

Arab-British Alliance against Ottomans and its Consequences With Respect to the Disunity of the Muslim World in the 20th Century

Introduction

(July 14, 1915 to January 25, 1916)

The letters included in this document represent the contents of the communications that was established between the Arabs and the British with regard to Arab support of the British war against the Ottoman Turks during World War I.

The Arabs have always turned to these letters as the basis for their understanding that in exchange for an Arab uprising in support of the British war effort, they would be given their independence. The British emphasized that the Arabs would be given their independence from the Ottoman Turks and that with British help after the war would establish their own pro British governments.

That letter is the letter from McMahon to Sherif Hussein dated Oct. 24, 1915 that was later made public by the London Times in 1937 when the Arabs charged that the British had made one promise to the Arabs under the McMahon/Hussein correspondence between July 1915 and Jan. 1916, but had all along planned to break those promises under secret discussions between the British and the French in the Sykes Picot agreement signed in May 1916 several months later.

July 14, 1915

To His Honour: Whereas the whole of the Arab nation without any exception have decided in these last years to live, and to accomplish their freedom, and grasp the reins of their administration both in theory and practice; and whereas they have found and felt that it is to the interest of the Government of Great Britain to support them and aid them to the attainment of their firm and lawful intention (which are based upon the maintenance of the honour and dignity of their life) without any ulterior motives whatsoever unconnected with this object;

And whereas it is to their (the Arabs') interest also to prefer the assistance of the Government of Great Britain in consideration of their geographical position and economic interests, and also of the attitude of the above mentioned Government, which is known to both nations and therefore need not be emphasized;

For these reasons the Arab nation see fit to limit themselves, as time is short, to asking the Government of Great Britain, if it should think fit, for the approval, through her deputy or representative, of the following fundamental propositions, leaving out all things considered secondary in comparison with these, so that it may prepare all means necessary for attaining this noble purpose, until such time as it finds occasion for making the actual negotiations:

FIRSTLY, England to acknowledge the independence of the Arab countries, bounded on the North by Mersina and Adana up to 37 degrees of latitude, on which degree fall Birijik, Urfa, Mardin, Midiat, Jerizat (Ibn `Umar), Amadia, up to the border of Persia; on the east by the borders of Persia up to the Gulf of Basra; on the South by the Indian Ocean, with the

exception of the position of Aden to remain as it is; on the west by the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea up to Mersina. England to approve of the proclamation of an Arab Khalifate of Islam.

SECONDLY, the Arab Government of the Sherif to acknowledge that England shall have the preference in all economic enterprises in the Arab countries whenever conditions of enterprises are otherwise equal.

THIRDLY, for the security of this Arab independence and the certainty of such preference of economic enterprises, both high contracting parties to offer mutual assistance, to the best ability of their military and naval forces, to face any foreign Power which may attack either party. Peace not to be decided without agreement of both parties.

FOURTHLY, if one of the parties enters upon an aggressive conflict, the other party to assume a neutral attitude, and in case of such party wishing the other to join forces, both to meet and discuss the conditions.

FIFTHLY, England to acknowledge the abolition of foreign privileges in the Arab countries, and to assist the Government of the Sherif in an International Convention for confirming such abolition.

SIXTHLY, article 3 and 4 of this treaty to remain in vigour for fifteen years, and if either wishes it to be renewed, one year's notice before lapse of treaty to be given.

Consequently, and as the whole of the Arab nation have (praise be to God) agreed and united for the attainment, at all costs and finally, of this noble object, they beg the Government of Great Britain to answer them positively or negatively in a period of thirty days after receiving this intimation; and if this period should lapse before they receive an answer, they reserve to themselves complete freedom of action. Moreover, we (the Sherif's family) will consider ourselves free in word and deed from the bonds of our previous declaration which we made through Ali Effendi [The Sherif's messenger and aide].

