

Spies in Arabia

*The Great War and the Cultural
Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire
in the Middle East*

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Air Control

"You have to understand the Arab mind," Capt. Todd Brown, a company commander with the Fourth Infantry Division, said as he stood outside the gates of Abu Hishma. "The only thing they understand is force—force, pride and saving face."

—Dexter Filkins, "Tough New Tactics by U. S. Tighten Grip on Iraq Towns," *New York Times*, December 7, 2003

The camp commander [at Guantanamo], Rear Adm. [Harry B.] Harris, said he did not believe the men [three detainees] had killed themselves out of despair. "They are smart. They are creative, they are committed," he said. "They have no regard for life, either ours or their own. . . . This was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us."

—"Guantanamo Suicides a 'PR Move,'" BBC News, June 11, 2006

Satan being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste or air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment, that he is continually hovering over this inhabited globe of earth; swelling with the rage of envy at the felicity of his rival, man; and studying all the

means possible to injure and ruin him; but extremely limited in his power, to his unspeakable mortification.

—Daniel Defoe, *The History of the Devil*, 1726

Against the backdrop of official paranoia, Britain devised a new surveillance technology in Iraq known as "air control." With it, intelligence in the Middle East became fully "operational," and the downy dream of technocratic development was turned inside out to reveal its rugged militarist lining. Air control was an example of that "rebellion of technology" that, for Walter Benjamin in 1937, defined "imperialistic war": "Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities." In the air control scheme, the RAF collapsed the mission of regenerating Babylonia into the more urgent task of patrolling the country from a network of bases and coordinating information from agents on the ground to bombard subversive villages and tribes. To be sure, airpower was also used elsewhere in the empire in 1919, in what have been termed "spasmodic, almost casual affairs"; it was in Iraq that the British would rigorously practice, if never perfect, the technology of bombardment as a permanent method of colonial administration and surveillance and there that they would fully theorize the value of airpower as an independent arm of the military.¹

Air control was cheap, as many contemporaries and scholars have noted, but reasons of cost would have applied equally elsewhere—indeed, after an incubatory period in Iraq, modified versions of air control were exported to other parts of the empire. The scheme's cheapness helped sell the idea to the cabinet but cannot explain its initial formulation for Iraq. Indeed, other European and Arab powers in the region would also have felt the need to economize, but none developed a regime as skeletally austere or dependent on total air substitution as the British.² How did the British come to invent an unprecedented scheme, relying on a new technology whose uses had yet to be fully imagined, specifically for Iraq? The explanation lies in the realm of cultural history, in the agents' confidence that Iraq was a place peculiarly suited to aerial surveillance and far enough beyond the pale of bourgeois "convention" to moot concerns about inhumanity—in any case, their intimate knowledge of the place, evidenced by this representation, would guarantee humane application of the system. When Whitehall opened its arms to this community of agents, it invited in their way of thinking and decision-making. The spark of innovation that had ignited the Middle Eastern campaigns would now set the region itself ablaze.

The Fantasy

Demobilization remained a distant dream for British troops charged with confronting the anticolonial rebellions of 1919–21. As the situation in the Middle East grew dire, British officials searched desperately for a way to avert evacuation. Arabist intelligence agents emerged fervent proponents of airpower in general and the air control scheme in particular. Lawrence dated both his interest in joining the service and his conviction that "aircraft could rule the desert" to the war. Contemporaries too numbered him "first to realize" that air control would allow control without occupation. Winston Churchill, secretary of war and air, had long been intimate with the community of Arabist agents, through common social networks and a shared sensibility besides wartime contact and close cooperation at the Peace Conference. He too wagered that airpower might be used creatively to maintain order in the Iraqi mandate after the war. Geoffrey Salmond, whom Hugh Trenchard, the chief of Air Staff, dispatched to the region to assess the efficacy of Churchill's suggestion, was at once taken with the idea of using airpower to integrate the region into an administrative whole. Lawrence, then a fellow at Oxford, assisted in the RAF's subsequent efforts to devise a workable scheme, as did Iraq's civil commissioner, Arnold Wilson. (It was partly out of gratitude that Trenchard, who was often an outcast in official circles and felt strangely at ease in the company of Bell and Lawrence, helped Lawrence secure a place in the ranks in 1922, where he remained an influential presence until his death in 1935.) All this was made easier when Churchill, as colonial secretary, inducted Lawrence, Bullard, Young, and Meinertzhagen (an old friend of Trenchard's and of the new air secretary, Frederick Guest) into his new Middle East Department.³

These various experts deemed Mesopotamia *peculiarly* suitable for air operations, better than Europe, for aesthetic as much as topographical reasons: its presumed flatness promised many landing grounds, little cover to insurgents, and the possibility of "radiating" British power throughout the country from a handful of fittingly spartan bases, while the reality of its varied and protean topography, when acknowledged, was held to offer ideal training for the RAF, exposing it to every sort of terrain—mountains in Kurdistan, marshes in the south, riverain territory in between, and so forth. The difficulties of communication in Iraq made "the idea of using aircraft" "extremely tempting"; they could annihilate distance in hours. Air action was deemed *inappropriate* for police action in the densely populated urban environments of Britain, Ireland, and even Palestine. It was expressly framed as an updated approach to "small wars." Lawrence insisted, "The system is *not* capable of universal application."⁴

The agents perceived a basic congruence between the liberty of action of the aircraft and the desert warrior, both operating in empty, unmapped, magical spaces. The airplane was a winged irregular. Lawrence prophesied: "What the Arabs did yesterday the Air Forces may do to-morrow. And in the same way—yet more swiftly." Both could move beyond mere concentration of force and replace it with "an intangibly ubiquitous distribution of force—pressing everywhere yet assailable nowhere." Like the equally "splendid" tanks, aircraft embodied an austere, modernist reinvention of chivalric warfare. He joined the RAF himself for this reason and for the inevitable opportunity for fresh literary inspiration. "Since I was 16 I've been . . . steadily getting better," he explained to Trenchard. "My last book on Arabia is nearly good. I see the sort of subject I need in the beginning of your Force." (He eventually wrote *The Mint*.) As in Arabia, now again he wanted to "shed his past and live the part" in the hope that the rhythm of flight, like the camel's plod, would collapse sensation into artistic insight. His views were echoed by Glubb, Philby, Bell, and others, and found greater amplification in the RAF itself. "There appears to be a sort of natural fellow-feeling between these nomad arabs and the Air Force," remarked Robert Brooke-Popham, both before and after he had served as air commander in Iraq. "Perhaps both feel that they are at times in conflict with the vast elemental forces of nature." The parallels agents had drawn between British skills at sea and in the desert were now extended to the air (indeed, as Hew Strachan notes, aircraft took war to civilians in the manner of old-fashioned maritime blockade). The "desert with all its mysterious fascination" had "an unreal atmospheric quality comparable with the sky. Perhaps," pondered a wing commander, "this is why people call it 'The Blue.'" Their quiddities were the same. Hence, perhaps, the airplane's obvious suitability to exploration of desert lands; Lawrence foresaw it opening up and rendering comprehensible the still stubbornly blank spot of the Rub al-Khali, a project he passionately (if unsuccessfully) advocated long after he had otherwise departed from the Arabian scene.⁵

