

# Arab Bureau

By [Samir Seikaly](#)

**A short lived agency, the Arab Bureau (1916-1920), was ostensibly established to co-ordinate British wartime policy in the Near East, track the regional direction of Turco-German activity and disseminate propaganda among Indian Muslims. In fact, its activity was largely confined to intelligence and logistical work in support of the 1916 Arab Revolt.**

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## Establishment

Located in Cairo rather than London, as originally envisaged by [Mark Sykes \(1879-1919\)](#), the Arab Bureau became part of the city's complex military and political network, reporting, through its director, to the British High Commissioner in [Egypt](#) and ultimately to the Foreign Office in London. Externally, therefore, it appeared as if the Arab Bureau was well-embedded in the cross-continental bureaucratic structure that ran the vast British [Empire](#). In fact, the Arab Bureau was a maverick organization, in terms of its personnel and their mode of operation. Some of its personnel were military men recruited from sister intelligence and ancillary units, but many were civilians carrying bogus military ranks, men in academia, or recent graduates of elite British universities. Examples of members include [David Hogarth \(1862-1927\)](#), archaeologist, historian and museum curator, who became sub-director of the Bureau under the leadership of Brigadier-General [Gilbert Clayton \(1875-1929\)](#); [Gertrude Bell \(1868-1926\)](#), historian, archaeologist, traveler and, ultimately king-maker in Iraq; [Thomas Edward Lawrence \(1888-1935\)](#), junior archaeologist, map-maker and chronicler of the revolt

that made him famous; and Alfred Guillaume (1888-1965), a bright Oxford graduate in Oriental studies at the cusp of an equally successful academic career.

Working out of a cramped suite in the Savoy Hotel in Cairo, this motley gathering of unusual individuals, dubbed by Lawrence the “Intrusive,” constituted a semi-autonomous think tank. Its members excavated information relating to their areas of operation, eventually limited to the Arabian Peninsula and its northern extension in Syria. Derived from a multiplicity of sources, this information was classified, analyzed and eventually re-shaped into concise secret reports (*The Arab Bulletin*), which were distributed among a small number of military and political departments, and meant to help guide the British war effort.

Although tasked with the duty of harmonizing British political activity in the Near East, in reality the Bureau hardly played any role in its formulation. In fact, the Husayn-McMahon correspondence ended before the Bureau’s creation, and the Bureau was involved in neither the [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#) nor the subsequent Balfour Declaration. Nevertheless, it is true that some of its leading figures, though dubious about the general run of British policies in the region, attempted to sell them to the Arabs as measures that would ultimately serve Arab interests.

## Arab Revolt

More decisive, of course, was the Bureau’s active involvement in providing the [logistical](#) support, in terms of expert personnel, military hardware and financial assistance, which underpinned the Arab revolt and contributed to its victorious outcome. In this saga, T.E. Lawrence looms large. Recent scholarship, however, maintains that the Bureau’s role in the Arab revolt was not predicated upon the exercise of individual genius but was the product of a collective endeavor. Taking into consideration the desert nature of Arabia and its forbidding terrain, and maximizing the use of human intelligence (humint), signal intelligence (sigint) and image intelligence (imint), a handful of local Bureau operatives working on the ground were eventually able to evolve a type of unconventional [warfare](#). This entailed using small mobile fighting units, hit and run tactics, and the harassment of enemy troops rather than directly confronting them. It became known as guerilla warfare, but for the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, this was the only form of war they practiced. Given this fact, the tribal Arab contribution in confining the superior Ottoman forces to Medina for the duration of the war and in assisting Edmund Allenby’s (1861-1936) thrust into Palestine and beyond should be given its due.

## Propaganda

Part of the mandate of the Arab Bureau was to generate [propaganda](#) in favor of [Great Britain](#) among non-Indian Muslims. It did so through newspapers, now hard to obtain, emanating from Cairo or published in the Hejaz. In the latter town, *al-Qibla* began to appear following the outbreak of the Arab Revolt. Mostly edited by Syrian émigrés living in Egypt, it supported the uprising in the Hejaz, but chose to present it as a struggle for the attainment of general Arab national goals. In Cairo two

papers, *al-Kawkab* and *Jaridat Filastine*, appeared. Both tried to make their Arab readers in Palestine and the remainder of Syria believe that Britain and its allies were fighting the war to defend Islam and its adherents, and to further Arab interests and achieve their freedom. Bureau propaganda directed at Arab audiences was as duplicitous as the policies envisaged for the area by the British imperial overlords.

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