Hussein Ibn Ali, Sherif of Mecca

August 30, 1915

To His Highness the Sherif Hussein:

We have the honour to thank you for your frank expressions of the sincerity of your feeling towards England. We rejoice, moreover, that your Highness and your people are of one opinion that Arab interests are English interests and English Arab. To this intent we confirm to you the terms of Lord Kitchener's message, which reached you by the hand of Ali Effendi, and in which it was stated clearly our desire for the independence of Arabia and its inhabitants, together with our approval of the Arab Khalifate when it should be proclaimed. We declare once more that His Majesty's Government would welcome the resumption of the Khalifate by an Arab of true race. With regard to the questions of limits and boundaries, it would appear to be premature to consume our time in discussing such details in the heat of the war, and while, in many portions of them, the Turk is up to now in effective occupation; especially as we have learned, with surprise and regret, that some of the Arabs in those very parts, far from assisting us, are neglecting this their supreme opportunity and are lending their arms to the German and the Turk, to the new despoiler and the old oppressor.

A. H. McMahon

September 9, 1915

With great cheerfulness and delight I received your letter dated the 19th Shawal, 1333 [August 30, 1915] and have given it great consideration and regard, in spite of the impression I received from it of ambiguity and its tone of coldness and hesitation with regard to our essential point.

...Your excellency will pardon me and permit me to say clearly that the coolness and hesitation which you have displayed in the question of the limits and boundaries by saying that the discussion of these at present is of no use and is a loss of time, and that they are still in the hands of the Government which is ruling them, &c., might be taken to infer an estrangement of something of the sort.

As the limits and boundaries demanded are not those of one person whom we should satisfy and with whom we should discuss them after the war is over, but our peoples have seen that the life of their new proposal is bound at least by these limits and their word is united on this.

Therefore, they have found it necessary first to discuss this point with the Power in whom they now have their confidence and trust as a final appeal, viz, the illustrious British Empire.

Their reason for this union and confidence is mutual interest, the necessity of regulating territorial divisions and the feelings of their inhabitants, so that they may know how to base their future and life, so not to meet her [England?] or any of her Allies in opposition to their resolution which would produce a contrary issue, which God forbid.

For the object is, honourable Minister, the truth which is established on a basis which guarantees the essential sources of life in future.

Yet within these limits they have not included places inhabited by a foreign race. It is a vain show of words and titles.

I am confident that your Excellency will not doubt that it is not I personally who am demanding of these limits which include only our race, but that they are all proposals of the people, who, in short, believe they are necessary for economic life.

With reference to your remark in your letter above mentioned that some of our people are still doing their utmost in promoting the interest of Turkey, your goodness [literally "perfectness"] would not permit you to make this an excuse for the tone of coldness and hesitation with regard to our demands, demands which I cannot admit that you, as a man of sound opinion, will deny to be necessary for our existence; may, they are the essential essence of our life, material and moral.

In order to reassure your Excellency I can declare that the whole country, together with those who you say are submitting themselves to Turco German orders, are all waiting the result of these negotiations, which are dependent only on your refusal or acceptance of the question of the limits and on your declaration of safeguarding their religion first and then the rest of rights from any harm or danger.

Hussein Ibn Ali, Sherif of Mecca

November 5, 1915

1. In order to facilitate an agreement and to render a service to Islam, and at the same time to avoid all that may cause Islam troubles and hardships seeing moreover that we have great consideration for the distinguished qualities and dispositions of the Government of Great

Britain we renounce our insistence on the inclusion of the Vilayets of Mersina and Adana in the Arab Kingdom. But the two Vilayets of Aleppo and Beirut and their seacoasts are purely Arab Vilayets, and there is no difference between a Moslem and a Christian Arab: they are both descendants of one forefather.

We Moslems will follow the footsteps of the Commander of the Faithful Omar ibn Khattab, and other Khalifs succeeding him, who ordained in the laws of the Moslem Faith that Moslems should treat the Christians as they treat themselves. He, Omar, declared with reference to Christians: "They will have the same privileges and submit to the same duties as ourselves." They will thus enjoy their civic rights in as much as it accords with the general interests of the whole nation.

