

Husayn-McMahon Correspondence (24 October 1915)

McMahon [His Majesty's High Commissioner in Egypt] And The Sharif of Mecca In 1915 And 1916, March 16, 1939, Cmd 5974; for this original report see: From: <http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/4c4f7515dc39195185256cf7006f878c?OpenDocument>



Husayn Ibn Ali. Photo: Public Domain.

Sir Henry McMahon (1862-1949), British High Commissioner in Cairo, negotiated in 1915-16 with Husayn Ibn Ali, the Sherif of Mecca. Sherif Husayn believed that his Hashemite family should lead the Arabs during and after the war; he was seeking Arab independence from the Turks at the end of the war, but did not indicate that he was seeking a state. For their part, the British government promised to support Sherif Husayn's bid for the restoration of the Caliphate (and leadership in the Arab world) if Husayn supported the British war effort against Turkey. Palestine was not mentioned by name in this exchange between his family and the British officials in Cairo representing the British government through the Foreign Office.

During WWI, Britain, France, Russia and Italy, allies in their war against Germany and the Ottoman Empire, separately drew up secret and public understandings with each other, with Arab and Zionist leaders, about what political entities might be created at the end of the war and without precision about where those entities would be located. Clearly, the British and French in numerous official, public and secret documents issued during and after the war were intentionally ambiguous about the dimensions, location, and what exactly would be established -- "independence," "homeland," and/or "national governments."

When international diplomacy unfolded at the end of the war, Arab leaders, based upon what was expected as compared to what was earlier said, claimed that the geographic area which later became the Palestine Mandate and was to be reserved for the Jewish National Home, was to be controlled by an Arab ruler or by Husayn or his family. This claim was contrary to statements made by Feisal, Sharif Husayn's son in 1919, when in his communication with the American, Felix Frankfurter and with the Zionist leader, Chaim Weizmann, he recognized Jewish presence in Palestine (See Faisal-Weizmann Letters). However, this recognition did not stop Arab political leaders in Palestine in the 1920s from having serious disagreements with the British for allowing the Jews to develop their homeland in Palestine.



Sir Henry McMahon, pictured in Cairo.

The controversy of who promised what, and what was expected spilled into the public domain with the publication of the 1937 Peel Commission Report and then, George Antonius's

Arab Awakening (1938). Before then, all the secret elements of the controversy were not known to the general public. The British concluded that their strategic interests in Haifa, their relationship with the French, and their Balfour Declaration promise to the Zionists, included in the Articles of the Palestine Mandate (1922) and given international legitimacy by the League of Nations, proved conclusively that their intentions were to exclude Palestine from any commitment to any Arab leader or Arab family. Issued in March 1939, after hearing Arab claims to the contrary, the British reviewed the relevant documents and issued this report. In the context of the May 1939 White Paper on Palestine, which truncated the Jewish national home's growth and offered the prospects of a federal state with to Palestinian Arabs in ten years (which they rejected), Britain firmly asserted that it had both the right in 1917 to foster the establishment of a Jewish national home, though twenty years later in 1939, the right to slow or stop Jewish growth that was headed toward statehood. In contemporary discussion or argument about promises made during World War I, the Arab viewpoint insisted that "Arab independence for all the areas under previously Ottoman control" was promised, which all evidence suggest that it was not.

–Ken Stein, January 2010

I have received your letter of the 29th of Shawal 1333 with much pleasure, and your expression of friendliness and sincerity have given me the greatest satisfaction.

I regret that you should have received from my last letter the impression that I regarded the question of limits and boundaries with coldness and hesitation, such was not the case; but it appeared to me that the time had not yet come when that question could be discussed in a conclusive manner.

I have realised, however, from your last letter that you regard this question as one of vital and urgent importance. I have, therefore, lost no time in informing the Government of Great Britain of the contents of your letter, and it is with great pleasure that I communicate to you on their behalf the following statement, which I am confident you will receive with satisfaction.

The two districts of Mersina and Alexandretta and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo cannot be said to be purely Arab, and should be excluded from the limits demanded.

With the above modification, and without prejudice to our existing treaties with Arab chiefs, we accept those limits.

As for the region lying within those frontiers wherein Great Britain is free to act without detriment to the interests of her ally, France, I am empowered in the name of the Government of Great Britain to give the following assurances and make the following reply to your letter:

1. Subject to the above modifications, Great Britain is prepared to recognise and support the independence of the Arabs in all the regions within the limits demanded by the Sherif of Mecca.

2. Great Britain will guarantee the Holy Places against all external aggression and will recognise their inviolability.
3. When the situation admits, Great Britain will give to the Arabs her advice and will assist them to establish what may appear to be the most suitable form of government in those various territories.
4. On the other hand, it is understood that the Arabs have decided to seek the advice and guidance of Great Britain only, and that such European advisers and officials as may be required for the formation of a sound form of administration will be British.
5. With regard to the vilayets of Bagdad and Basra, the Arabs will recognise that the established position and interests of Great Britain necessitate special administrative arrangements in order to secure these territories from foreign aggression to promote the welfare of the local populations and to safeguard our mutual economic interests.

I am convinced that this declaration will assure you beyond all possible doubt of the sympathy of Great Britain towards the aspirations of her friends, the Arabs, and will result in a firm and lasting alliance, the immediate results of which will be the expulsion of the Turks from the Arab countries and the freeing of the Arab peoples from the Turkish yoke, which for so many years has pressed heavily upon them.

I have confined myself in this letter to the more vital and important questions, and if there are any other matters dealt with in your letters which I have omitted to mention, we may discuss them at some convenient date in the future.

It was with very great relief and satisfaction that I heard of the safe arrival of the Holy Carpet and the accompanying offerings which, thanks to the clearness of your directions and the excellence of your arrangements, were landed without trouble or mishap in spite of the dangers and difficulties occasioned by the present sad war. May God soon bring a lasting peace and freedom for all peoples.

I am sending this letter by the hand of your trusted and excellent messenger, Sheikh Mohammed ibn Arif ibn Uraifan, and he will inform you of the various matters of interest, but of less vital importance, which I have not mentioned in this letter.

Compliments,

(Signed): A. Henry McMahon