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The McMahon-Hussein Correspondence: Comments and a Reply

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# The McMahon-Hussein Correspondence: Comments and a Reply

Arnold Toynbee

Mr Friedman's article in the *Journal* on this subject is by far the best of the discussions of it, known to me, that have been published so far. He has made a very comprehensive and careful study of the information now accessible. He has not only studied the official papers, now on view in the Public Record Office, which are the most important part of the evidence; he has also taken into account other sources of information, both published and unpublished. Moreover, Mr Friedman has been non-polemical in his treatment of a subject that has become controversial, and he has dealt courteously and considerately with the people, living and dead, who were personally concerned.

In writing the following notes on Mr Friedman's article, my purpose is not to enter into controversy with him, but to supplement what he has written from my own knowledge and to put some questions which arise, I think, out of Mr Friedman's paper, but which are not fully answered there. Very likely, Mr Friedman knows what the answers are, since it is clear that he has made himself a master of the subject.

The reasons why there are memoranda, written by me, among the relevant official documents, now in the Public Record Office, are as follows. In 1918 I was a temporary Foreign Office clerk in the FO's Political Intelligence Department. About six weeks before the Armistice of 11 November 1918, I was told to get from the FO Registry all files dealing with HMG's existing commitments in the Middle East (including still valid pre-war commitments, e.g. the international agreements of the eighteen-sixties about the Lebanon) and to submit memoranda setting out what these commitments were and stating whether, in my judgment,

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they were or were not all compatible with each other. The FO Registry is efficient, and I do not think that any relevant FO files failed to reach my desk. I quickly noticed one blank. The files concerned with the St. Jean de Maurienne Agreement (which assigned zones to Italy in Anatolia) did not include the record of the actual agreement. On inquiry, I was told that, at the crucial stage in the negotiations, Lloyd George had taken these out of the FO's hands and had eventually presented the FO with a fait accompli. However, the St. Jean de Maurienne Agreement is not relevant to Palestine. I am sure that I had before me every relevant file that was in the Foreign Office. I certainly had all those, of dates earlier than the end of 1918, that are mentioned by Mr Friedman in his article.

One of my memoranda was the paper on *British Commitments to King Hussein*.<sup>1</sup> I submitted this and my other memoranda to Crowe, who was then Permanent Under-Secretary, and I went through them with him personally. He ordered them to be put into the FO Print, and to be included in the FO's dossier of papers for the Peace Conference. This was done. Immediately after our arrival in Paris, I was sent for by Smuts and was told by him to boil down my memoranda to something that the statesmen who were going to take the decisions would have time to read. I then produced the second paper to which Mr Friedman refers.<sup>2</sup>

The following points are, I think, undisputed:

(i) 'It was the arrival of Muhammad Sherif al-Faruqi in Cairo that constituted the decisive turning-point'<sup>3</sup> in the British negotiations with Hussein. Al-Faruqi's formula seemed to the British authorities to give an opening to her satisfying the Ottoman Arabs without falling foul of the French.

(ii) According to al-Faruqi, 'the point on which the Young Arabs would not budge, was the inclusion of Damascus, Aleppo, Hama and Homs in the Arab Confederation'.<sup>4</sup>

(iii) McMahan, in writing his letter of 24 October 1915 to Hussein, took his cue from al-Faruqi's hint in the name of the Ottoman Arab organizations on whose behalf al-Faruqi claimed to be speaking, that the Ottoman Arabs might acquiesce in territorial

<sup>1</sup> Cab. 27/36, EC 2201, cited by Mr Friedman in his footnote 91.

<sup>2</sup> Cab. 24/72/I, GT 6506, also cited by Mr Friedman in his footnote 91.

<sup>3</sup> Friedman, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> Clayton in FO 371/2486/34982, cited by Mr Friedman on his p. 105.

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concessions to France that did not extend to the four towns that al-Faruqi had named.

McMahon, in his letter to Hussein of 24 October 1915, named 'the wilayahs of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo' as being the Ottoman territories in, and to the east of which, but not to the west of which, HMG was prepared to recognize and uphold Arab independence. Why was McMahon's use, in this letter, of the word 'wilayahs' apparently interpreted on 29 November 1916, by the author of the Arab Bureau's *History of the Hedjaz Rising*,<sup>5</sup> and certainly interpreted by me in my two memoranda and by the Arab Delegation to London in 1922, as meaning, not 'vilayets', in the Ottoman official meaning of the word, but 'environs' or 'banlieux', which was the unofficial usage of the word in Arabic? When I was writing my first memorandum (my second was merely an abridgment of the whole of my set of memoranda), I had before me the English version of McMahon's letter of 24 October 1915, as well as the Arab Bureau's *History*. Why did I interpret McMahon's 'wilayahs' in the sense in which the author of the *History* appears to have interpreted it? And why did the Arab Delegation put forward the same interpretation in 1922?