2. As the Iraqi Vilayets are parts of the pure Arab Kingdom, and were in fact the seat of its Government in the time of Ali ibn Abu Talib, and in the time of all the Khalifs who succeeded him; and as in them began the civilisation of the Arabs, and as their towns were the first towns built in Islam where the Arab power became so great; therefore they are greatly valued by all Arabs far and near, and their traditions cannot be forgotten by them. Consequently, we cannot satisfy the Arab nations or make them submit to give us such a title to nobility. But in order to render an accord easy, and taking into consideration the assurances mentioned in the fifth article of your letter to keep and guard our mutual interests in that country as they are one and the same, for all these reasons we might agree to leave under the British troops without the rights of either party being prejudiced thereby (especially those of the Arab nation: which interests are to it economic and vital), and against a suitable sum paid as compensation to the Arab Kingdom for the period of occupation, in order to meet the expenses which every new kingdom is bound to support; at the same time respecting your agreements with the Sheikhs of those districts, and especially those which are essential.

3. In your desire to hasten the movement we see not only advantages, but grounds of apprehension. The first of these grounds is the fear of the blame of the Moslems of the opposite party (as has already happened in the past), who would declare that we have revolted against Islam and ruined its forces. The second is that, standing in the face of Turkey which is supported by all the forces of Germany, we do not know what Great Britain and her allies would do if one of the Entente Powers were weakened and obliged to make peace. We fear that the Arab nation will then be left in the face of Turkey together with her allies, but we would not at all mind if we were to face the Turks alone. Therefore it is necessary to take these points into consideration in order to avoid a peace being concluded in which the parties concerned may decide the fate of our peoples as if we had taken part in the war without making good our claims to official consideration.

4. The Arab nation has a strong belief that after this war is over the Turks under German influence will direct their efforts to provoke the Arabs and violate their rights, both material and moral, to wipe out their nobility and honour and reduce them to utter submission as they are determined to ruin them entirely. The reasons for the slowness shown in our direction have already been stated.

5. When the Arabs know the Government of Great Britain is their ally who will not leave them to themselves at the conclusion of peace in the face of Turkey and Germany, and that she will support and will effectively defend them, then to enter the war at once will, no doubt, be in conformity with the general interests of the Arabs.

6. Our letter dated the 29th Shawal, 1333 [September 9, 1915], saves us the trouble of repeating our opinions as to articles 3 and 4 of your honoured last letter regarding administration, Government advisers and officials, especially as you have declared, exalted

Minister, that you will not interfere with internal affairs.

Hussein Ibn Ali, Sherif of Mecca

December 14, 1915

To Sherif Hussein,

I am grateful to observe that you agree to the exclusion of the districts of Mersina and Adana from boundaries of the Arab territories.

I also note with great pleasure and satisfaction your assurances that the Arabs are determined to act in conformity with the precepts laid down by Omar Ibn Khattab and the early Khalifs, which secure the rights and privileges of all religions alike.

In stating that the Arabs are ready to recognise and respect all our treaties with Arab chiefs, it is, of course, understood that this will apply to all territories included in the Arab Kingdom, as the Government of Great Britain cannot repudiate engagements which already exist.

With regard to the Vilayets of Aleppo and Beirut, the Government of Great Britain have fully understood and taken careful note of your observations, but, as the interests of our ally, France, are involved in them both, the question will require careful consideration and a further communication on the subject will be addressed to you in due course.

The Government of Great Britain, as I have already informed you, are ready to give all guarantees of assistance and support within their power to the Arab Kingdom, but their interests demand, as you yourself have recognised, a friendly and stable administration in the Vilayet of Bagdad, and the adequate safeguarding of these interests calls for a much fuller and more detailed consideration than the present situation and the urgency of these negotiations permit.

