

Lawrence of Arabia On War: The Campaign in the Desert, 1916-18 by Rob Johnson. Oxford:

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Rob Johnson has followed his 2016 history of the Great War in the Middle East with an original, lengthy account of T. E. Lawrence's campaign in Arabia set within the Hashemite Arab revolt against the Ottomans in the last two years of the First World War. It works admirably as an insightful politico-military history of the Arab revolt of the Hashemite Arabs – and is a useful coda to Johnson's broader history of the war in the region – but the exact focus is on Lawrence and military thought, notably in relation to insurgency and counterinsurgency. It is a book about the past, but it paints a broad brush across the canvas, with the final chapters examining Lawrence's links to recent insurgent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Johnson eschews discussion of Lawrence's private life – except where it has bearing on his views on war (or whether Lawrence had PTSD) – to explore the nature of industrial, machine-based war as it presented itself in 1914 and Lawrence's reaction thereof, and then our response today to Lawrence's views then. The genuflection to 'on war' in the book's title emphasises how Johnson has tied Lawrence to the Prussian military thinker Carl von Clausewitz and his seminal 1832 book *On War*. Johnson is interested in Lawrence's place in wider military thought (and action) about war, and themes of learning, intuition, indirect strategy, culminating points, psychology and morale, manoeuvre, and, above all, politics and the deployment of local troops thread their way through Johnson's critical chronology of the war in Arabia. The changing nature of war in 1914 and current thinking on counterinsurgency book end the study, making this a holistic examination extending beyond Lawrence's war against the Ottomans that dominates the empirical parts of the study. Archival research from four continents buttresses the text.

Well into the book, Johnson makes a key point that underpins his analysis (p. 198): 'If the Arab Revolt had occurred outside of the context of the Great War and the enormous commitment of British Imperial forces to the Middle East, it seems highly likely that the Arabs would have been subjected to the full might of the Ottoman military apparatus and defeated inside a year.' He is right. The Arab Hashemite insurgents were not militarily effective, and they were unable to

succeed by their own endeavours; Lawrence, moreover, was under no illusion about their limitations. It is worth dwelling on this. All insurrections depend on external support but at some moment, whether it was the assassination of the 'Cairo Gang' in 1920, Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the march down from the Sierra Maestra to Havana in 1959, the capture of Saigon in 1975, or the siege of Fallujah in 2004, insurgents must assume forceful, independent action and seize victory. But as Johnson shows in some detail, the Hashemites turned up late or not at all for many actions (as at Wejh), fought 'battles' that were negotiated surrenders (the capture of Aqaba), won fights that were slight encounters (Tafila), got others to do the work for them (as with British raiding parties blowing up the Hedjaz railway), failed to take isolated garrisons (as at Medina that held out to 1919) or permanently break railway lines, had no local supply lines (instead relying on Royal Navy ships for logistics), preferred looting to consolidation, and manifestly failed to escalate combat in any Maoist strategy to win pitched battles (as with the Trans-Jordan raids). This was a (p. 68) 'less-than-exemplary' performance, as Johnson gently puts it, to which a critic of Lawrence might add that a bad workman always blames his tools. The Hashemites remained raiders throughout, until the British installed them in Damascus in 1918. Arab soldiers with the Ottomans generally remained loyal and saw Hashemite forces as (p. 53) 'just another colonial unit fielded by the British.' Lawrence made a virtue out of necessity, arguing that it suited him to keep open the Hedjaz line to Medina and to bottle up the Ottoman garrison therein, ignoring the failure to develop Hashemite combat power that made fixed battle with regular Ottoman troops well-nigh impossible. Instead, regular British-led troops defeated the Ottomans in two sets of battles in late 1917 and 1918. Dramatic successes like the capture of Aqaba went nowhere as the British troops in the Sinai took little account of their desert right flank (p. 127): 'Here lies the enigma about the fall of Aqaba. Although heralded as a "breakthrough" in the Arab campaign, it is striking how nothing was done for so long after the event.'

The campaign may have been a damp squib but the political part to Lawrence's thinking on war is exciting. The theoretical abstraction of Lawrence from the actual fighting in Arabia is the original element to the book under review. Lawrence was closer to Clausewitz than he would care to admit, and he adhered closely to Clausewitzian conceptions of irregular insurrection occurring within the framework of war by regular troops. Lawrence encompassed Clausewitz, and the

latter's thinking embodied in *On War* was not far removed from the indirect approach of the Arab revolt, in Johnson's view. Lawrence emphasised psychology and the (p. 129) 'human terrain,' as modern military personnel now style it, seeing this as the centre of gravity of the political war of insurrection. The attempt to formulate a new way of war and avoid the (p. 73) 'full fury of blood-letting' of twentieth-century war, alongside the emphasis on intuition and mental over physical power, excited Basil Liddell Hart after the war, and Johnson also usefully relates Lawrence to SOE's irregular war against Germany after 1939. This was human spirit and willpower over the slugfest of the Western Front. Lawrence's acute awareness of the political nature of guerrilla war links to the more successful insurgencies of Mao Zedong and his acolytes from the 1930s – a subject that Johnson tilts at – but the combination of local troops with modern Western tactics and equipment resonates more obviously with neo-colonial wars being fought today rather than the high period of classic (usually communist) insurgency after 1945. There is some irony here as Lawrence's insurgent thinking is now being used by neo-imperial counterinsurgents eager to find and destroy the political gravity of rebel forces. Johnson is to be congratulated for an incisive, informed and balanced study whose intellectual reach will appeal to scholars of the Middle East and those interested in military affairs, and from which Lawrence emerges as a thinker of note but not of the first order.

Matthew Hughes

Brunel University London

matthew.hughes@brunel.ac.uk