Air control, like irregular warfare, was designed to work in a country "where news flies on the wings of the wind." Speed allowed aircraft to counter tribesmen's ability to anticipate, through this prolific flow of news, the arrival of ground forces. "The punishment, like the news, will fly on the wings of the wind," explained Flight Lieutenant C. J. Mackay in a prize-winning essay for the Royal United Service Institute. If it failed to, the target could simply be changed. Moreover, aircraft would turn to advantage the region's systematic exaggeration of information: where there was one plane, Arabs would spread news of dozens; a few casualties would instill fear of hundreds. Iraq's lack of natural borders would enable aircraft to use disinformation as a practical strategy (the recourse to ungentlemanly "bluff" spun as proof of the British

willingness to take risks, use new technology, and rely on "racial superiority"). Trenchard envisioned a single imperial air force dispatched like a navy, in fleets, with Baghdad the "pivot" of an imperial air route from England to Cairo to Karachi to Singapore, along which reinforcements could be moved economically between theaters. The "moral effect" of air control upon subversives would derive partly from "this ocular demonstration of the linking up of the British garrisons in their midst with forces of unknown strength outside their ken." Power would lie off-stage, just as it did when irregulars gestured at an "unknown quantity" of supporters in the desert fastness. The logistics of the interwar strategic doctrine of maximum projection of and minimum actual use of force depended on a particular conception of the kind of space the new Arabian empire was.⁶

These spatial conceptions were of special consequence in the shadow of Whitehall's conspiracy-theory explanations of the Iraqi insurrection. Air control was designed for a population conceived of as congenitally insurgent, an always incipient guerrilla army lacking any agency of its own but available for exploitation by an external agent. As counterinsurgent aerial guerrillas, the British, too, would be elusive. Air control (with the help of wireless technology) would at once raise the apparatus of imperial rule out of reach of these "stubborn races" and create a surveillance regime capable of coping with nomad existence and porous desert borders: "The 'long arm' of the new weapon renders it ubiquitous . . . [and] makes it practicable to keep a whole country under more or less constant surveillance." It was an ideal system for the information problems they faced in the Middle East. Through air control, the agents could realize in a new dimension the controversial postwar dream of a regionwide intelligence web (see chap. 8). It was essentially a system of control by intelligence, the epitome of the new operational intelligence, with aircraft substituting for the political officer who had long combined the tasks of intelligence and administration. Indeed, earlier brainstorming about ways to reduce the occupying garrisons in Mesopotamia had contemplated replacing them with a skeletal network of political officers, each individually capable of projecting as much, if not more, power than a garrison: air control was the mechanical apotheosis of this notion, minus the Achilles' heel of susceptible health. Like intrepid Arabist agents, aircraft would allow the British to segue into, even manage, the magical information network. The "official version" would "get around quicker," checking the contortions of information passed "by the natives from mouth to mouth." The Air Staff warranted, "Frequent friendly patrols, dropping leaflets containing suitable propaganda; disseminating correct news, and preventing the wilful misinterpretation of the orders of a political officer by intriguing headmen, may often prevent the seeds of unrest being sown by irresponsible

agitators." Aircraft, like conspiracy thinking, provided the security of *imagined* omniscience to an empire in the throes of rebellion.⁷

It was in this paranoid atmosphere that Lawrence and Churchill obtained approval of the scheme at the Cairo Conference of 1921, attended by luminaries of the Arabia intelligence and political establishment. The RAF officially took over in Iraq in October 1922, although it had become the dominant military force during the rebellion. It commanded eight squadrons of fighters and light bombers, several thousand Iraq Levies, and four armored car units (staffed by many former Black and Tans—an empirewide counterinsurgency staff for an apparently empirewide insurgency). Like airplanes, armored cars “showed their true paces” in Iraq. (In 1919, Lawrence, who had found them critical to being “everywhere at once” in the war, had approached J. F. C. Fuller on the question of using tanks in Arabia, which the latter considered “a fairy tale... unless he could provide the magic carpet”—a condition apparently filled by the air control regime.) Army garrisons were gradually whittled back to protect only the nine RAF bases. The last British battalion left in 1927; the last Indian, in 1928. The short range of most available aircraft made advanced landing grounds and emergency fuel and bomb dumps important. Air action was used against Turkish and Najdi raiders (at a time when frontiers were very much a work in progress) as well as Kurds and Arabs within Iraq proper. Theoretically, the levies were to be the first responders to unrest, followed by an “air demonstration” and dropped messages threatening hostile action, then action against livestock, and as a last resort, against villages—but theory was not implemented in practice, as we shall see. In a single two-day operation, a squadron might drop several dozen tons of bombs and thousands of incendiaries and fire thousands of rounds of small arms ammunition.⁸

This arrival of aircraft in Iraq was, as we have seen, understood in the same romantic developmental vein as the entire conquest of Mesopotamia. But besides restoring the cradle of civilization to its rightful position on the map of global commerce and communications, aircraft themselves, as a sophisticated technology, exercised a more traditional “civilizing effect,” not least by demonstrating the advanced state of British civilization. The famous “furrow” ploughed across the desert to guide pilots on the air route to Baghdad was lauded as a feat of British ingenuity. The “romance” of desert flight derived from the “demonstration of the power of modern inventions which are able to conquer vast open spaces of the world... little known to civilised man”; technology remained the handmaiden of progress. The air also afforded a lofty view from which to observe the effects of the new, loftier imperialism, to witness “adoring Asia kindle and hugely bloom,” in the poetic allusion of the *Illustrated London News*. (It also fittingly revealed the otherwise invisible traces left by their ancient

imperial forbears.) Aerial surveillance and disciplining fit neatly into this vision of liberal empire in the sky. Flying over the desert on behalf of the Foreign Office, Hubert Young “felt that a new era had dawned, and that with the goodwill of His Majesty’s Government and the powerful help of the Royal Air Force the Arabs of Iraq would undoubtedly win their independence at last.” Moreover, a wing commander argued irresistibly, “the cheaper the form of control the more money for roads and development and the sooner it will be no longer necessary to use armed forces to do with explosives what should be done by policemen and sticks.”⁹

