

**REVERTING TO THE McMAHON-HUSSEIN
CORRESPONDENCE: INTERPRETATIONS OF McMAHON'S
PROMISES IN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE ANGLO-ARAB
DIPLOMATIC MATCH IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1915-1939**

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ABSTRACT

The correspondence between Sir Arthur Henry McMahon, British High Commissioner in Egypt, and Sharif Husayn, in 1915-1916 is usually called “The McMahon-Hussein Correspondence” (Anglo-American historiography) or “The McMahon-Hussein Agreement” (Russian papers). The aims of this paper are to outline the Anglo-Arab diplomatic match in the Middle East throughout 1915-1939 and to represent two main approaches that exist in historiography. Some controversial and unclear aspects of the topic are discussed shortly: the aims of the British negotiators, the problem of “fair play” and “the breach of faith” in historiography, Sir Arthur Henry McMahon activity in the Middle East.

Key Words: The McMahon – Hussein Correspondence, Anglo-Arab match in the Middle East, 1915-1939, “standard historiography”, “revised historiography”, “the breach of faith”, interpretations of McMahon’s promises.

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In 1915-1916 Sir Arthur Henry McMahon, British High Commissioner in Egypt corresponded with Sharif Husayn, Sharif and Emir of Mecca, and both received five letters from each other. These written negotiations exerted great influence on international relations in the Middle East.

Since 1916 it has become clear that the issue of Palestine was one of the essential questions of McMahon’s letters interpretation. Since that time the question of Palestine has been the core issue in various interpretations of both official ones and those in historiography, it can be seen in memoirs of politicians and last survey works (see, e. g.: Ross, 2004: 31-33; Landa, 2006: 134).

The aims of this paper are to outline the Anglo-Arab diplomatic match in the Middle East throughout 1915-1939 and to represent two main approaches that exist in historiography. Also controversial and unclear aspects of the topic are discussed shortly beneath.

The Arabs referred to the Correspondence as a trump card which would help them to lay claims to Palestine. In that case the British were forced to defend themselves. They kept on examining McMahon's letters thus substantiating their rights to the Mandate on Palestine.

"For the Arabs", as D. Ross, the U. S. envoy to the Middle East in 1988-2000, has stated, "Sharif Husayn was crystal clear: he was offering alignment and an uprising against the Turks in return for independence in all the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire, being quite precise in his definition of the territories and boundaries to be included... No commitments on the boundaries of the areas that would gain independence, and there would be no Arab uprising against the Turks" (Ross, 2004: 31).

Every detail of the negotiations within 1915-1916 was of great importance for further relations between Britain and the Arabs in the 1916-1930s. Yet, a number of things remain unclear up to now.

The Correspondence was published only in 1939 in spite of the requests of the British officials. For instance, Sir H. Samuel, British High Commissioner in Palestine in 1920-1925, and Sir E. Grey asked to publish McMahon's letters in 1923 (Kedourie, 1976: 248, 250: Parliamentary Papers, 1939, Cmd. 5974: Annex A, para. 16 and Enclosure in Annex A; Antonius, 1938: 181-182).

However, the British Government postponed the publication of the Correspondence. The denial of giving publicity to the Correspondence was used by the Arabs to their advantage. All over the Arab world the opinion was widely disseminated that McMahon's letters veiled something from the Arabs, particularly the fact that Palestine had been promised to them (Boyle, 2001: 1: Antonius, 1938: 180-181).

Although the Anglo-Hijazi dealings in 1915-1916 are widely described in historiography, it is worth mentioning what took place at that time.

Hussein bin 'Ali from the Hashimete clan was appointed as Sharif and Emir of Mecca in 1908 (Paris, 2003: 12: see also: Lazarev, 1960: 51). At that time the local authorities of Hijaz had strained relations with *valis*. The appointment of Vahib-bey as a new *vali* of Hijaz in February 1914 meant exacerbating the relations between the Porte and Mecca, for the Hashimetes wished to hold influence over other Hijazi tribes, and at the same time the Turks wanted to strengthen their position in Arabia, particularly in the Holy Places district. Thus, the real points at issue between the Sublime Porte and Mecca were control over the Red Sea coast, the local tribes, as well as the Holy Places and the ways of pilgrimage. All this explained wishes of Istanbul to continue constructing the Hijaz railway to Mecca.

R. Storrs, in 1915-1916 the Oriental Secretary in British Residency in Cairo, quoted the letter from Lord Kitchener, British Consul-General in Egypt then, to his private secretary Sir W. Tyrell, April 26, 1914. The letter concerned

Hussein's fears about Turkish influence on Hijaz: "...Sharīf Abdullah... He sent for Storrs who under my instructions told him the Arabs of the Hejaz could expect no encouragement from us and that our only interest in Arabia was the safety and comfort of Indian pilgrims.... The Sharīf seemed to be disappointed with the result of his visit to Constantinople and with the determination of the Turkish Government to push the railway on to Mecca which he saw would mean the economic death of the camel-owning population of Arabia.