The identical interpretation was made independently by three different people at three different dates. In 1918 I did not have the time or the opportunity to compare notes with the author of the Arab Bureau's *History* (I still do not know who he was). In 1922 the Arab Delegation cannot have had access to my papers, and I never met any of the members of the Delegation or had any correspondence with any of them. (I had ceased to be a temporary Foreign Office clerk in the spring of 1919, and in any case I should not have been entitled to give the Arab Delegation any information.) Of course, by 1922, the Arab Delegation had an obvious political motive for interpreting McMahon's 'wilayahs' as meaning 'environs', not 'provinces'. But the author of the Arab Bureau's *History* in 1916, and I in 1918, had no political axe to grind. We were concerned solely to make out, if we could, what HMG's commitments actually were. Nor would the Arab Delegation in 1922 have felt it worth while to interpret McMahon's 'wilayahs' as we had done if there had not been a convincing reason for interpreting the word in this context in this way.

<sup>5</sup> FO 371/6237 (1921), cited by Mr Friedman in his footnote 95.

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Mr Friedman is quite right in saying (pp. 113–4) that the most natural interpretation of the words ‘the wilayah of Damascus’ would have been ‘the Ottoman province of Damascus’, not ‘the environs of Damascus’. However, McMahon did not write ‘the wilayah of Damascus’, he wrote ‘the wilayahs (in the plural) of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo’, and this is why his word ‘wilayahs’ was interpreted three times, independently, as meaning not ‘provinces’, but ‘environs’.

There were no Ottoman vilayets of Homs and Hama. In the vilayet of Damascus there was a sanjaq of Hama consisting of four kazas, two of which were the kazas of Hama and Homs. There was a vilayet of Aleppo, but this vilayet extended westwards to the coast. Its sanjaq of Aleppo included, among its kazas, the three coastal kazas of Iskanderun, Beilan, and Antaqiyeh. It is quite certain that McMahon was not intending to include these three kazas in the area within which HMG undertook to recognize and uphold Arab independence. In his letter of 26 October 1915, to Grey, McMahon says ‘I have been definite in excluding Mersina, Alexandretta (i.e. Iskanderun) and those districts on the northern coast of Syria which cannot be said to be Arab and where I understand that French interests have been recognized’.

If McMahon was intending (as certainly was to be expected) to write in terms of Ottoman official administrative areas, what he ought to have written was ‘the vilayet of Damascus and the portion of the vilayet of Aleppo that lies to the east of a line running northward from . . .’ – and here he would have had to describe a line running northwards, from the north-east corner of the Ladiqiyeh sanjaq of the vilayet of Beirut through the vilayet of Aleppo to this vilayet’s northern boundary.

Subject to Mr Friedman’s opinion of this point, I guess that this was why the author of the Arab Bureau’s *History* substituted the word ‘line’ for McMahon’s word ‘districts’. I think that he must have been trying, as I was trying, simply to make out what McMahon had meant.

The consequences of interpreting McMahon’s ‘wilayahs’ as meaning ‘Ottoman provinces’ are so disconcerting that it was – and, to my mind, still is – difficult to believe that McMahon was intending to use the word in this sense in his letter. This interpretation would force on us a choice between the two following alternative conclusions:

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(i) First alternative: McMahon was completely ignorant of Ottoman administrative geography. He did not know that the Ottoman vilayet of Aleppo extended westward to the coast, and he did not know that there were no Ottoman vilayets of Homs and Hama. It seems to me incredible that McMahon can have been as ill-informed as this, and that he would not have taken care to inform himself correctly when he was writing a letter in which he was making very serious commitments on HMG's account.

(ii) Second alternative: McMahon was properly acquainted with Ottoman administrative geography, and was using the word 'wilayahs' equivocally. Apropos of Damascus, he was using it to mean 'Ottoman provinces'; apropos of Homs and Hama, and Aleppo, he was using it to mean 'environs'. This equivocation would have been disingenuous, impolitic, and pointless. I could not, and still cannot, believe that McMahon behaved so irresponsibly.