Despite these hopes and the promise of omniscience, the air control regime was plagued by frequent reports of pilot disorientation, visibility problems, and instances “of quite inexplicable failures to identify such objects as columns of Armoured cars... and even whole sections of bedouin tribes on the move.” It was not uncommon for aircraft to make a “demonstration” over or bomb the wrong town. It also turned out that “hostile parties” could find cover in watercourses, hillocks, and other features of the “featureless” landscape. Assessing the effect of bombing operations was “largely a matter of guesswork.” However, in an infamously deceptive land, all this inaccuracy, indeed information itself, was of little consequence: Arnold Wilson dourly explained that complaints about RAF observation failures were necessarily exaggerated, as was all information in the country, not least because the mirage prevented anyone from judging the accuracy of a pilot on high. Moreover, in the end, accuracy itself was moot, since aircraft were meant to be everywhere at once, “conveying a silent warning.” This “*moral effect*” of patrolling aircraft “which can drop Bombs whenever necessary would effectually check disturbances.” Air control was intended to work like the classic panopticon, for “from the ground every inhabitant of a village is under the impression that the occupant of an aeroplane is actually looking at him... establishing the impression that all their movements are being watched and reported.” Even if pilots could not be sure whether they were looking at “warlike” or “ordinary” tribes, Bedouin would behave because *they* could not discriminate “between bombing and reconnaissance expeditions.” Thus, despite innumerable reported errors, the air control experiment was pronounced entirely successful in “this kind of turbulent country.” Lord Thomson, air secretary in 1924, even spoke of bombing’s “all-seeing power” in the “clear atmosphere of Iraq”; the infamous haze had apparently obliged political expedience. In its Iraqi cocoon, the RAF was safe from criticism of its accuracy, protected by the notorious fallibility of all news emerging from Arabia. Within a decade, modified air control schemes would spread to “areas where conditions are similar”—Palestine, Transjordan, Aden, and further afield—and experts would disparage as “absurd” the increasingly inconvenient contention

that "some peculiar quality about the country... has enabled aircraft to achieve in Iraq what they could not achieve anywhere else."¹⁰

The Defense of Inhumanity

Irregular warfare, as Lawrence understood it, could be bloodless because it depended less on attack than on the "silent threat of a vast unknown desert." Likewise, proponents of air control frankly admitted that "terror" was the scheme's underlying principle—and the source of its humaneness, which some explicitly traced to Lawrence's guerrilla theory. In theory, terror inspired by occasional demonstrations of destructive power would awe tribes into submission. Alternatively, interference with its victims' daily lives, through destruction of homes, villages, fuel, crops, and livestock, would "infallibly achieve the desired result."¹¹ Of course, the inhumanity of the system ultimately stemmed from its inability to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants, a conflation no less iniquitous in the case of violent impoverishment of villages than in simple massacre of them. And, as early RAF statements openly acknowledged, the moral effect depended on demonstrations of exemplary violence, which could hardly be accomplished without loss of life—as even the covetous army warned, the "moral effect of a plane that mustn't bomb... is less than that of an infantry man who can at least arrest." In any case, theory aside, however diligent the RAF may have been in giving warnings by loudspeaker, leaflets, and "demonstration flights," the "pacification" of Iraq proved horrifically costly in Iraqi lives—a hundred casualties was not unusual in a single operation, not to mention those lost to starvation and the burning of villages. "Recalcitrant" tribes, which included not only those attacking British communications and personnel but also those refusing to pay taxes, ultimately had to be bombed into submission. Entire villages were bombed for "general recalcitrance"—refusal to submit to government—and for harboring wanted rebel leaders, providing the lessons of an emerging science of bombing. Attempts to reduce abuses by "cooling" impulsive requests for bombers in red tape did not curtail bombing for taxation and recalcitrance. Defenders of air control effectively allowed its moral effect to become a synecdoche for the entire regime.¹²

The antiseptic theory of moral effect in fact responded to a potent moral critique that stalked the regime even before it was fully in place, building on outrage about the Amritsar Massacre of April 1919 and quickly overtaking pro-saic skepticism of the regime rooted in interservice jealousy. Besides a few local agents' concerns about the rampant bombing of villages, Churchill and other Whitehall observers were also at least momentarily aghast at the news from

Iraq. Hubert Young and his partisans criticized the Mesopotamian administration for bombing resisters of a tax that, they alleged, was in fact higher than the Turkish rate had been. The new war secretary offered this unsparing assessment: "If the Arab population realize that the peaceful control of Mesopotamia depends on our intention of bombing women and children, I am very doubtful if we shall gain that acquiescence of the fathers and husbands of Mesopotamia as a whole to which the Secretary of State for the Colonies looks forward." This trenchant critique was amplified in the press and Parliament, where many had looked upon the Iraqi venture as outdated imperial foolishness from the very outset (see chap. 9).¹³

All this official displeasure quickly elicited papers from the Air Ministry on the effects of bombing on "semicivilised and uncivilised tribes." Ultimately concluding, as any properly dithering bureaucracy would, that sufficient time had not elapsed to prove its effects, the ministry also reminded its colleagues that air control was not unique in eliding the distinction between combatants and civilians. "All war is not only brutal but indiscriminate in its brutality," affirmed the Air Staff, pointing to the effects on civilians of naval bombardment, shelling of a city, blockading, trampling by invading armies, or the bombing of military facilities; at least the lives of attackers were safer in air operations. The Air Staff and Air Ministry adopted the voice of the realist, presenting stark realities unblinkered by sentimentality. Some of their supporters even insisted, paradoxically, on "the great humanity of bombing," for, however "ghastly"—indeed, *because* so ghastly—the experience of "continual unending interference with their normal lives" forced the enemy to give up quickly, thereby preventing untold further losses. Churchill might have looked back with pride at his hand in developing a system based on the "minimal use of force"—a foundational moment in the evolving myth of British skill in counterinsurgency—but at the time, the violence of air control was openly acknowledged. The question is what made it acceptable.¹⁴