It will be interesting to see developments as the Arabs seem to be much excited" (Storrs, 1939: 120, note).

Mecca is known to have initiated the dealings with the British representatives in Cairo. It was Abdullah who visited Cairo and met Lord Kitchener and R. Storrs in February and April 1914 (see: Paris, 2003: 22-23; Kedourie, 1976: 6-10 etc.).

Abdullah was trying to enlist the support of the British in Egypt in case of direct clash between Hussein and the Turks. Those meetings resulted in nothing, except for good feelings between Abdullah and R. Storrs (Storrs, 1939: 129).

All the researchers believe that it is R. Storrs who took the initiative in further dealings between Cairo and the Arabs of Hijaz. But in his memoirs R. Storrs himself found it hardly possible to estimate the Anglo-Hijazi contacts in 1914-1916.

Two circumstances contributed to further contacts between the parties. Certain circles of the British officials in Egypt, and R. Storrs was one of those persons, supposed that the Turks could attack Sinai Peninsular, and Hijaz could participate if the attack occurred (Storrs, 1939: 155).

It is R. Storrs who prepared all necessary papers to draw together the Hashimetes and the British of Cairo, but most probably it was done following Lord Kitchener's initiative. It is only Lord Kitchener who had had a draft of "an autonomous Arabia... between Teutonized Turkey, on the one hand, and Egypt and India on the other" before the war broke out (Hogarth, 1924: 120).

Offers made by the Oriental Secretary were accepted by his authorities and finally by Lord Kitchener, who was appointed as the war minister at that time. E. Kedourie mentions the paper "Appreciation of situation in Arabia" written by officers of the intelligence department in Cairo. The document is based on false evidence of the unity between all Arab rivals – Ibn Sa'ud of Nejd, the Idrisi of Asir, Imam Yahia of Yemen and the Sharif of Mecca (Kedourie, 1976: 13-14).

R. Storrs cited a telegram dated September 24, 1914, which was received by the Oriental Secretary. In this document Lord Kitchener approved of the offers to better the relations between Cairo and Mecca: "...To H. M.'s Representative in Cairo. Following from Lord Kitchener. Tell Storrs to send secret and carefully chosen messenger from me to Sharīf Abdullah to ascertain whether 'should present armed German influence in Constantinople coerce Sultan

against his will, and Sublime Port, to acts of aggression and war against Great Britain, he and his father and Arabs of Hejaz would be with us or against us” (Storrs, 1939: 156).

The British representatives were entrusted with similar tasks all over the Middle East. To carry out this commission the emissaries were sent to the most powerful tribe chiefs. Sir R. Storrs mentioned his agent Ali Asghar whom he had sent to Mecca and who returned on October 30, 1914 with Abdullah’s message to Cairo officials. E. Kedourie cites this message. “The people of the Hedjaz”, the Abdullah’s letter runs as follows, “will accept and be well satisfied with more close union with Great Britain and its Government”. Abdullah called for the protection of “the rights of our country and the rights of the person of His Highness our present Emir and Lord and the rights of his Emirate and its independence... against the Ottomans” (quoted from: Kedourie, 1976: 17).

On October 31, 1914, a draft letter from Lord Kitchener to Abdullah was received by the British Residency in Cairo. The next day, on November 1, 1914, a British war minister’s message was telegraphed to Hijaz. H. H. Kitchener began his letter writing about the beginning of war. Great Britain promised “not to intervene in any manner whatsoever, whether in things religious or otherwise”, and to recognise and respect “the sacred and unique office of the Amir Hussein”, as well as “independence, rights and privileges of the Sharifate against all external foreign aggression, in particular that of the Ottomans” if the Arab helped Great Britain in her war against the Turks. H. H. Kitchener made a suggestion that “the Caliphate at Mecca and Medina” should be “assumed” by “an Arab of true race” (quoted from: Kedourie, 1976: 19; see also: Storrs, 1939: 159).

Lord Kitchener’s letter became a basis for further dealings with Hijazi authorities. Meanwhile, the contacts were suspended, for the partners just took their time waiting for the development of military operations.

The correspondence between the British High Commissioner in Egypt Sir Henry McMahon and the Grand Sharif of Mecca was kept up from July 1915 up to March 1916 and influenced the situation in the wartime Middle East. Hussein was not able to resume the relations with the Porte. He also strived to be ahead of Ibn Sa’ud of Nejd, who was carrying out negotiations with the British. By that time Hussain had probably received permission to act on behalf of *al-Ahd* and *al-Fatat* secret societies (see: Antonius, 1938: 157-159).