We fully appreciate your desire for caution, and have no wish to urge you to hasty action, which might jeopardise the eventual success of your projects, but, in the meantime, it is most essential that you should spare no effort to attach all the Arab peoples to our united cause and urge them to afford no assistance to our enemies.

It is on the success of these efforts and on the more active measures which the Arabs may hereafter take in support of our cause, when the time for action comes, that the permanence and strength of our agreement must depend.

Under these circumstances I am further directed by the Government of Great Britain to inform you that you may rest assured that Great Britain has no intention of concluding any peace in terms of which the freedom of the Arab peoples from German and Turkish domination does not form an essential condition.

A. H. McMahon

January 1, 1916

With regard to what had been stated in your honoured communication concerning El Iraq as to the matter of compensation for the period of occupation, we, in order to strengthen the confidence of Great Britain in our attitude and in our words and actions, really and veritably, and in order to give her evidence of our certainty and assurance in trusting her glorious Government, leave the determination of the amount to the perception of her wisdom and justice.

As regards the northern parts and their coasts, we have already stated in our previous letter what were the utmost possible modifications, and all this was only done so to fulfill those aspirations whose attainment is desired by the will of the Blessed and Supreme God. It is this same feeling and desire which impelled us to avoid what may possibly injure the alliance of Great Britain and France and the agreement made between them during the present wars and calamities; yet we find it our duty that the eminent minister should be sure that, at the first opportunity after this war is finished, we shall ask you (what we avert our eyes from to day) for what we now leave to France in Beirut and its coasts.

I do not find it necessary to draw your attention to the fact that our plan is of greater security to the interests and protection of the rights of Great Britain than it is to us, and will necessarily be so whatever may happen, so that Great Britain may finally see her friends in that contentment and advancement which she is endeavouring to establish for them now, especially as her Allies being neighbours to us will be the germ of difficulties and discussion with which there will be no peaceful conditions. In addition to which the citizens of Beirut will decidedly never accept such dismemberment, and they may oblige us to undertake new measures which may exercise Great Britain, certainly not less than her present troubles, because of our belief and certainty in the reciprocity and indeed the identity of our interests, which is the only cause that caused us never to care to negotiate with any other Power but you. Consequently, it is impossible to allow any derogation that gives France, or any other Power, a span of land in those regions.

Hussein Ibn Ali, Sherif of Mecca

January 25, 1916

We take note of your remarks concerning the Vilayet of Bagdad, and will take the question into careful consideration when the enemy has been defeated and the time for peaceful settlement arrives.

As regards the northern parts, we note with satisfaction your desire to avoid anything which might possibly injure the alliance of Great Britain and France. It is, as you know, our fixed determination that nothing shall be permitted to interfere in the slightest degree with our united prosecution of this war to a victorious conclusion. Moreover, when the victory has been won, the friendship of Great Britain and France will become yet more firm and enduring, cemented by the blood of Englishmen and Frenchmen who have died side by side fighting for the cause of right and liberty.

A. H. McMahon

**Letter From Sir Edward Grey To Paul Cambon
May 16, 1916**

I shall have the honor to reply fully in a further note to your excellency's note of the 9th instant, relative to the creation of an Arab state, but I should meanwhile be grateful if your excellence could assure me that in those regions which, under the conditions recorded in that communication, become entirely French, or in which French interests are recognized as predominant, any existing British concessions, rights of navigation or development, and the rights and privileges of any British religious, scholastic, or medical institutions will be maintained.

His Majesty's government are, of course, ready to give a reciprocal assurance in regard to the British area.

Sir Edward Grey

**Letter From Sir Edward Grey To Paul Cambon
May 16, 1916**

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your excellency's note of the 9th instant, stating that the french government accept the limits of a future Arab state, or confederation of states, and of those parts of Syria where french interests predominate, together with certain conditions attached thereto, such as they result from recent discussions in London and petrograd on the subject.