The Great War had certainly shifted notions about humanity and warfare; to many military thinkers, the moral imperative was to minimize casualties as a whole rather than civilian deaths in particular, since modern combatants were merely civilians in uniform.¹⁵ Thus, in 1930, Air Secretary Thomson replied to Lord Cavan's criticism of air control by affecting surprise that Cavan, "who had seen so much war, should still believe that one could humanize it." Clearly, he elaborated, the most "insidious way of prolonging war as a means of settlement between nations was to endeavour to make it a gentlemanly occupation." Nevertheless, the Air Staff's defense did not really address the concerns of those who were equally offended by modern war's general brutality or of those who (rightly) considered aerial bombardment, in its all-seeing omnipotence, more lethal and terrible than older forms of barbarity. But most saliently, for my

purposes, their counterexamples—naval bombardment, blockades, and the like—were all *wartime* measures. The Air Staff paper was meant to discuss bombing as a peacetime security measure, a policing technique, in “semi-civilised” areas of the world such as Iraq. What was permissible only in wartime in advanced countries turned out to be *always* permissible in Iraq. In his description of the admittedly appalling bombing in Iraq, Thomson acknowledged that there things happened “which, if they had happened before the world war, would have been undoubtedly acts of war.” It was thus that the RAF alone among the armed services maintained its “war-time spirit” in this period, “particularly . . . in Iraq.”¹⁶

Militarism was thus being perpetuated at precisely the moment that it had become marginalized as a political program and the myth of Britain as a uniquely peaceable kingdom had taken root.¹⁷ How was this possible? It was not, I think, merely the result of racist conjuring—indeed, many airpower theorists based their faith in the bomber on the notion that people were the same everywhere and would respond in the same manner to its power¹⁸—but of the spatial packaging of the underside of British modernity, in which Arabia figured as the last bastion of the world free from bourgeois convention, a place of honor and bravery (however mindless), of manly sportsmanship and perennial conflict. Hence Lawrence’s investment in guerrilla warfare as a chivalrous and individualized mode of combat suited to the region; as Glubb put it, “Life in the desert is a continuous guerilla warfare,” and this meant striking hard and fast because that was the way of “Bedouin war.” “Not a moderate, but a maximum weight of bombs must be dropped” to maintain the native’s respect for airpower, insisted Flight Lieutenant Mackay. On his return home, General Haldane corroborated this truism about Arabs’ masochistic respect for “force, and force alone,” assuring audiences at the United Service Institute that though he had been “obliged to inflict a very severe lesson on the recalcitrant tribes, they bore me no resentment.” To them, Glubb elaborated, war was a “romantic excitement” whose production of “tragedies, bereavements, widows and orphans” was a “normal way of life,” “natural and inevitable.” Their taste for war was the source of their belief that they were “elites of the human race.” It would almost be a cultural offense *not* to bombard them with all the might of the empire (not least out of respect for the frequently invoked tribal principle of communal responsibility). Arnold Wilson confirmed for the Air Ministry that the problem was one of public perception, that Iraqis were used to a state of constant warfare, expected justice without kid gloves, had no patience with sentimental distinctions between combatants and noncombatants, and viewed air action as entirely “legitimate and proper.” “The natives of a lot of these tribes love fighting for fighting’s sake,” Trenchard assured Parliament. “They have no objection to being killed.” In a place long romanticized as an oasis of a

prelapsarian egalitarianism and liberty, defenders of air control could rest assured that the Bedouin retained their dignity even under bombardment and were not miserable wretches deserving of a condescending pity. Mark Sykes had long before recommended rule by local agents who could “shoot and give an order and never bother natives about cant and nonsense such as the rights of man.” Thus would the “natives” see them as “proper and respectable persons.” The ultramechanical “knight of the air” may have brought chivalry, in the sense of honorable combat between elite warriors, back to an otherwise thoroughly grim and “vulgarised” modern warfare, but this influence, its proponents were careful to elucidate, was “quite distinct from the humanitarian one” which regarded with compassion “those whom chivalry despised.” Thus, Iraqi women and children need not trouble the conscience, for, as the British commander observed, “[sheikhs] . . . do not seem to resent . . . that women and children are accidentally killed by bombs.” To them, women and children were “negligible” casualties compared to those of the “really important men,” Lawrence explained, conceding this was “too oriental a mood for us to feel very clearly.” Frightening as such fearlessness ought to have been, it seems instead to have provoked derision, or perhaps comic relief: as air secretary, Samuel Hoare fatuously assured Parliament that bombing of flocks and herds often proved sufficient; indeed, “tribes had felt that form of local operation more severely than if they had dropped bombs on the tribes themselves. (Laughter.)”¹⁹

Paranoia only confirmed the view that the entire Iraqi population was a latent army easily triggered into hostile action by Britain’s enemies. What was excusable as wartime excesses against the Boche would be always permissible against this population. In 1932, the high commissioner, head of the British administration in nominally independent Iraq, warned against clipping the “claws” of the RAF because “the term ‘civilian population’ has a very different meaning in Iraq from what it has in Europe. . . . The whole of its male population are potential fighters as the tribes are heavily armed.” This was a population at once so orientally backward and so admirably manly and phlegmatic that, to a postwar imperialism increasingly in thrall to cultural relativistic notions, all principles of *ius in bello* were irrelevant. Arabia was, in British eyes, especially suited to a type of bombardment that might be morally offensive elsewhere. The austerity of tribal existence, a condition imagined to extend to all Iraqis, rendered even concern about destruction of “property” irrelevant—despite the targeting of livestock, camels, and villages. It is useful to recall here, as a counterpoint, the premise of Lawrence’s guerrilla theory—that Bedouin could neither tactically nor temperamentally sustain casualties. Stereotypes of Arabs were, however, capacious enough to accommodate such contradictions, and British agents’ faith in their intuitive grasp ensured that all pronouncements

on Arab character were sound.²⁰ Only one officer, Lionel Charlton, chief of staff in Iraq in 1923, seems to have taken the softer view of tribal warfare as a more innocent, bloodless, sportlike style of retribution seriously, and he resigned in outrage against the notion that "an air bomb in Iraq was, more or less, the equivalent of a police truncheon at home."²¹

