



Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918

By James Barr

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Greed and intrigue combine explosively in this gripping tale of how the mercurial Lawrence of Arabia changed the Middle East forever.

It was T. E. Lawrence's classic *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* that made the Arab Revolt a legend and helped turn the British intelligence officer into the mythical "Lawrence of Arabia." But the intrigue behind the revolt and its startling consequences for the present-day Middle East have remained a mystery for nearly one hundred years. James Barr spent four years trawling declassified archives in Europe and crossing the hostile deserts of the Middle East to re-create the revolt as the international drama it really was. A colorful cast of Arab sheiks, British and French soldiers, spies, and diplomats come together in this gripping narrative of political maneuvering, guerrilla warfare, and imperial greed. *Setting the Desert on Fire* is a masterly account of a key moment in the history of the Middle East, and a portrait of Lawrence himself that is bright, nuanced, and full of fresh insights into the true nature of the master mythmaker.

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Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918 By James Barr **Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #117308 in Books
- Published on: 2008-02-17
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.50" h x 1.30" w x 6.50" l, 1.53 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 400 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

British historian Barr re-examines World War I's 'Great Arab Revolt' led by the legendary Lawrence of Arabia in this exhaustively researched and vividly narrated history. Thomas Edward Lawrence was a young British intelligence officer when he undertook to organize Arab resistance to the Ottoman Empire, a German ally. The Turkish (Ottoman) sultan was also the caliph—spiritual leader of Muslims worldwide—and the British feared that his call for jihad threatened their eastern empire. To secure Arab support against the Turks, the British offered them a hazy declaration of future independence. Led by Lawrence, an eccentric amateur who adopted the flowing robes of his desert allies, the Arabs began a guerrilla campaign against the Hijaz Railway, the Turks' supply line between Damascus and Medina. Lawrence's driving obsession was to capture Damascus and foil French ambitions in Syria. As the war in Europe was ending, the Arabs occupied Damascus and Lawrence installed an Arab government. Upon the war's conclusion, Middle Eastern matters were peripheral. Britain then yielded Syria to France, denying Arab independence and initiating a new legacy, of increasingly bitter relations. Barr expertly navigates an intriguing landscape of shifting alliances and labyrinthine politics peopled with eccentric characters to demystify a fascinating legend. *illus. (Feb.)*
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From [Booklist](#)

Many laypersons are familiar with T. E. Lawrence and the Arab revolt only through David Lean's film *Lawrence of Arabia*. A few may have gone further and read Lawrence's largely self-promoting account, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935). Barr has written a compact, scrupulously accurate chronicle of the revolt and Lawrence's role in it, utilizing previously unavailable archival material and seamlessly interweaving the military narrative with the political maneuvers of the British and French governments as they pursued their own narrow interests. Barr provides finely drawn portraits of some of the key players in this drama, including General Allenby, Ronald Storrs, Prince Feisal, Auda abu Tayi, and, of course, Lawrence, who is viewed less as the romantic, tragic adventurer and more as a hardheaded, effective soldier. Although he was sympathetic to Arab national aspirations, he was primarily devoted to protecting British interests and seemed to have a particular hostility toward French designs upon Syria and Lebanon. An excellent general history of a widely misunderstood struggle that largely defined the shape of the modern Middle East. --Jay Freeman

Review

"[James] Barr has written a compact, scrupulously accurate chronicle of the revolt and Lawrence's role in it, utilizing previously unavailable archival material. . . . An excellent general history of a widely misunderstood struggle that largely defined the shape of the modern Middle East." (Booklist)

"A tightly-focused, fast-paced account. . . . Mr. Barr's achievement is to tell Lawrence's story more clearly and objectively, helping to make sense of a complex war fought in an unfamiliar land and language." (Adam Kirsch - New York Sun)

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