By July 1915 the military operation in the Dardanelles ended in deadlock; the Arabia chiefs seemed to display loyalty towards the Porte; at the same time the Turks planned a new attack on the Suez Canal; and the British lost a channel of information from Arabia after the death of Captain W. I. Shakespear, an agent of the Government of India, serving under Ibn Sa’ud. Thus, the Englishmen found themselves in some kind of cul-de-sac. All this contributed to the negotiations between Mecca and the British officials in Cairo.

Probably, Lord Kitchener's concept of the future Middle East was realised by Cairo officials. It is rather difficult to record the details of that concept because of few facts on it. One could draw an outline of that concept only taking into account the fragments of evidence provided by Professor D. G. Hogarth and official despatches of that time which are cited by Prof. E. Kedourie.

It is possible to state clearly only three elements of what Lord Kitchener referred to as his "Middle Eastern project". First, H. H. Kitchener, British Governor General of Egypt and the Sudan in 1911-1914, as Prof. Hogarth gives it, "was... contemplating the possibility of autonomous Arabia between Teutonized Turkey, on the one hand, and Egypt and India on the other" (Hogarth, 1926: 120). Second, H. H. Kitchener strove to prevent *jihad*, which, he thought, would instigate the movement of the Moslems against the Englishmen in India and in the Middle East (Hogarth, 1926: 120). One of Lord Kitchener's trusted, General Sir J. Maxwell, the then G. O. C. in Egypt, providing information on al-Faruqi's interrogations focused Lord Kitchener's attention on October 12, 1915: "If their [members' of the Arab Party] overtures are rejected or a reply is delayed any longer the Arab party will go over to the enemy and work with them, which would mean stirring up religious feelings at once and might well result in a genuine Jihad" (quoted from: Kedourie, 1976: 78).

Third, Lord Kitchener appeared to support the Arabs in their movement against the Turks under the British protection.

On June 30, 1915, a committee, considering Britain's interests in Asiatic Turkey and presided by Sir Maurice de Bunsen, presented a report which could clear up some more details of Lord Kitchener's "Middle Eastern project". The Bunsen Committee report stated that Britain aspired to carry out promises given to the Arabs (Kedourie, 1976: 59).

One element in the H. H. Kitchener's "Middle Eastern plan" remains unclear. It concerns the way how Lord Kitchener saw the Khalifat. It is difficult to find out what Lord Kitchener meant when wrote about the Khalifat in his documents.

Lord Kitchener's dreams did not come true. And there seems to be three reasons for it. First, Arab policy founders in Great Britain meant different things under the terms of the Correspondence, e. g. "Arabia", "Syria", "Khalifat", etc. (see: Kedourie, 1976).

Second, there was not unity in policy making in the Middle East among those founders. Till the early 1920s two British institutions supervised the Middle East. They are Foreign Office and India Office. It is natural that these two institutions were rivals. And it was only Lord Kitchener – the man of

authority and dignity—who could shape the policy on the Middle East and impose his views.

During the written negotiations between Cairo and Mecca both the sides put their promises in such words that the negotiations finally turned out a “zero sum game”. All the terms were so generally formulated that each party understood them in their own way.

As a result, the British High Commissioner on behalf of Great Britain guaranteed “the independence of Arabia and its inhabitants”, as well as their “approval of the Arab Khalifate when it should be proclaimed” (Letter No. 2 from Sir H. McMahon to the Sharif of Mecca, August 30, 1915).

It is not possible to conclude whether the Sharif of Mecca accepted the terms of the proclamation of the Khalifat. The official text of the letter (the text published in 1939) from Sharif Husayn, September 9, 1915, is as follows: “May God have mercy on the Khalifate and comfort Moslems in it”. Note 6 to the official publication of the Correspondence, 1939, runs as follows: “As for the Caliphate, God have mercy on its soul and comfort the Moslems for their loss”. This is a remark made by G. Antonius, Secretary-General of the Arab delegations to the Conference on Palestine of 1939 (see: Antonius, 1938: 417).

Britain promised the protection for Arabia and “guarantees” to the Moslem Holy Places “against external aggression” (Letter No. 4 from Sir H. McMahon, October 24, 1915). The Arabs agreed to recognise the treaties of England with the Arab chiefs.

Sir H. McMahon followed the direction given by Lord Kitchener. Only after Muhammad Sharif al-Faruqi, an officer deserted from the Ottoman army, mentioned above, had been conveyed to the intelligence in Cairo and interrogated there, McMahon changed the line in the negotiations. Faruqi (probably he was Hussain’s proxy) could convince McMahon that the British had to make a decision on the Arab question as soon as possible. After that McMahon’s letter, dated October 24, 1915, appeared, and it said about an undertaking given to the Arabs by the British.

Also there was a formula in the Correspondence which would be thoroughly investigated afterwards. The letter dated October 24, 1915, runs as follows: “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”.