With all Iraqis transmuted into belligerents, it became easier to mute alarm about air reports by recourse to euphemism. When Churchill objected to the reporting of casualties under the "comprehensive head of 'men and women,'" ²² Trenchard, who in general shared Arabist agents' intuitive bent of mind and disinterest in statistics, insisted that in countries in which combatants and non-combatants and even the sexes could not be distinguished by visual markers, all casualties should be reported in "bulk numbers" without details as to sex or age. Air control and its indiscriminate violence were ideally suited to a place in which indiscriminate violence did not matter, as little in fact distinguished combatants from noncombatants. Casualty counts could legitimately assume that all were combatants without fear of traducing the data. Indeed, data of any kind was so notoriously difficult to find that any amount of scrupulousness in recording seemed excessive. From the Middle East Department, Richard Meinertzhagen assured his colleagues in Iraq, "Bombs dropped on men in the open seldom have much effect beyond fright" and advised dropping the matter of results because aerial observation of casualties was "always misleading." (It is worth remembering in this connection his prewar experience using bayonets, rifles, machine guns, and fire to eliminate recalcitrant Kikuyu in East Africa.) Even political officers' failures to observe "results" on the ground were immaterial, for, Meinertzhagen's colleague Reader Bullard assured, "news as to casualties will drift in from the desert gradually." This cavalier attitude rendered casualties entirely, well, casual. "If the Civil Commissioner is going on to Mosul," read a General Headquarters telegram to Wilson, "will he be so kind as to drop a bomb on Batas"—the sort of kindness he apparently never objected to. Striking at a phantom enemy and enjoying the bliss of willful ignorance at the outcome made air control sit more easily in the official mind. Only in Arabia, about which the British had long decided that nothing could ever really be known, did such fecklessness make sense and thus make air control acceptable.²³

Air control also seemed to fit comfortably in a biblical land. In 1932, when the inhumanity of air control was of some pressing importance at the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva, the high commissioner argued that unlike the outrages inevitably committed by ground troops, "bombing from the air is regarded almost as an act of God to which there is no effective reply but immediate submission."²⁴ Lawrence, speaking anonymously as one "who has lived among the Arabs, one whose intimate knowledge of their ways and thoughts

is universally recognized," explained the "impersonally fateful" nature of air bombing from an Arab's point of view: "It is not punishment, but a misfortune from heaven striking the community." It was the "superstition . . . concerning the 'god in the air'" that commanded Arabs' respect, explained a wing commander (their inevitable discovery that it was only a man in the plane making it all the more urgent that the RAF demonstrate its power "with all its might"). Arabia was a biblical place, and the people who lived there *knew* that; they expected periodic calamity and continual news of life and death. Bombardment was to them yet another kind of visitation. Air control played on Arabs' presumed fatalism, their faith in the incontrovertible "will of God." Such people could bear random acts of violence in a way that Europeans, coddled by secular notions of justice and human rights, could not. This view underwrote the frequent harping on the importance of not breeding too much familiarity with aircraft, lest the Arabs cease to view them as vehicles of divine retribution.²⁵

As a biblical space, Arabia was also a place of elemental clashes between good and evil out of the realm of ordinary, mortal law. The Bedouin "world of violence, bloodshed and war" recalled, for Glubb, England's forgotten "age of chivalry"—which could itself be traced to the Arab conquest of Spain: they possessed "depths of hatred, reckless bloodshed . . . lust of plunder of which our lukewarm natures seem no longer capable . . . deeds of generosity worthy of fairy-tales and acts of treachery of extraordinary baseness." Their "love of dramatic actions" outweighed "the dictates of reason or the material needs," even, the General Staff affirmed, overcame their "inherent dislike of getting killed." In this last bastion of authentic experience, bombardment could be accommodated as yet another vitalizing experience—shared equally by airmen who were resurrecting chivalry even as its death knell was sounded (many Bristol fighters being fitted, incidentally, with Sunbeam's "Arab" engines). Dr. Miller Maguire, speaking as an "ordinary member of the public," marveled excitedly at the end of a lecture on air control at the United Service Institute that it was all familiar from Chaucer's tales about the kings of Tartary whose horses "used to ride in the air" and Milton's poems about air battles between angels and devils. Bombardment allowed bombers to at once fulfill this medieval atavism and give Arabs what they wanted. No group did more to fulfill this romantic vision of air control than Ibn Saud's puritanical avant-garde forces, who continually raided into Iraq from Najd, often eluding their patron's grasp. Gertrude Bell was fiercely proud of "our power to strike back" at the diabolical Ikhwān, who, "with their horrible fanatical appeal to a medieval faith, rouse in me the blackest hatred." All concerns about cruelty were moot among those "notorious for . . . cruelty and . . . inhuman injustices." Bloodlust made sense in heterocosmic Arabia. It was the way of the place, and, as with intelligence operations, the mantra was "When in Rome . . ."²⁶

These clashes between good and evil transformed the "pacification" project into a series of episodes of cosmic significance. During the rebellion, Leachman, of whose unpopularity we have already read, wrote chillingly of his desire "to see . . . a regular slaughter of the Arabs in the disaffected areas." His adoring biographer, fellow political officer Norman Bray, describes him living in constant fear of assassination, concluding, "No wonder he . . . reveled in dropping bombs on Arabs concealed in a hollow." Paranoia and the transposition of real Arabia into the Arabia of myth, the consummate spy-space, made bombing palatable—even to individuals who believed they would revile it any other context. The vindication of air control grew out of long-circulating ideas about Arabia as a place somehow exempt from the this-worldliness that constrained human activity in other parts of the world. There heroes could reach the most exalted heights and villains the profoundest depths; there, as in literature, agents could find escape from the pitiful reality of human suffering into an exalted sphere in which everything possessed a cosmic significance. There, where each soul was free to work out its cosmic destiny, violence was entirely *personal*: Sheikh Dhari, Leachman's assassin—or "murderer," as he was styled in British accounts—was the single exception to the general amnesty granted after the rebellion. He was not seen as a member of that uprising, but as someone who had violated the honor between two men; the Iraqi unrest was reconfigured as an episode of medieval battle, in which the mettle of chivalric men was tested and rewarded. In this "supreme crisis," "every quality [Leachman] possessed, even *his faults*, served the cause of England."²⁷

Ordering bombers was thus entirely consonant with the sensibility of the Arabist agent enchanted with notions of Arabian liberty. A journalist remarked, "It is frequently those officials who are loudest in their demand for complete independence and for the removal of the British forces and advisers who are also the first to cry out for the assistance of British aeroplanes." The agents loved Arabia for its otherworldly qualities, and it was those very qualities that made Arabia a space fit to bear the equally unearthly destruction wreaked by bombers. Britons considered the moral world of Arabia distinct from their own. From the outset, the intelligence project in Arabia had been infused with a philosophical spirit, which did not depart it at this stage.²⁸

The Arabian window of acceptability opened the door to wider uses of aerial bombardment. In 1921, the Air Staff deemed it better, in view of allegations of "barbarity,"

to preserve appearances . . . by still nominally confining bombardment to targets which are strictly military . . . to avoid emphasizing the truth that air warfare has made such restrictions obsolete and impossible.