I have the honor to inform your excellency in reply that the acceptance of the whole project, as it now stands, will involve the abdication of considerable British interests, but, since his majesty's government recognize the advantage to the general cause of the allies entailed in producing a more favorable internal political situation in turkey, they are ready to accept the arrangement now arrived at, provided that the co-operation of the Arabs is secured, and that the Arabs fulfill the conditions and obtain the towns of homs, hama, damascus and aleppo.

It is accordingly understood between the french and British governments:

1. That France and great Britain are prepared to recognize and protect an independent Arab states or a confederation of Arab states (a) and (b) marked on the annexed map, under the suzerainty of an Arab chief. That in area (a) France, and in area (b) great Britain, shall have priority of right of enterprise and local loans. That in area (a) France, and in area (b) great Britain, shall alone supply advisers or foreign functionaries at the request of the Arab state or confederation of Arab states.
2. That in the blue area France, and in the red area great Britain, shall be allowed to establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire and as they may think fit to arrange with the Arab state or confederation of Arab states.
3. That in the brown area there shall be established an international administration, the form of which is to be decided upon after consultation with Russia, and subsequently in consultation with the other allies, and the representatives of the sheriff of mecca.
4. That great Britain be accorded (1) the ports of Haifa and acre, (2) guarantee of a given supply of water from the tigris and euphrates in area (a) for area (b). His majesty's government, on their part, undertake that they will at no time enter into negotiations for the cession of Cyprus to any third power without the previous consent of the french government.
5. That Alexandretta shall be a free port as regards the trade of the British empire, and that there shall be no discrimination in port charges or facilities as regards British shipping and British goods; that there shall be freedom of transit for British goods through Alexandretta and by railway through the blue area, or (b) area, or area (a); and there shall be no discrimination, direct or indirect, against British goods on any railway or against British goods or ships at any port serving the areas mentioned.
6. That Haifa shall be a free port as regards the trade of France, her dominions and protectorates, and there shall be no discrimination in port charges or facilities as regards french shipping and french goods. There shall be freedom of transit for french goods through Haifa and by the British railway through the brown area, whether those goods are intended for or originate in the blue area, area (a), or area (b), and there shall be no discrimination, direct or indirect, against french goods on any railway, or against french goods or ships at any port serving the areas mentioned.

7. That in area (a) the Bagdad railway shall not be extended southwards beyond Mosul, and in area (b) northwards beyond Samarra, until a railway connecting Bagdad and Aleppo via the Euphrates valley has been completed, and then only with the concurrence of the two governments.

8. That Great Britain has the right to build, administer, and be sole owner of a railway connecting Haifa with area (b), and shall have a perpetual right to transport troops along such a line at all times. It is to be understood by both governments that this railway is to facilitate the connection of Bagdad with Haifa by rail, and it is further understood that, if the engineering difficulties and expense entailed by keeping this connecting line in the brown area only make the project unfeasible, that the French government shall be prepared to consider that the line in question may also traverse the Poligon Baniyas Keis Marib Salkhad Tell Otsda Mesmie before reaching area (b).

9. For a period of twenty years the existing Turkish customs tariff shall remain in force throughout the whole of the blue and red areas, as well as in areas (a) and (b), and no increase in the rates of duty or conversions from ad valorem to specific rates shall be made except by agreement between the two powers.

10. There shall be no interior customs barriers between any of the above mentioned areas. The customs duties leviable on goods destined for the interior shall be collected at the port of entry and handed over to the administration of the area of destination.

11. It shall be agreed that the French government will at no time enter into any negotiations for the cession of their rights and will not cede such rights in the blue area to any third power, except the Arab state or confederation of Arab states, without the previous agreement of His Majesty's government, who, on their part, will give a similar undertaking to the French government regarding the red area.

12. The British and French government, as the protectors of the Arab state, shall agree that they will not themselves acquire and will not consent to a third power acquiring territorial possessions in the Arabian peninsula, nor consent to a third power installing a naval base either on the east coast, or on the islands, of the Red Sea. This, however, shall not prevent such adjustment of the Aden frontier as may be necessary in consequence of recent Turkish aggression.