Finally, both the sides agreed to postpone the consideration of the status of vilayets Beirut and Aleppo, the “northern parts and their coasts” (as they were called in letter No. 6, from Sir H. McMahon, December 14, 1915).

The consideration of the status of Bagdad was also delayed (letter No. 6 from Sir H. McMahon, December 14, 1915, and letter No. 8, January 25, 1916). The negotiators mentioned Basra as well, but its status remained unclear.

The negotiators aimed high. The British wanted to stir up unrest on the territory of the Ottoman Empire in order to draw off the Ottoman forces from the Suez and take time. The Sharif of Mecca attempted to create his own Empire even if it would be created within four Syrian towns-Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo. At least Hussein mentioned these four towns via his man Muhammad Sharif al-Farouki.

It is necessary to draw attention to the fact that from the beginning of the Anglo-Hijazi contacts each side did not regard its counterpart as an equal but as an inferior party. For the British the Arabs were “uncivilised” people. T. E. Lawrence spoke about “a manufactured people.” (Lawrence, 2001, chapter 2), or as E. Karsh and I. Karsh give it, a “potential junior partner” (Karsh E., Karsh I., 2003: 242), and it was not necessary to discuss the essential issues of post-war settlement with them. Just as for the Arabs, the British were infidels, and the Moslems saw no need to discuss any issues with *gâvurlar*.

Since 1916 the McMahon–Hussein Correspondence has become the subject of consideration for both the Arabs and the British. E. Kedourie thoroughly examines all the interpretations which were made by the British officials as well as some Arab leaders. Thus, there is no need to describe all of them now.

It is worth reminding that all the interpretations were used to accomplish specific political tasks. For instance, the interpretation made by the Arab Bureau in April 1916 concerns British claims on Palestine (Kedourie, 1976: 204-205) against French ones on the whole territory of Syria. The political task of both the Arabs and the British concerned their claims to Palestine.

Almost in every interpretation of the McMahon – Hussein correspondence the phrase was coined resourcefully by Sir H. McMahon, it is “portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo”. The expression has been already mentioned in the article.

The interpreters of the Correspondence made some mistakes and created clichés which were copied from one reading to another. It should be noted that the absence of the Arabic copies, haste in which the interpretations were prepared, and probably interpreters’ disinclination to investigate all the materials were the causes of those false readings. For instance, those false readings referred to the letter from Sir H. McMahon dated October 24, 1915 as the main one in the Correspondence.

Also, it should be mentioned that up to now a lot of things in the Correspondence interpretations remain unclear. There are some examples.

In 1922 the interpretation of the Correspondence by the Palestine Arab Delegation headed by Mousa Kazim al-Husayni appeared (Parliamentary papers, 1939, Cmd. 1700). The arguments in the Palestinians’ position, however, have not changed since that time. On June 3, 1922, the official of the Colonial Office Sir J. E. Shuckburgh sent the draft statement on British policy

in Palestine to the Zionist Organisation (encl. in letter No. 5). It is generally known that in that statement the British Government excluded Palestine from the area of independence of the Arabs, since this area had been reserved by Sir H. McMahon within "the portions of Syria lying to the west of the district of Damascus". But in the letter dated June 17, 1922, the Palestine Delegation strongly objected to the formula "vilayet of Damascus", which was not in the draft of the Colonial Secretary memorandum. From whence the term "vilayet Damascus" arose in the Palestinians' letter dated June 17, 1922 (letter No. 6)?

Replying to the Colonial Office inquiry on March 12, 1922 Sir H. McMahon presented the arguments why he had not mentioned Palestine in his letters of 1915-1916 (Karsh E., Karsh I., 2003: 238; Friedman, 1970: 108; Kedourie, 1976: 247-249). But why did the British Government never use McMahon's letter dated March 12, 1922, to defend its official position (Karsh E., Karsh I., 2003: 238)?

Two main lines are distinguished in contemporary historiography of the Middle East. They are the "standard" and the "revised" lines. It is worth remarking some disparities between the two lines of historiography concerning the McMahon-Husein Correspondence.

It is necessary to state that the clichés mentioned above appeared in the Correspondence interpretations and were borrowed by "standard historiography". D. J. Hogarth, Amin Said, and G. Antonius were among the founders of this line.

In "standard historiography" the Anglo-Arab relations in 1914-1939 are regarded as the "breach of faith" and "double-dealing".

Prof. E. Kedourie cited A. J. Toynbee's memorandum, December, 1918 (at that time A. J. Toynbee was a clerk in the Information Department of the Foreign Office): "We have pledged ourselves to King Hussein that Mesopotamia shall be 'Arab' and 'independent', subject to special measures of British administrative control. There is no controversy about this control: it is accepted by King Hussein, by the people of Mesopotamia, and by all British Authorities that are concerned in the settlement of the Middle East. But Captain Wilson proposes, in effect, to take advantage of this control to isolate Mesopotamia from the other Arab countries, and deliberately to break up the Arab National Movement.