I do not know when, in the discussion between al-Faruqi and the British, and in the correspondence between McMahon and Hussein, the word 'wilayahs' was first introduced in association with the names of the four towns that had been designated by al-Faruqi. Was this done by McMahon himself, or by his draftsman, or by the translator into Arabic of the letter that McMahon or his draftsman had composed for despatch on 24 October 1915? It seems to me most improbable that McMahon got the word 'wilayahs', as well as the four place-names, from al-Faruqi. Al-Faruqi was an Arab Ottoman officer. I shall not be convinced that al-Faruqi ever wrote or said 'the wilayahs of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo' unless and until these words appear in a document written or dictated in Arabic by al-Faruqi himself. Mr Friedman does not quote any documents of al-Faruqi's own, and I do not know of any. The only information, that I know of, about al-Faruqi's statements is contained in reports, at second hand, of British officials who had talked to him. There can be no doubt that he mentioned the four place-names, and he must have had in mind, not just the four towns but a continuous belt of territory linking them together. But is there any evidence of the extent of the area that he had in mind, and of the words in which he described it?

The areas that al-Faruqi outlined to Sykes on 20 November 1915<sup>6</sup> were those in which the Ottoman Arabs would be willing to give a

<sup>6</sup> See Friedman, p. 106, and footnote 74.

monopoly of concessions, foreign advisers and employees, and foreign educational work, to France and Britain respectively. In this conversation – and, I believe, throughout – al-Faruqi took care to avoid defining the area which the Arabs would recognize as being French territory, though he did commit himself to Sykes, on this occasion, to recognizing an area round Basra as British territory. Al-Faruqi included not only the territory to the west of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo in his proposed French sphere of influence; he also included in it the four towns, and, since he carried the eastern boundary of the suggested French sphere of influence as far south as Maan, he was proposing to include in this sphere not only Damascus itself but also the whole of the Ottoman vilayet of Damascus. Mr Friedman infers (p. 113) that al-Faruqi was implying that all the territory between the western boundary of the Ottoman vilayet of Damascus, ‘down to the Egyptian border near Rafah’, was to be French territory. But this is only an inference. As I read al-Faruqi’s proposal according to Sykes’ report of it, al-Faruqi was deliberately limiting himself to defining the future French sphere of influence, and was taking care to avoid specifying, within this sphere, a boundary between French territory and Arab territory.

As long as I was in temporary government service I was never challenged on my interpretation of McMahan’s word ‘wilayahs’: not by Crowe, who was both well-informed and precise; not by Smuts (but Smuts was concerned only for brevity); and, most surprising of all, not by McMahan himself.

When the Western Powers decided to send an international commission of inquiry to Syria and Palestine, McMahan was appointed head of the British section, and I was appointed secretary. I came from Paris to London, met McMahan in London for the first time, and worked there with McMahan every day, for several weeks, on making preparations for our intended expedition to the Middle East. I then fell sick, and, a week or two later, Britain and France withdrew from the commission and the United States carried out the inquiry alone. (It resulted in the King-Crane Report.)

During those weeks that I was in daily contact with McMahan, he never raised with me the question of the interpretation of his letter to Hussein of 24 October 1915. Of course, I did not raise it on my side; this was not my business, and also I was not aware that

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McMahon's interpretation of his letter was different from mine. Yet my memoranda must have been in McMahon's hands long since, and I was now going to be his aide. If, in the spring of 1919, McMahon was convinced that he had excluded Palestine from the area of Arab independence, it is incomprehensible to me that he did not take me up on this point – a point of great personal importance to him, as well as of public importance for the Commission – as soon as I arrived in London and reported to him. Yet McMahon never said a word to me about this. Nor had he previously taken up with the Arab Bureau its substitution of the word 'line' for his word 'wilayahs'. The substitution had been made already in a prototype of the Arab Bureau's *History* which McMahon himself had forwarded to Grey on 19 April 1916.<sup>7</sup> He forwarded this interpretation of his own letter without demur.

The first challenge to the Arab Bureau's interpretation and my interpretation that I had was from Major Hubert Young. He told me that he had been looking into the meaning of McMahon's letter of 24 October 1915 and had concluded that, apropos of Damascus, McMahon's 'wilayahs' meant 'the Ottoman vilayet of Damascus' – which would mean, of course, that in this letter McMahon had excluded Palestine from the area of Arab independence. The date at which Major Young told me this must have been about the time when he was writing his memorandum of 29 November 1920.

