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100 years ago: Arab Revolt against Ottoman Empire proclaimed

6/6/2016



Sherif-Hussein

On June 7, 1916, the Sharif of Mecca, Hussein bin Ali, issued a proclamation denouncing the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the ruling party in Turkey, and proclaiming the

independence of the regions known as Hejaz. His statement was an announcement of an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire.

The CUP had come to power in 1908 in the “Young Turk” revolution on a program of aggressive nationalism. During the period preceding the war there had also been a rise in Arab nationalism, reflected in increasing demands for greater autonomy within the Ottoman Empire. The Arab revolt of 1916 was aimed at securing independence from the Ottomans and establishing a single Arab state in the region from Aleppo in Syria to Aden in Yemen.

Hussein bin Ali was a Hashemite Arab leader, who had been appointed Emir of Mecca in 1908 by Abdul Hamad II, the last Sultan of the Ottoman Empire prior to the ascension to power of the Young Turks. Britain had agreed to recognize Arab independence, subject to certain exemptions, following World War I, in return for Arab help in the war with the Ottoman Empire.

The promises contained in letters to bin Ali were seen by the Arab ruling elite to constitute a formal agreement between them and Britain. They established a military force under the leadership of Hussein bin Ali’s son, Faisal, which fought against the Ottoman Empire.

Britain recognized the value of supporting and encouraging Arab nationalism in order to pursue its own aims. In an intelligence memo written in January 1916, T.E. Lawrence, a member of the British Intelligence staff in Cairo later dubbed “Lawrence of Arabia,” described the Arab revolt as “beneficial to us, because it marches with our immediate aims, the break-up of the Islamic ‘bloc’ and the defeat and disruption of the Ottoman Empire, and because *the states [Sharif Hussein] ... set up to succeed the Turks would be ... harmless to ourselves* The Arabs are even less stable than the Turks. *If properly handled they would remain in a state of political mosaic, a tissue of small jealous principalities incapable of cohesion*” (emphasis in the original).

The Arab revolt commenced just weeks after the signing of the Sykes-Picot agreement that provided for the carve-up of the Arabian Peninsula between France, Britain and Russia following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. The agreement struck conflicted significantly with the promises to Hussein bin Ali and the Arab bourgeoisie.