This would clearly a breach of faith with King Hussein..." (Kedourie, 1976: 215).

Prof. A. J. Toynbee also in his dispute with I. Friedman in 1970 stated that although McMahon's pledges in the letter of October 24, 1915, "had no juridical validity", "yet an undertaking may be morally valid, even if it does not have the force of law" (Toynbee, 1970: 193).

Lord F. H. Maugham, Lord-Chancellor of England, declared during the Conference on Palestine, February 24, 1939: "...His Majesty's Government must make it clear that they repudiate very strongly any suggestion of breach of faith on the part of their predecessors or of themselves" (Parliamentary Papers, 1939, Cmd. 5974. Annex B "The 'McMahon-Husain' Correspondence", para. 43).

G. Antonius wrote in the **Arab Awakening: The story of the Arab National Movement** (1938): "The Sykes-Picot Agreement is a shocking document. It is not only the product of greed at its worst, that is to say, of greed allied to suspicion and so leading to stupidity: it also stands out as a startling piece of double-dealing" (Antonius, 1938: 248).

"But more serious", argued G. Antonius, "...was the breach of faith". And then he went on: "The Agreement had been negotiated and concluded without the knowledge of the Sharif Husayn, and it continued provisions which were in direct conflict with the terms of Sir Henry McMahon's compact with him. Worse still, the fact of its conclusion was dishonestly concealed from him because it was realised that, were he to have been apprised of it, he would have unhesitatingly denounced his alliance with Great Britain" (Antonius, 1938: 249).

S. S. Boyle in her work **Betrayal of Palestine: The Story of George Antonius** (2001) wrote: "His story [the life of G. Antonius] is that of betrayal by empires and individuals – betrayal not only of promises made to Arabs but also of the universal moral code of fairness, justice, and truth" (Boyle, 2001: xv).

And below: "The British double-dealing that ruptured Arab trust began during the war. Although the abnormality of war might explain much opportunism, unscrupulous behavior, and conflicting judgments, this is not the whole story. For the double-dealing Antonius witnessed was not simply blind to Arab suffering at the hands of the empire and to Arab friendship and alliance with Britain – but far more egregious, a matter of what Antonius described as 'greed' and 'stupidity'. The post-war problems began with European leaders adopting an amoral conqueror's code: Satisfying imperial appetites meant breaking promises and betraying Arab allies. The resultant culture of lies and deceit would haunt Middle East policy-making for generations" (Boyle, 2001: 57).

These clichés stuck deeply in the minds of English political élité. In an interview, reproduced by the BBC on November 15, 2002, Mr. J. Straw, then UK Foreign Secretary, declared: "The Balfour declaration and the contradictory assurances which were being given to Palestinians in private at the same time as they were being given to the Israelis-again, an interesting history for us, but not an honourable one" (British empire blamed..., 2002).

I. Friedman and E. Kedourie seem to have been the first who took the deductions of the "traditionalists" sceptically. It was Prof. I. Friedman who endeavoured to prove that Palestine had not been within McMahon's undertakings (see: Friedman, 1970). It was E. Kedourie who proved that British

political élité had had “a corrosive feeling of embarrassment” and that the Correspondence itself “did... demoralize British Middle-Eastern policy” (Kedourie, 1976: 319). (Prof. E. Kedourie was one of the founders of “revised historiography”.)

One more disparity is the thesis proposed by the “traditionalists” that the “Sykes – Picot Agreement” of 1916 on Asiatic Turkey partition contradicts McMahon’s promises given to the Arabs.

The terms of the so-called “Sykes – Picot Agreement” are widely known, and there is no need to remind them. The author of this paper has already mentioned the agreement on Asiatic Turkey partition or the “Sykes – Georges-Picot – Sazonov Agreement” (see: Shevelyov, 2001).

In spite of the inference that McMahon’s undertakings and the “Sykes – Picot Agreement” contradict, the authors hardly confirm this contradiction. Not saying about some “conqueror’s code” mentioned above, it is G. Antonius who shows why he regards the agreement as “shocking documents” (Antonius, 1938: 248).

First, the agreement on Asiatic Turkey partition “cut upon the Arab Rectangle in such a manner as to place artificial obstacles in the way of unity” (Antonius, 1938: 248). G. Antonius also states that the agreement was “provided for a topsy-turvy political structure in which the first were to come last and the last first” (Antonius, 1938: 249).

Second, he calls “absurdity” the fact that Syria and Iraq as regions “politically more developed and mature” than “inland regions” were to be “placed under a régime of direct foreign administration”. Inland Syria was “to form independent Arab States” (Antonius, 1938: 249).