I have pointed out that, by 1922, the Arab Delegation to London had a political motive for interpreting McMahon's word 'wilayahs' as meaning 'environs'. I must now also point out that, as soon as HMG was sure that it was going to get the mandate for Palestine, it had a political motive for interpreting McMahon's word 'wilayahs' as meaning, apropos of Damascus, 'Ottoman vilayets'. The acquisition of the mandate for Palestine carried with it, for Britain, the obligation to implement the Balfour Declaration, and HMG would have found it embarrassing to do this in the teeth of Palestinian Arab protests if it had not now maintained that Palestine was excluded from the area within which McMahon had pledged HMG to recognize and uphold Arab independence. The documents written by British officials, contesting the interpretation of McMahon's word 'wilayahs' that was made by me and,

<sup>7</sup> FO 371/2768/938, cited in Mr Friedman's note 97.

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before me, by the author of the Arab Bureau's *History*, all date from after the time at which HMG had become sure that Britain had Palestine in her pocket. The date on which the Principal Allied Powers assigned the mandate for Palestine to Britain is 24 April 1920. The date of Major Young's memorandum is 29 November 1920<sup>8</sup>; the date of McMahon's confidential letter to Sir John Shuckburgh is 12 March 1922<sup>9</sup>; the date of Childs' memorandum is 24 October 1930.<sup>10</sup>

It can be, and has been, argued that, even if the interpretation of McMahon's 'wilayahs' as meaning 'environs', not 'Ottoman vilayets', is correct, McMahon's letter still excludes Palestine from the area of Arab independence by the reservation, included in the letter, that HMG could give assurances to the Arabs only in regard to those territories 'in which she [sic] can act without detriment to the interests of her ally France'. In making this reservation, McMahon was giving HMG *carte blanche* to revoke the undertakings that McMahon himself was making to the Arabs on HMG's behalf; but this reservation was a contingent one. It would come into effect only in so far as France claimed to have interests and pressed her claims.

In October 1915 McMahon did not know, because HMG did not know, what the extent of the French claims was going to be or how hard France was going to press them. On 24 April 1920, the Principal Allied Powers, of whom France was of course one, assigned the mandate for Palestine to Britain, and thus France implicitly renounced any interest in Palestine that she may previously have claimed. On the same date, however, the Principal Allied Powers, of whom Britain also was one, assigned the mandates for the Lebanon and Syria to France, so, on that date, the contingent reservation in France's favour, that McMahon had included in his letter of 24 October 1915, was liquidated in respect of Palestine but simultaneously came into force in respect of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo – the very places that McMahon had explicitly included (subject to this reservation) in the area within which he pledged HMG to recognize and uphold Arab independence. Accordingly, HMG made no move to uphold Arab independence there when, in July 1920, France pressed her

<sup>8</sup> FO 371/5066, E. 14959/9/44, cited by Mr Friedman p. 116.

<sup>9</sup> FO 371/7797 (1922), E 2821/2821/65, quoted by Mr Friedman p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> FO 371/14495 (1930), cited by Mr Friedman p. 114.

claim to the four towns in the interior of Syria by conquering them by force of arms.

In any case the McMahon-Hussein correspondence, of which McMahon's letter of 24 October 1915 to Hussein was a part, did not result in the conclusion of any agreement or treaty. I 'pin-pointed' this, as Mr Friedman says (p. 121) in my memorandum on British Commitments to King Hussein. Thus the commitments in this letter of McMahon's had no juridical validity. Yet an undertaking may be morally valid, even if it does not have the force of law. McMahon's letter of 24 October 1915 was not, and is not, a dead letter, and the attempts to ascertain the true meaning of this letter have not been wasted labour. I do not agree with Mr Friedman's judgment (p. 83) that, today, the controversy over this question has no more than an academic interest. McMahon's letter of 24 October 1915 struck some of the sparks that have set ablaze the present conflagration in the Middle East.

