, with the three primary building blocks being the Shiia (60 percent of the population), the formerly ruling Sunnis (20 percent), and the Kurds (around 20 percent). Early utopian efforts to ignore this reality and talk of supporting "Iraqis" rather than working with Iraq's genuine building blocks has died down, blunted by the gloomy day-to-day political realities.

#### **Lesson #2: To work against the grain of history is to fail at state building.**

To immediately and artificially impose Western economic, social, sociological, historical, and anthropological standards on a failed non-Western state while disregarding their own unique culture and history is to court disaster. American efforts to limit the role of Islam in the new Iraq did little more than alienate Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the key representative of the Shiia, who Washington slowly came to see as broadly sharing American goals in Iraq.

Sistani, unlike Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, has shunned direct power. His representatives have placed Islam at the center of the Iraqi interim constitution, saying that although it is the primary source of law, it is not the only one. In retrospect, this, coupled with a generous bill of rights, is the best political outcome America could have hoped for. Antagonizing Sistani by initial dreamy hopes of some sort of Western separation of church and state almost succeeded in alienating the man who has become, interest-wise, America's greatest ally in the country.

#### **Lesson #3: Local elites must be made stakeholders in any successful state-building process.**

In disbanding the Iraqi army, Paul Bremer, the head of the allied coalition, unwittingly laid the groundwork for a period in which it was the American-led coalition, rather than a fusion of American and Iraqi security forces, that became responsible for the security of the country. This was perhaps America's greatest mistake in state building in Iraq, for it meant that the West, rather than Iraqis themselves, took the lead in rebuilding the country.

As such, the Bush Administration walked directly into the trap of political legitimacy. Every Iraqi who helped the dominant Americans could be branded a collaborator rather than a patriotic citizen helping to rebuild their country. It was not until January 2005, with the Iraqi elections and increased efforts to quickly build up Iraqi security forces, that the political game of catch-up that this blunder ushered in began to wane.

**Lesson #4: Avoid a cookie-cutter approach to state building.**

The Western approach to state building in the 1990s operated under a depressingly familiar rhythm. Whether the case is Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, or Iraq, the West attempted to reconfigure centralized control over a failed state without looking at the reasons such a state came apart in the first place. It is unsurprising that such flawed analysis has led to disaster time and time again.

If any general rule does hold true, it must be that a more bottom-up and decentralized political outcome (federation or confederation) ought to prove more effective in restoring a state that fell apart because of centrifugal forces in the first place. Neo-conservatives, who have looked to either Chalabi or Ayad Allawi to be a new strong man in Iraq, miss the vital point that the state's falling apart in the first place is emblematic of the need for a more decentralized outcome—if the new regime is to outlast the American occupation.

**Lesson #5: A degree of humility ought to be professed while state building.**

Western leaders should lower the stakes following a successful intervention and tone down the rhetoric when embarking on post-war state-building efforts. In the modern era, policies are judged by the rhetoric in which they are packaged. By promising too much, Western leaders can be held to a standard that they cannot possibly meet. Worse, it is a standard of the West's own making. The goal should always be to leave a people better than they were before the state-building enterprise. Such modest and achievable goals would do more to resurrect the badly damaged notion of state building than any other single act.

**Lesson #6: Beware of the Imperial Trap.**

This corollary to the importance of local legitimacy dictates that a Western great power must know when to let the local elites take the reins in the state-building process. This is the ultimate litmus test as to whether a state-building effort has been successful—when the Western powers depart, the new political entity is capable of self-government.

As Lawrence urged in his *Round Table* article, Faisal's new government in Damascus should be accounted a success only if it became a full-fledged member of the British Commonwealth, drawing on British advice and know-how but practicing domestic self-government. To leave too early is to see the effort at state building collapse. To stay too long is to practice top-down imperialism, meaning that Western troops are doomed to stay in an inhospitable climate; in such a case, any local government will be seen as a Western stooge.

Timing is absolutely critical to the successful state-building process. In the case of Iraq, this is probably the biggest task still confronting the United States. To leave before enough Iraqi troops are trained to bolster the new regime or before the final constitutional settlement is worked out is to court disaster. However, to linger over-long is to become a recruiting poster for al-Qaeda, with its shrill charge of America as "Crusader Imperialist."

**Lesson #7: A Western country should engage in the arduous process of state building only when primary national security interests are at stake.**

In the Great War, Lawrence became convinced that the defeat of Turkey was possible through energizing the Arab Revolt and that this defeat was greatly beneficial to a hard-pressed Britain. American efforts at state building ought to be discussed in similar hardheaded terms. The 1990s American efforts at state building display an undifferentiated quality in terms of American national interests. The Clinton Administration never met a failed state it did not want to intervene in, however peripheral to American interests (Haiti, Somalia, Kosovo, Bosnia).

The differentiation of when and where to engage in state building, guided by national interest calcu-

lations, will stop an overextended (and violently disliked) America from frittering away for little gain the competitive advantages that have made it the dominant power in the world. Sometimes the answer is no. As John Quincy Adams put it, “America is the well-wisher to the freedom of all. She is the guarantor of only her own.” State building is simply too complicated to be attempted more than necessary—it should be engaged in only when primary American interests are at stake.

**Lesson #8: At root, almost all state-building problems are political and not military in nature. With political legitimacy, military problems can be solved.**

During the Great War, Lawrence intuitively realized that success was certain if the people of the Hejaz united behind the Arabs’ guerrilla campaign, not divulging the whereabouts of Faisal’s legions to the Turks. Likewise in Iraq, the insurgency will wane if the people of the country come to believe that the insurgents are doing great harm to *their*

country, to *their* government, rather than to the American occupiers.

The problem, then, is primarily political and psychological. If they can be persuaded (by their local elites) to believe the insurgency is crippling the new Iraqi state, there is little doubt that intelligence regarding the whereabouts of the insurgents will improve dramatically. On the other hand, without local political legitimacy, no amount of military effort will overcome the basic problem.

These are the precepts that Lawrence established. They are the yardstick that must be used to judge whether future state-building efforts in Iraq lead to success or failure.

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