Third, according to him, the “Sykes – Picot Agreement” is a “breach of faith”.

For “revised historiography” the Anglo-Arab relations are considered a competition. At first, Prof. E. Kedourie refers to a “crude gambit”, concerning, for instance, the letter from Hussein to Sir Sayyid Ali al-Mirghani, a Moslem leader in the Sudan and a trusted of Sir R. Wingate, October 1915 (Kedourie, 1976: 72).

Then Prof. E. Karsh and I. Karsh wrote in 2003 about the Anglo-Sharifian dealings: “It was a process of intricate bargaining in which both parties pitched for the highest possible prize: Hussein for the largest empire he could secure for himself and his family; McMahon for harnessing the entire ‘Arab Nation’ to the Allied cause” (Karsh E&I., 2003: 235).

It can also be said that the Anglo-Arab dealings resembled a match.

The authors of “revised historiography” do not find any contradiction between McMahon’s undertakings and the “Sykes – Picot Agreement”. According to E. Karsh and I. Karsh, “the historiographical debate about the

Sykes – Picot Agreement has been a tempest in a teacup” (Karsh E&I., 2003: 247).

The negotiations of 1916 between British and French representatives, Sir M. Sykes (also a man of Lord Kitchener) and F. Georges-Picot, which were considered to be Asia Minor experts, were the continuation of the dealings with the Sharif of Mecca in 1915-1916.

The negotiations dealt with “an independent Arab State or a Confederation of Arab States”, with the “districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo” to be given to the Arabs. Meanwhile, in McMahon letters there was mentioned a draft project of the area of “Arab independence”.

E. Kedourie proves that before the Bolsheviks published the terms of the “Sykes – Picot Agreement” Sharif Husayn had already known its terms after the meetings with Sir M. Sykes and F. Georges-Picot in May 1917 (Kedourie, 1976: 163-167). Therefore the Sharif of Mecca was acquainted with the agreement drafted by the English and French officials.

Nevertheless, Sharif Husayn denied it every time as he wanted to take advantage of it. For example, in the mid-1918 Hussein inquired his proxy, as Sir R. Wingate informed the Foreign Office, about the details of the agreement on Turkey partition. Hussein seemed to have known about the agreement from a French newspaper (Kedourie, 1976: 166, 197).

Moreover, Hussein knew about the terms of the Balfour Declaration, 1917. As it can be concluded Hussein willingly accepted the fact that the “Jewish national home” was to be built in Palestine.

In 1938 G. Antonius unveiled the terms of the message Cdr. D. G. Hogarth delivered to King Hussein in January 1918 (Antonius, 1938: 267-269). The message was also published among the documents of the joint Anglo-Arab Committee at the Palestine Round Table Conference (**Parliamentary papers, 1939**, Cmd. 5974. Annex F). Hussein said nothing against the determination of the British Government “that no obstacle should be put in the way of the realization” of Jews returning to Palestine. In February of that year Hussein appealed to his followers that he had been assured by the British “that the settlement of Jews in Palestine would not conflict with Arab independence in that territory”. In March 1918 he also initiated an article in Mecca’s official “*al-Qibla*” applying to Arabs in Palestine “to welcome the Jews as brethren and co-operate with them for the common welfare” (Antonius, 1938: 269; see also: Friedman, 1970: 117). At the same time, Hussein spurred some Syrian notables in Cairo to protest against the Balfour Declaration (Friedman, 1970: 117).

The facts just mentioned prove that in the diplomatic game in the Middle East the Grand Sharif of Mecca defeated the British. It is worthwhile reminding one more example.

The Arabic original texts, which were sent to the Sharif of Mecca from Cairo in 1915-1916, were lost. This fact was found out only in April 1917 (Kedourie, 1976: 156-157). Their absence was confirmed also in 1919. Till now it remains unclear why the Arabic drafts disappeared (probably it was a blunder committed by R. Storrs).

Hussein seems to have taken this fact to his own advantage and bluffed. He had the Arabic copies of McMahon's letters but he did not allow either Colonel C. E. Wilson in April 1917, nor H. Goldie in March 1919, both British agents in Jeddah, to have a look at the documents. Only C. E. Vickery, British agent in Jeddah too, was able to obtain some Arabic copies in 1919. Colonel C. E. Vickery described this occasion in his letter to *The Times* on February 21, 1939 (Documents relating..., 1939: 18-19).

E. Kedourie thinks that C. E. Vickery copied four letters of the Correspondence, dated August 30, October 24, December 14, 1915, and March 10, 1916 (Kedourie, 1976: 227). But up to now no one knows whether the British had the Arabic copies of other letters because the official publication of 1939 was prepared based not only on the Arabic originals but also on Sir H. McMahon's drafts (see: Parliamentary Papers, 1939, Cmd. 5957, Explanatory Note [to the official publication]).