I do not think that Young's or Childs' or Mr Friedman's interpretation of McMahon's use of the word 'wilayahs' is tenable. After studying Mr Friedman's paper and writing these notes, I am inclined to think that the drafting of this letter was, not disingenuous, but hopelessly muddle-headed. Incompetence is not excusable in transacting serious and responsible public business. If the draftsman had been Crowe or Hirtzel (I did some work for both of them, and have first-hand knowledge of their carefulness and precision), I think it is improbable that this important letter would have been as ambiguous as, unfortunately, it has proved to be.

## Isaiah Friedman replies

I am grateful for Professor Toynbee's comments and for the opportunity to elucidate a few points. (Figures in brackets refer to the pages of my article.)

I agree that, unlike the Arab Delegation, Toynbee in 1918 had no political axe to grind. If anything rather the reverse, for in his memorandum dated 21 November 1918,<sup>1</sup> he recommended,

<sup>1</sup> Cab. 24/72/1.

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consistently with Whitehall's desideratum, that Britain should administer Palestine and advised that the British Government should ensure 'reasonable facilities' for Jewish colonization, without giving offence to Arab or general Moslem opinion. On this point he made an important contribution:

The problem of Palestine cannot be solved entirely on the principles of self-determination and free choice of assistance. As in Armenia, there will be a mixed population, and there will be one element in that population, in this case the Jewish colonists, which for special reasons, will be entitled to a position more than mathematically proportionate to its numbers at the start.

Moreover, in Palestine there are international religious interests so important, and so difficult to reconcile, that they almost overshadow the internal problems of the native inhabitants.

However, his dilemma with regard to what appeared to him contradictory commitments made to Sherif Hussein (24 October 1915) and the Zionists (2 November 1917) remained unresolved, and his doubt has persisted for over half a century.

1. On what grounds did Dr Toynbee reach his conclusion? At the time this question was only marginal, and I am inclined to think that W. J. Childs, in his paper dated 24 October 1930, was correct in assuming that when Toynbee was preparing his memorandum he used a copy of the Arab Bureau's *History of the Hedjaz Rising*, as his various references show (114). Since writing my article I have ascertained that the author of this work was Ormsby-Gore, then on the staff of the Arab Bureau.<sup>2</sup> It is not a 'History', certainly not an interpretative one, nor even a summary, but merely a collection of cables and dispatches set out in chronological order about the Hedjaz rising and negotiations with the French representative in London leading to the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The document in question, on which Toynbee based his conclusion, is dated 16 April 1916. I recently traced its paternity to David Hogarth.<sup>3</sup> Noting that the correspondence with

<sup>2</sup> FO 882/5. Arab Bureau Papers, 121-326. 'Summary of Historical Documents from the outbreak of War between Great Britain and Turkey, 1914, to the outbreak of the Revolt of the Sherif of Mecca in June, 1916.' Cairo, Arab Bureau, 29 November 1916.

<sup>3</sup> FO 882/2, Arab Bureau Papers, 'The Arab Question', note by Cdr. Hogarth.

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Sherif Hussein remained inconclusive, Hogarth attempted to establish what was and what was not agreed. He wrote:

We for our part have *not* agreed to:

A) Recognize Arab independence in Syria west of the line [sic] Aleppo-Hama-Homs-Damascus, or in any portion of the Arab area in which we are not free to act without detriment to our ally, France. . . .

What has been agreed to, therefore, on behalf of Great Britain is:

A) To recognize the independence of those portions of the Arab speaking area in which we are free to act without detriment to the interests of France. Subject to these undefined reservations, the said area is understood to be bounded north by about latitude  $37^\circ$ . East by the Persian frontier. South by the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. West by the Red Sea and the Mediterranean up to about latitude  $33^\circ$  and beyond by an indefinite line [sic] drawn west of Damascus, Hama, Homs and Aleppo; all that lies within this last line and the Mediterranean [i.e. the Syrian littoral] being, in any case, reserved absolutely for future arrangements between the French and the Arabs.

Hogarth joined the newly established Arab Bureau in mid-March 1916 and beyond the correspondence had no first-hand knowledge of relations with Sherif Hussein. Even a cursory examination of his note shows that:

a) he considered Hussein's letter of 14 July 1915, in which the latter outlined the boundaries of the Arab Empire bounded on the north by the line Mersin-Adana to parallel  $37^\circ\text{N}$  to include the whole of the Arabian peninsula (except Aden), Mesopotamia, Syria and what was later Transjordan and Palestine, as the ultimate embodiment of Arab desiderata. This was obviously not the case since this letter served merely as a *basis* for negotiations (87-9);

b) he was completely unaware of what had passed since al-Faruqi's appearance on the scene – a fatal gap, since it was the statements made by Faruqi that formed the cornerstone of McMahon's crucial letter of 24 October 1915 and his reservations set out therein;

c) he overlooked the correspondence between Cairo and London, for had he seen it he would have realized from McMahon's cable to Grey of 26 October 1915 (109) that 'the area in which we are not free to act without detriment to the interests of our ally, France', was Palestine.