It may be some time until another war occurs and meanwhile the public may become educated as to the meaning of air power."

Arabia offered the Air Staff a means of selling the new warfare to the public by exhibiting it in a famously romantic and chivalric place where, it was known, the bourgeois rules lately exposed by the war as utterly bankrupt did not apply anyway. (Significantly, when Iraq's former air commander, Sir John Salmond, called the question of air control's humanity a "paradox" in a United Service Institute lecture, the *Times* paraphrased it as "anachronism.") There, any principle not military devolved into bathos. After all, the Iraqi authorities, the Air Staff pointed out, were among the first to concede the potentialities of aircraft.²⁹ Thus, in otherworldly Arabia, bombardment became irrevocably part of this world; eventually, British bombs fell frictionlessly all over the world, including Europe. The gruesome relish evident in a 1924 report by the officer commanding Squadron 45 in Iraq is striking in this regard:

The Arab and Kurd . . . now know what real bombing means, in casualties and damage; they now know that within 45 minutes a full sized village . . . can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured by four or five machines which offer them no real target, no opportunity for glory as warriors, no effective means of escape.

Ultimately excised, this sentence appears verbatim in early drafts of an Air Staff report to Parliament. The officer himself later achieved distinction, and, writes David Omissi, "in the ruins of this dying village one can dimly perceive the horrific firestorms of Hamburg and Dresden," for the officer was Squadron Leader Arthur Harris, head of Bomber Command in World War Two. Harris later traced his faith in the heavy bomber as the only salvation against Germany to his experience in the Middle East. It was in Iraq that he made the first long-range heavy bomber by crudely converting a transport plane and developed night bombing as a means of terrorizing Arabs into thinking airplanes could see them even in the dark. At his side then, as during the war, were Robert Saundby and Ralph Cochrane. Indeed, two and a half times as many British pilots served in Iraq as elsewhere. Air control trained the RAF in bombardment; it was the only significant British experience of bombing before World War Two. The RAF thought it was getting good training for the next war—whatever historians' assessment of its preparation. Even the British focus on general area bombing (as opposed to the American preoccupation with "precision")—can be traced to the emphasis on moral effect over accuracy in the Iraqi laboratory. Tellingly, it was under Harris's wartime influence that Churchill, as

prime minister, warded off periodic pangs of conscience about bombing German cities with faith in the "higher poetic justice" that "those who have loosed these horrors upon mankind will now in their homes and persons feel the shattering stroke of retribution." It was the Ikhwan all over again, and Europe itself had become the scene of a clash between good and evil—a gradual transposition that dated to the days well before Hitler's seizure of power, when "fascist" was an epithet hurled against the Saudi government and Britons began to fear that airpower—and technological hubris more generally—would not so much secure the empire as open up the possibility of Britain's being bombed into a *desert*. The alleged prematurity with which Britons began to fear aerial bombardment in the early 1930s, before any apparent material international development, seems less remarkable when we look, as they did, beyond the European horizon of history to the distant happenings in the deserts of Arabia.³⁰

The Human Face of Air Control?

Ideas about Arabia may have exonerated air control from charges of *inhumanity*, but the regime's reliance on political officers on the ground, modeled on the veteran agents, was crucial to its projection of an actively humane image. Their supposed intuitive understanding of the place carried within it a claim to an empathetic style of colonial control that supposedly kept the regime from growing distant and impersonal. The theory of moral effect was intended to project a benign vision of air control, in which aircraft were explicitly modeled on the traditional political officer, merely replacing the traditional "prestige of the white man" with the prestige of a machine that took advantage of the "ignorance of the native mind." Not only were aircraft modeled on these traditional embodiments of British "moral suasion," but their continued presence on the ground provided the RAF with both scapegoats and a ready antidote, at least in theory, for all its faults of inhumanity.³¹

Initially, some feared that air control might prematurely render traditional political officers obsolete. The community of agents warned against such a development as likely to make the British as distant and hated as the late Turkish rulers of Iraq. They insisted, as seen in chapter 3, on the need for "men who are specially gifted, who have got the feeling of the Middle East in their blood." Indian officials speaking from long imperial experience likewise warned, "The *deus ex machina* is useful in his place, but is out of place in the day-to-day administration." While political officers did travel by air to reach their posts, accompany reconnaissances, and participate in bombing runs, the establishment's

gadflies had little to fear: the RAF quickly realized that it needed the cooperation of political officers on the ground to ascertain just when the desired moral effect had been achieved and avoid unduly prolonging operations. Ground agents were also crucial for coping with the problems of pilot disorientation and visibility failures that continued to plague the theoretically all-seeing regime (although they, too, often remained disoriented and requested aerial tours to better understand the terrain). The importance of swift action without reference to a home department in a region apparently rife with conspiracies also made a fully organized intelligence system on the ground indispensable.³²

At first, existing political officers seemed likely to fulfill the needs of the civil government, the army, and the air force. During the 1920 insurrection, however, the RAF found itself somewhat constrained by the "reluctance" of these officers "to appear to be alarmist, with the result that their reports were too meagre and too late." Somewhat paradoxically, the regime's early excesses were also blamed on political officers' ignorant and overly enthusiastic requests for bombers (blindly obeyed by airmen inadequately aware of their own "semi-political" role). These problems were remedied by the creation of an RAF Special Service Officer (SSO) organization eventually consisting of a Central Bureau with agents on the outside in charge of the various zones of the country. Pilots, SSOs, and administrative inspectors (as the former political officers were now styled) worked closely together.³³