For thirty-three years the British had to defend themselves, for the Arabs challenged one of the essential principles of the Mandate for Palestine – a creation of the Jewish national home.

The match between London and the Arabs seems to have been the success of "the Arab cause". The sequence of failures in British imperial policy resulted in unrest in the colonies in 1920-1930s. Both Arab élité and the masses were able to unite namely in struggle against the Jewish national home.

In 1939 the Arab leaders tried their best to prove once again that the British had promised Palestine to the Grand Sharif of Mecca, hence the Jewish national home was illegitimate. The disturbances in 1936-1939 demonstrated the crisis of British policy in Palestine. The Arab leaders used this fact to their own advantage, as well as the disappearance of the Arabic original letters, and the resignation of the main actors of the negotiations of 1915-1916, e. g. Sir H. McMahon, G. F. Clayton, Sir R. Wingate, Hussein himself, and naturally Lord H. H. Kitchener. The Arab policy was very well thought-out.

The documents of the joint Anglo-Arab committee for consideration of the Correspondence illustrate the struggle of the Arabs against Jewish Palestine. This can be proved by the following lines: "There is no room for doubt that Palestine was in fact and in intention included by both parties to the McMahon-Husain Correspondence in the area of Arab independence. This is an abundantly plain from the terms of the Correspondence itself and is, moreover,

borne out by the evidence of the historical background” (Parliamentary Papers, 1939, Cmd. 5974. Report of the joint Anglo-Arab committee, para. 12 a).

In March 1939, after the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence had been given publicity by the British Government, the Jewish Agency for Palestine published the brochure **Documents relating to the McMahon Letters**. This collection of documents comprises various declarations, interviews, and statements of British officials and Arab representatives of 1917-1938. The collection begins with the Balfour Declaration, November 2, 1917, and has as its ending the quotations from a manuscript copy of T. E. Lawrence’s **Seven Pillars of Wisdom** as well as from the edition of this book published in 1935.

It is necessary to point out that Colonel Lawrence gave rather contradictory assessments of the British policy towards the Arabs at that period. For example, in chapter 122 of his **Seven Pillars of Wisdom** he wrote:

“...Anyone who pushed through to success a rebellion of the weak against their masters must come out of it so stained in estimation that afterward nothing in the world would make him feel clean.” (Lawrence, 2001: chapter 122).

At the same time he affirmed in a “draft preface to an abridgement of the Oxford Text” of the book: “I do not wish to publish secret documents, nor to make long explanations: but must put on record my conviction that England is out of the Arab affair with clear hands” (Documents relating..., 1939: 19-20), and in his letter to Prof. W. Yale, October 22, 1929: “It is my deliberate opinion that the Winston Churchill settlement of 1921-1922 (in which I shared) honourably fulfils the whole of the promises we made to the Arabs, in so far as the so-called British spheres are concerned” (Documents relating..., 1939: 20).

Based on these messages the Jewish Agency put its position clearly:

“Had any promises been contained in these letters such as the Arabs now allege, and had claims been raised on that bases at the Peace Conference, even then an international Treaty and an international Mandate would cancel the legal validity of previous declarations and agreements. But from the documents published below, emerges the fact that during the crucial years 1917-1921 no claims to Palestine were raised by the Arab representatives on the basis of the McMahon correspondence. Indeed, they did in various ways explicitly agree to Palestine being treated differently from Arab territories” (**Documents relating...**, 1939: 4).

In conclusion it is necessary to note one aspect which was insufficiently explored. It concerns the role of Sir Henry McMahon in the Anglo-Arab negotiations of 1915-1916. Surprisingly, the researchers have the opinion that Sir Henry McMahon’s activity was rather mediocre, but this thing has not been proved. Only E. Kedourie does not express it openly, trying to analyse the recollections of the men who performed their duties together with him (Kedourie, 1976: 34-37).

Sir Henry McMahon was appointed British High Commissioner in Egypt in 1914 after Lord H. H. Kitchener had occupied the post of war minister. But at the same time Lord Kitchener continued and wished to continue controlling the Middle East. From the beginning of the war Lord Kitchener succeeded in it via reliable persons – men who were faithful to him. They were General Sir J. Maxwell, G. F. Clayton, the Sudan agent in Cairo and head of the military intelligence, Sir R. Wingate, Governor-General of the Sudan and the sirdar of the Egyptian army, R. Storrs who had served under Lord Kitchener's command, and Sir A. H. McMahon himself sent to Egypt from India.

It is essential to record that before his appointment to the post of British High Commissioner in Egypt he had already had experience of written negotiations with local clans' representatives in the East. In March 1914 he conducted negotiations with Lonchen Shatra¹ by exchanging letters. Those negotiations resulted in the Simla Convention, July 3, 1914. It was Sir Henry McMahon who before his dealings with the Sarif of Mecca had drawn a line on the map, later called as the McMahon Line (see: Article 9 of the Simla Convention 1914)².