Moreover, Hogarth erroneously substituted for the word 'districts', used by McMahon, 'line', compounding this lapse by

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another mistake. By inventing a second line 'up to about latitude 33° and beyond an indefinite line drawn inland west of Damascus . . . and the Mediterranean', he gratuitously included Palestine within the area of Arab 'independence', contrary to McMahon's intention. When he reserved it 'absolutely for future arrangement between the French and the Arabs', he tacitly admitted that Palestine fell within the French sphere of interest; the term 'independence' was not used in its literal sense but was synonymous with liberation from the Turk.<sup>4</sup>

Hogarth's blunder stands out even more conspicuously when set against another section of his note where, discussing the Sykes-Picot Agreement, he wrote: 'Palestine, west of Jordan, to be internationalized. Acre and Haifa to be British . . . Independent Arab State to consist of remaining area [i.e. east of Jordan and the Syrian hinterland], but to be divided into two spheres of influence . . . French and British.' This inconsistency apparently accounts for McMahon's failure to notice Hogarth's error when forwarding a copy of his note (undated and unsigned) to London.<sup>5</sup>

However much Hogarth might have disliked the system of an international regime, particularly so close to the eastern Egyptian border, he saw one advantage in it: 'Palestine under International Control was perhaps the best solution, especially in view of the aspirations of the Jews to the area in which they may enjoy some sort of proprietorship.' This statement, written only two weeks after his note of 19 April 1916, is interesting since he thought that the Lebanon, unlike Palestine, should have been included in the area of Arab independence.<sup>6</sup>

Hogarth's mistake, although unfortunate, was soon obliterated from his memory. Henceforth he regarded British-oriented Zionism as a useful tool with which to undermine the French position accorded by the May 1916 Asia Minor Agreement.<sup>7</sup> On 4 January 1918, when delivering his (now famous) message to King

<sup>4</sup> 'What we were asked to promote, was simply independence to the Arabs from their present over-Lord, the Turk.' See also Hogarth's article cited in mine, p. 86, and other evidence *ibid.*, pp. 84-7.

<sup>5</sup> FO 371/2768/938, McMahon to Grey, 19 April 1916, dis. no. 83 secret; cf. my article p. 115, note 97, where 'Cis-Jordanian Palestine' in square brackets should be corrected to 'east of the river Jordan'.

<sup>6</sup> FO 882/14, Anglo-Franco-Russian Agreement. Hogarth (Cairo) to Hall (London), 3 May 1916.

<sup>7</sup> FO 371/3054/865526, Note on Anglo-Franco-Russian Agreement, by D. G. Hogarth dated 10 July 1917.

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Hussein, Hogarth could detect no contradiction between the terms of the Balfour Declaration and McMahon's pledge. Nor did his host, who referred to Palestine as 'a sacred and beloved homeland . . . [of] its original sons (abna'ihil-l-asliyim)' – the Jews (117). Hogarth was one of the high-ranking British officers who gave his unequivocal support to Yale's solution during the Peace Conference (119). In a paper read on 27 January 1925 he assured his audience that the British Government was 'guiltless . . . of any betrayal of King Hussein. The sole condition of his active alliance . . . that he be freed from his Ottoman overlords and recognized as an independent sovereign – has been fulfilled'.<sup>8</sup> In the discussion that followed, Col. Jacob, Ormsby-Gore, Sir Percy Cox and Sir Arnold Wilson participated. None of them disputed Hogarth's contention.