13. The negotiations with the Arabs as to the boundaries of the Arab states shall be continued through the same channel as heretofore on behalf of the two powers.

14. It is agreed that measures to control the importation of arms into the Arab territories will be considered by the two governments.

I have further the honor to state that, in order to make the agreement complete, His Majesty's government are proposing to the Russian government to exchange notes analogous to those exchanged by the latter and your Excellency's government on the 26th April last. Copies of these notes will be communicated to your Excellency as soon as exchanged.

I would also venture to remind your Excellency that the conclusion of the present agreement raises, for practical consideration, the question of claims of Italy to a share in any partition or rearrangement of Turkey in Asia, as formulated in article 9 of the agreement of the 26th April, 1915, between Italy and the allies.

His Majesty's government further consider that the Japanese government should be informed

of the arrangements now concluded.

Sir Edward Grey

**Letter From Sir Edward Grey To Count Benckendorff
May 10/23, 1916**

I have received from the french ambassador in London copies of the notes exchanged between the Russian and french governments on the 26th ultimo, by which your excellency's government recognize, subject to certain conditions, the arrangement made between great Britain and France, relative to the constitution of an Arab state or a confederation of Arab states, and to the partition of the territories of Syria, Cilicia, and Mesopotamia, provided that the co-operation of the Arabs is secured.

His majesty's government take act with satisfaction that your excellency's government concur in the limits set forth in that arrangement, and i have now the honor to inform your excellency that his majesty's government, on their part, in order to make the arrangement complete, are also prepared to recognize the conditions formulated by the Russian government and accepted by the french government in the notes exchanged at petrograd on the 26th ultimo.

In so far, then, as these arrangements directly affect the relations of Russia and great Britain, i have the honor to invite the acquiescence of your excellency's government in an agreement on the following terms:

1. That Russia shall annex the regions of Erzeroum, Trebizond, van, and Bitlis, up to a point subsequently to be determined on the littoral of the black sea to the west of Trebizond.
2. That the region of Kurdistan to the south of van and of Bitlis between Mush, Sert, the course of the Tigris, Jezireh Ben Omar, the crest line of the mountains which dominate Amadia, and the region of Merga Var, shall be ceded to Russia; and that starting from the region of Merga Var, the frontier of the Arab state shall follow the crest line of the mountains which at present divide the ottoman and Persian dominions, these boundaries are indicated in a general manner and are subject to modifications of detail to be proposed later by the delimitation commission which shall meet on the spot.
3. That the Russian government undertake that, in all parts of the ottoman territories thus ceded to Russia, and concessions accorded to British subjects by the ottoman government shall be maintained, if the Russian government express the desire that such concessions should later be modified in order to bring them into harmony with the laws of the Russian empire, this modification shall only take place in agreement with the British government.
4. That in all parts of the ottoman territories ceded to Russia, existing British rights of navigation and development, and the rights and privileges of any British religious, scholastic, or medical institutions shall be maintained. His majesty's government, on their part, undertake that similar Russian rights and privileges shall be maintained in those regions which, under the conditions of this agreement, become entirely British, or in which British interests are recognized as predominant.
5. The two governments admit in principle that every state which annexes any part of the ottoman empire is called upon to participate in the service of the ottoman debt.

Sir Edward Grey

Letter From Sir Edward Grey To Count Benckendorff
Oct. 10/23, 1916

In reply to your excellency's note of the 1st ultimo, regarding the arrangement between great Britain, Russia, and France, relative to the creation of an Arab state, or of a confederation of Arab states, and to the partition of the territories of Syria, Cilicia, and Mesopotamia, provided that the cooperation of the Arabs is secured, I have the honor to state that His Majesty's government take note of the reservation formulated by the imperial Russian government at the end of article 4 of the arrangement respecting the rights of the imperial government to grant cabotage in the Black Sea, and of the desire manifested by that government that this question should be submitted later to a friendly examination by the governments of the parties interested.

Sir Edward Grey