It is also worth mentioning the fact that Sir Henry McMahon had four decorations for his service – G. C. M. G., G. C. V. O., K. C. I. E., and C. S. I. It emphasizes the fact that Sir Henry McMahon was not a mediocre diplomat. Incidentally, Sir A. H. McMahon was also in the list of recipient of the Hijazi Order of *al-Nahda* (the Order of Renaissance), awarded on March 8, 1920, First Class Order. And it was C. E. Vickery who also was awarded by the Order of *al-Nahda* on January 16, 1920 (Owain Raw-Rees, 2003).

Sir Henry McMahon was appointed to the post, as E. Kedourie demonstrated, for carrying out Lord Kitchener's policy in the Middle East. And one of the key element of this policy was "the Hejaz question" that is the negotiations with the Grand Sharif of Mecca.

All the recollections of Sir Henry McMahon diplomatic activity are quite contradictory. E. Kedourie cites Lord Ch. Hardinge, then Viceroy of India, Sir Ronald Graham and Mervyn Herbert, both British officials in Egypt, Sir Valentine Chirol, a journalist, etc. (Kedourie, 1976: 35-37). All the men supposed that Sir Henry McMahon was not involved in the Egyptian affairs and was involved only in "the Hijaz question".

¹ **Lonchen Ga-den Shatra Pal-jor Dorje as it is in Simla Convention 1914.**

² Article 9 of the Simla Convention runs as follows: "For the purpose of the present Convention the borders of Tibet, and the Boundary Between Outer and Inner Tibet, Shall be as Shown in Red and Blue Respectively on The Map Attached Hereto."

"Nothing in the present Convention shag be held to prejudice the existing rights of the Tibetan Government in Inner Tibet, which include the power to select and appoint the high priests of monasteries and to retain full control in all matters affecting religious institutions" (See the text of the Simla Convention on: <http://www.tibetjustice.org/>. See also: *Rossiya i Tibet*, 2005: 205-208).

It is worth reminding some more evidence. Sir R. Storrs in the memoirs of 1939 wrote that the “Egyptian atmosphere” was “foreign” to Sir H. McMahon, but

“Yet all who were privileged to work under him were struck with admiration for his faculty of making up his mind on great matters, of courageously taking decisions and no less tenaciously maintaining them; and I noted that he never once obtruded Indian repercussions or other irrelevancies into major Near-Eastern issues” (Storrs, 1939: 201-202).

T. E. Lawrence who used to make no secret of what he thought about people wrote in his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* about Sir Henry McMahon’s “shrewd insight and tried, experienced mind” (Lawrence, 2002: chapter 6).

It seems interesting to quote an abstract from a confidential letter of K. D. Nabokov, Russian Consul-General in Calcutta, to A. A. Neratov, deputy foreign minister, August 19, 1913:

“As I have previously reported to Your Excellency, it is extremely difficult for me to receive any information on the British activity in Tibet directly from the foreign secretary [that is Sir A. H McMahon]. Sir Henry McMahon, being so courteous and attentive to me, however does not miss an opportunity to emphasize that I have no diplomatic functions. He also refuses to discuss political events or undertakings of the Government of India and obstinately insists that all the information about these issues is to be given by London. Thus, I have to form my own opinion about everything that is happening in Tibet from newspapers or from conversations with people, who have no panic fears, as every official from the local foreign department does, to reveal a secret” (**Rossiya i Tibet**, 2005: 199).³

Thus, Sir H. McMahon’s diplomatic activity was not ordinary or middling. It is Sir H. McMahon who was one of the trusted officials who had to continue Lord Kitchener’s Middle Eastern policy and to fulfil his project. It is Sir H. McMahon who arranged dealings with Hijaz taken full advantage of the Sharifian position before and during the war. It is Sir H. McMahon who coined the very phrase “portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo” which both the sides have been trying to interpret since 1916.

It is necessary to state that the Anglo-Arab relations throughout 1914-1939 resembled a match, and the wording of the partners’ arguments was rather vague.

Sharif Husayn seems to have bluffed. In response the British had to agree with him. They accepted the claims of the Arabs on Palestine.

³ Translated from Russian by the author of this paper.

In 1916 after the written negotiations between Cairo and Mecca it seemed that the British had won the diplomatic match – Husayn was involved in the war against the Ottoman rule in the Middle East. But in 1939 the British gave in to the Arabs thus proclaimed a new policy of Jewish immigration restriction. The diplomatic win at the beginning of the dealings in 1914-1916 seems to be Sir McMahon's merit who conducted negotiations with Sharif Husayn.

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