All signs show that Ormsby-Gore was unaware of the error that Hogarth made in his note of 6 April 1916, when he incorporated it into his voluminous collection entitled 'Summary of Historical Documents . . .', on 29 November 1916. Early in 1917, Ormsby-Gore moved from Cairo to London to join the War Secretariat. He advised Lord Milner in drafting the Balfour Declaration, and like Sir Mark Sykes was considered an expert on Arab and Zionist affairs. In 1918 he accompanied the Zionist Commission to Palestine and in 1919 assisted the British delegation to the Peace Conference. In none of his numerous memoranda, minutes, or dispatches is there the slightest hint that he saw any inconsistency between the British commitment to the Zionists and that made to Hussein. On 21 July 1937, then Colonial Secretary, he assured the House of Commons that 'it was never in the mind of anyone on that staff [i.e. Arab Bureau] that Palestine west of the Jordan was in the area within which the British Government then undertook to further the cause of Arab independence . . . the whole sequel proves the case'.

2. That McMahon in 1919 made no comment on Toynbee's statement, does not prove that he agreed with it. It constituted a small part of Toynbee's memorandum and McMahon might have overlooked it (if he saw it at all). More telling is that McMahon fully endorsed Yale's solution on Palestine and the Middle East at the Peace Conference. Other distinguished British officers like Cdr. Hogarth, General Allenby, Col. Lawrence, Col. Cornwallis,

<sup>8</sup> D. G. Hogarth, 'Wahabism and British Interests,' *Journal of British Institute of International Affairs*, 1925, 73.

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Col. Sterling, as well as Lord Robert Cecil, Emir Feisal, Rustum Haidar Bey, and Nuri Said also approved Yale's plan. Yale, as his reports show, was well informed about the nature of British commitments to Hussein and was in a position to judge whether or not they conflicted with those made to the Zionists.

Sir Eyre Crowe was undoubtedly a competent man but in 1915-16 did not deal with the Arab question, and in 1919 too probably relied on other Middle East experts. How could he have suspected a 'breach' if Emir Feisal, representing his father, publicly left Palestine aside and entered into an agreement with Dr Weizmann? The late Sir Charles Webster (during the war in Military Intelligence), who also assisted the British Delegation to Paris, in a personal interview with myself, categorically rejected any idea of contradictory promises to Arabs and Jews.

3. Not until January 1921, when Feisal made his first challenge, did the Foreign Office examine the whole question thoroughly. The 'Summary of Historical Documents . . .' (on which Toynbee relied) was traced and printed with the explicit purpose of showing 'without any possibility of doubt' what McMahon meant by the relevant passage of his letter of 24 October 1915.<sup>9</sup> Professor Toynbee had by then left the Foreign Office and subsequently it was shown (see Childs' paper dated 24 October 1930) how he had been misled.

4. As to the meaning of the word 'districts',<sup>10</sup> it would certainly have been much tidier had McMahon phrased the passage as Professor Toynbee suggests. But the fault was not McMahon's. As Childs had shown, this phrase originated with al-Faruqi. McMahon referred to it in his dispatch to Grey on 18 October 1915 (105) six days before making his territorial pledges to Hussein. Since then it had become a cliché in both Cairo and London. Al-Faruqi certainly did not intend a narrow interpretation of the 'immediate neighbourhood', since this would have been fatal to the whole concept of an Arab state stretching from the

<sup>9</sup> FO 371/6237, Eastern (1921) E155/4/91. P. Knightley and C. Simpson in *The Secret Lives of Lawrence of Arabia* (London, 1969), 106, overlooked the minute sheet that accompanied the 'Summary' and were trapped into the same error.

<sup>10</sup> Prof. Toynbee consistently substitutes for it 'wilayahs', a term not used by McMahon. This method was employed earlier by the Arab Delegation for the obvious reason that in vernacular Arabic it stands for 'environs', a narrower meaning than district or the Turkish 'vilayet'.

Syrian hinterland southwards through what later became Transjordan to Hedjaz. Moreover, we have McMahon's own interpretation given to Sir John Shuckburgh on 12 March 1922 (108) which I have no reason to question. The Arab Bureau staff were of course quite familiar with the administrative division of Syria and Palestine. Thus Ormsby-Gore specifically referred to the region east of the Jordan as 'part of the Vilayet of Damascus'.<sup>11</sup>

5. Al-Faruqi specifically mentioned Palestine by name when excluding it, as well as the Syrian littoral, from the area destined to become an Arab state. Palestine was also covered in Faruqi's phrase 'the places inhabited by a foreign race'; his statement conveyed the purpose of the Sherif's letter of 14 July 1915 outlining the boundaries of Arab independence. This is not my inference, as Professor Toynbee suggests; it was so understood at the time by McMahon, Clayton, Sykes, Sir Arthur Nicolson, and Grey (as their respective dispatches and notes show), and it was on the basis of this understanding that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was subsequently outlined. Moreover, al-Faruqi's reservations tally with Hussein's admission in his letter to his friend, Seyyid Ali Morghani: 'We have no reason for discussing the question of the frontier other than a preliminary measure.' Professor Toynbee overlooked all the evidence adduced in my article to this effect (105-7, 117).