The SSOs quickly adopted their predecessors' tactics and epistemology. Intuitive ability and canny knowledge of local custom were deemed indispensable to acquisition of the information required for bombardment, given the "peculiar mentality" of tribesmen, "who," Glubb explained, "deemed it a duty to receive and to welcome a guest, although he was mapping their villages with a view to bombing them and told them so." Immersion became a universal principle of aircraft intelligence in theaters of irregular warfare, where selection of the correct air objective called for information materially different from that used against a "first class power": "comprehensive and accurate knowledge of the topography, the psychology of the enemy, his customs, characteristics, and industries" and the ability to "sift the evidence very thoroughly" for truth. The importance of constant roving, for any type of agent in the Middle East, was etched in stone. As SSO "Akhwan Defence," Glubb, along with several others, advised pilots to heed the wisdom of their terrestrial counterparts:

There is no golden road to the acquisition of tribal knowledge. The *deus ex-machina* [*sic*] who descends upon a miserable camp of frightened nomads, and shouts at them for five minutes above the noise of the engine, cannot expect to learn much. Only long hours,

days and weeks of intercourse will make him familiar with natives and without this familiarity, he cannot commence to understand his work.

In 1930, the Air Council formally adopted this principle. The ultimate goal for agents and pilots was, as before, to be able to think like an Arab and imitate his "magical" ability to "divine" knowledge, such as the intentions of raiders, from desert signs, even seemingly "invisible" ones. Major Jarvis marveled at Philby's prediction of approaching raiders as chief British representative in Amman: "It seems extraordinary that it remained for a British official to notice and identify a strange symbol of lines and half-circles, which to the educated Arabs conveyed nothing, and to forecast that which was shortly to occur." These agents claimed empathy with, even love for, Arabs as the source of their genius. Immersion enabled them to overcome the near impossibility, as one put it, of a man of one race ever understanding another, and to "interpret what is in [the Arabs'] mind." Air Intelligence trusted SSOs to accurately "sense impending events" (if not "dig down to the facts," a task more befitting the SIS). Successful bombardment was often attributed to SSO genius, wireless technology allowing them to communicate swiftly with aircraft—from their mouths to God's ears. They differed from prewar agents in that their work reflected the war's expansion of intelligence into the permanent nomadic warfare of peacetime, exemplified by the counter-raiding tactics of Glubb's Southern Desert Camel Corps, explicitly recalling Lawrence's wartime adventures (not to mention old-fashioned British naval policing against pirates).³⁴

The security that aircraft in turn provided this ground intelligence system was lauded as the source of the regime's ultimate benevolence: air control, its defenders argued, promoted greater understanding between administrators and Iraqis by enabling political officers to roam without fear. Backed by the skeletal air regime, these men on the spot, in the eyes of the ever-nostalgic former agents in the Colonial Office, were akin to those intrepid Britons of an older, braver age who had served in frontier zones at the bidding of "an adventurous spirit." The austere air control regime was to them ideally suited to a country that had always been and would always be a sort of vast frontier zone, where one brave Briton would more than make up for the absence of troops. For all its modernity, air control strengthened the feeling that in Arabia they could be as imperialists of old.³⁵

Of course, it was also political officers' untrammelled mobility that ensured the RAF received the intelligence it needed to "[pick] out the right villages and to hit when trouble comes." By this ironic logic, the RAF's successful persecution of a village testified to their *intimacy* with people on the ground, without which they would not have been able to strike it accurately. Indeed, the claim to empathy

ultimately underwrote the entire air control system with its authoritative reassurances that bombardment was a tactic that would be respected and expected in this unique land. As late as 1957, RAF Marshal Sir John Slessor defended the regime by pointing to the support of SSOs, who "became so attached to their tribesmen that they sometimes almost 'went native.'" Well into the 1980s, Glubb insisted, "The basis of our desert control was not force but persuasion and love." In 1989, a military historian—much-cited, even by U.S. Air Force officers—again vindicated the regime by citing Glubb: "No European was ever closer and more sympathetic to the Arabs than Sir John Glubb." And then there are the epigraphs from the new millennium that open this chapter.³⁶

At the end of the day, the claim to empathy was of course built, literally, on sand. From its Edwardian invention as an intelligence epistemology, it signaled not the recognition of a common humanity but a self-alienating strategy for coping in what was perceived as another physical and moral universe. After the war, aspiring agents, inspired partly by the legends surrounding their predecessors, continued to venture to Arabia to escape the bonds of *too much* civilization, to recover a noble, free, democratic spirit lost to "utilitarian" England. Their effort to gather intelligence in the Middle East began with the same baptismal sensations of moving in a fictional, unreal, biblical, enchanted, and uncanny space. They reached for literature and an elegiac mood to convey the "half-romantic, half-mystic feelings" the landscape aroused. Appreciation for the desert's strange beauty remained the mark of individuals *estranged* from "normal" civilization. They too found in the desert sublime a remembrance of God, a rekindling of faith far from "the cold blasts of Western doubt" and an opportunity to fulfill the nomadic instinct that was "part of the heritage of our race." Their travel in the desert was still understood as an escape into the blue, a truant fulfillment of patriotic duty. Glubb knew that "in the desert I was alone. The government was indifferent." He fashioned himself into an "enthusiastic young man" whom his superiors found "slightly unbalanced," "conceited," and often insubordinate. To enter Arabia was still to exit the *customary* world, in both senses of the word, for "the desert is a world in itself."³⁷

The "extraordinary and romantic" world of the RAF in Iraq compounded the feeling of being in a world apart. Its tenuous links to "civilisation" through a miraculous wireless infrastructure, and bruits of Lawrence's presence in the ranks, only fed its Arabian mystique. If flight over the austere biblical terrain reached new heights of sublimity and divinity, an escape from "the normal things in life" to "a new mysterious world," it also produced "quite a bad effect upon one's nerves," a feeling that "the end of the world had really come," according to Brooke-Popham. Experienced agents stressed that for new pilots, this "sense of being lost at sea" was a critical "mental factor." Pilots too grew

skilled at identifying "that air of quiet weariness which comes to those who have been in the desert too long." They fell prey to "a gentle, nameless terror" that made them go temporarily mad and increasingly "fey" as time passed. This was not a place for empathy but for total psychic breakdown, apparently; without some kind of bracing, Britons risked losing their minds. Emulation of Arabs was intended to enable their survival in this extraterrestrial space but did not produce compassion for the Arab victims of the surreal world of bombardment they actually created by pulling the strings of fate from the sky. Thus did Iraq actually become a place beyond the reach of secular and humanitarian law. It remained beyond the gaze of legality and society, a place agents had long used as a site for recovering an otherwise compromised *individual* sovereignty.³⁸