6. France's standing in the East was a matter of common knowledge. Following her claim to Syria and Palestine in March 1915 (on the heels of Russia's claim to Constantinople), the British Government was in no position to assign any part of these provinces to the Arabs without French consent. Paris insisted that Syria was a purely French possession and by Syria meant the region bounded by the Taurus ridges on the north and the Egyptian frontier near Rafah on the south. This was what Picot stated officially to Nicolson during their meeting in London on 23 November 1915.

With the Arab desiderata centred on the Syrian hinterland and their four towns, the future of Palestine was left exclusively to France and Britain and their allies. It is therefore immaterial to argue that on 24 April 1920, when France renounced her interest in Palestine in favour of a British mandate, the force of the reser-

<sup>11</sup> FO 882/14, Palestine Political, memorandum by W. O(rmsby) G(ore) dated 12 January 1917, 267.

vation made by McMahon in his letter of 24 October 1915 lapsed, and that by the same token the British Government was free to give Palestinian Arabs their independence. This argument is not new. It was advanced by successive Arab delegations to London (1922-39) and by Antonius. Lord Maugham, Lord Chancellor, dismissed it as 'irrelevant'; Mr Leonard Stein termed it 'irrational' and 'cynical', whilst Childs maintained that French interest remained. The official French position, was that the Jewish National Home policy should be implemented; the award of Palestine to the Arabs would have violated the French pledge given to the Zionists in June 1917 and February 1918, to say nothing of a similar pledge given by the Italian Government and the subsequent arrangement made by the League of Nations in 1922.<sup>12</sup>

I do not excuse the conduct of the French in Syria in July 1920, but it is worth bearing in mind: a) that British advice to Feisal in 1919/20 to come to terms with the French Government, as set out in the Asia-Minor [Sykes-Picot] Agreement, remained unheeded; b) that the nature of Arab 'independence' in the Syrian interior was conditional on the extent of the Arab rising against the Turk, which did not take place; c) that the British position in regard to Palestine and the pledge to the Zionists, were unrelated to Franco-Arab relations in Syria.

7. I agree that if the draftsman had been Crowe or Hirtzel, the important letter to Hussein would have been written differently. I presume that the readers of my article did not fail to take note of the attitude of Sir Arthur Hirtzel and the India Office to the whole affair (93-4).

8. I cannot accept Professor Toynbee's contention that, though devoid of any juridical validity, the undertaking to Sherif Hussein is still 'morally valid'. This undertaking, as I hope was shown in my paper, was not of a *unilateral* nature, and if any party remained in debt it was rather the Arabs towards the British than vice versa; the method employed by al-Faruqi to extract far-reaching obligations from the British could not be termed moral. Nor can I accept Toynbee's assertion that, because of the British Government's interest in retaining the mandate over Palestine, statements and memoranda produced by British officials after April 1920 are not

<sup>12</sup> George Antonius: *The Arab Awakening* (London, 1938), 179, 262-3; Cmd. 5974, 27; Leonard Stein, *Promises and Afterthoughts* (London, 1939), 9-10; Childs, memo. cited, 60-1.

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reliable. The charge that high-ranking officers and Ministers consistently and deliberately perjured themselves is to my mind inadmissible. Nor can I understand how Professor Toynbee overlooked a considerable body of evidence relating to the pre-1920 period (adduced in my article) which belies his conclusion. It would be legitimate to ask at this point why, in his 1918 memoranda, Toynbee recommended that Britain assume the role of trustee of the Jewish National Home, rather than hand Palestine to the Arabs, if he thought that it was included in the boundaries of Arab independence?

Whether or not the subject has any political bearing, is not for me to say. For me it was and remains an academic issue and I hope I treated it in that spirit. On the basis of my study I do not hesitate to state that the record of the British Government in this matter is clean. It was not McMahon's letter of 24 October 1915, unfortunate though its phrasing was, that complicated Anglo-Arab-Jewish relations, but the myth that was built up around it. If to reveal historical truth helps to create a better climate of international understanding, the labour was not in vain.