True empathy was officially proscribed for the safety of the regime. Official indignation at the utterances and activities of the alleged "fanatics" among the veteran agents inspired efforts to prevent copycat SSOs from falling into the same pattern. Despite official encouragement of immersion, they were firmly warned against "the inclination to drift into native ways" and were expected to "maintain the standards of European life." Intelligence officers were to tour continually but strictly "without special predilections for any one of the countries." The ideal was a staff of agents like the old one, minus their eccentric passion for individual potentates and the grotesque threat of empathy with their colonial subjects. Someone perhaps like Wyndham Deedes, who was eulogized for his detachment, a "withdrawal from the world" by which he entered "the realm of contemplation in which the phenomena of daily existence are only . . . illusion." (Such aloofness ultimately proved unsustainable even in his case: it was partly frustration with his isolation that led him to resign as chief secretary in Palestine in 1923 to pursue the life of an ascetic and social worker in East London.) Ultimately, the air control scheme rested on terrorizing the population with an *unfamiliar* technology or, rather, with one just familiar enough to allow the effects of exemplary violence to "sink into the mind of the tribesmen"; real familiarity or, for that matter, empathy would only breed contempt. In the succinct words of one scholar, "The technique of 'empathy' remained a method of control"; it underwrote the mandate's entire dyarchical structure, a highly "exacting" form of control, as Lawrence put it, in which British advisers were entrusted with using their psychic, hypnotic influence to ensure the Iraqi government ran along lines favorable to imperial interests.³⁹

Defending the Regime

In interwar Iraq, an obsession with "grand conspiracy," as in previous historical moments, was implicated in the creation of a regime founded on terror.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, air control did little to assuage official paranoia about the Middle East. Though it owed its invention to a perception of the entanglement of outside and inside threats, its infrastructural minimalism was premised on the existence of no "outside" threats to the regime; and yet it was hurriedly installed and the exhausted army relieved before this condition had been satisfied. The Air Ministry hastily revised its estimate of the scheme's defensive powers upward and prepared to face an always imminent invasion that they knew the regime could not withstand—John Salmond later confessed that when the RAF took control in 1922, the situation on Iraq's borders was "far from that anticipated at the Cairo Conference." The air control scheme was based on bluff, on keeping the country in check by projecting untold British military power in the lonely flight of a single aircraft, and bluffs are always subject to being called, a potentiality that could only feed paranoia. Most of all, the British were painfully aware that their neighbors' "system of pin pricks and invasion by insidious methods" was being met by reliance on a scheme "which at best can be described as an experiment."⁴¹

While airpower became essential to Britain's ability to hold on to its new acquisitions in the Middle East, this "Land of the RAF" became equally indispensable to British preeminence in airpower. The RAF relied on its Iraqi bases in order to exist as a service. Early on, Meinertzhagen had asserted:

If ever there was an area where AIR POWER could be exercised to its full extent . . . that area is the Middle East and all our plans for control and defence should be based on AIR POWER. No other country in the world has such a training ground, such opportunities and such a strangle-hold as we have in the Middle East, if we are wise.

One of the reasons for keeping the Middle East was the *space* it provided for developing Britain's aerial defenses (defenses needed primarily to keep the Middle East). Both his department and the Air Staff realized they could hardly air this factor in public. The Cairo Conference propitiously concluded that two of the scheme's major advantages—if not primary purposes—were imperial: the opportunity to train and test an independent air force and the creation "of an 'All Red' military and commercial air route to India." No other theater allowed combination of training "with work of the 'productive' character" going on in Iraq. The Middle East was the ideal and *only* place in which to develop the new mechanical warfare in what was increasingly seen as a postnaval age.⁴²

With these imperial advantages at stake, letting go of Iraq—the proclaimed objective of the mandatory relationship—posed an awkward dilemma. Not entirely coincidentally, the theory of moral effect also made it difficult to determine when the Iraqi mandate was ready for full independence. Even apparent

pacification could not license a slackening of air control, whose deterrent effect, experts argued, was the only thing keeping the country from plunging into chaos. On the eve of Iraq's admission to the League of Nations, the Air Ministry argued vigorously against withdrawal on the grounds that the RAF there protected the entire empire from collapse (not to mention preserving access to oil fields and a base for war against Russia). The ministry insisted that, despite new diplomatic agreements, Turkey, Persia, and Russia remained threatening; diminution of imperial forces would reduce "the wholesome awe" that kept these "forces of disorder" in check. This meant that intelligence arrangements also would have to remain intact—they too existed to keep tabs on Iraq's ever-precarious "external relations" and on the "precocious growth of ideas of Nationalism and Independence" likely to emerge were those relations ever settled. Such nationalism, the British foresaw, would inevitably consist in Iraqis intriguing with "different countries externally, and different parties and classes internally" to oust the British.⁴³

Withdrawal would, in any case, wreck the strategic air route, force India to strengthen its reserves, and thus cost as much as continuing the regime. It was decided that the RAF should explain to the Iraqi government that if it did not think it could maintain security alone, the British government would agree, "very reluctantly," to leave the RAF in Iraq for some time on condition that Iraq would try to strengthen its forces and stand alone. A considerable advantage of this tack was that Iraq would then presumably bear the cost of maintaining the RAF, allowing the British to further ingratiate themselves by offering financial assistance. Above all, this canard would dispel "the impression... that we are anxious to keep the air force in Iraq for Imperial purposes." (To their great annoyance, the Iraqi government nevertheless greeted the offer with suspicion.) In fact, ends and means had become one; the scheme that had enabled control of frontierless Iraq now required permanent retention of Iraq for preservation of the frontierless system of colonial control. Iraq was the "key" to the imperial air route; aside from geopolitical security, it secured the empire emotionally, bringing the cherished dominions closer to "the heart of the empire." Whether it really was the pivot of the world, the arrangements based on that assumption quickly made it so.⁴⁴

Iraq's peculiar geography was therefore pressed before the Permanent Mandates Commission, the League of Nations body in charge of supervising the mandate system, to justify the need to maintain the RAF there even after Iraq joined the league. In a besieged, frontierless country, the RAF would ensure the British could implement their alliance as per the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi treaty. (The commission observed that this would "in some way impair the independence of Iraq," an argument the British official found difficult to

counter.) Technically, the RAF would remain for purposes of *external* defense only, but British officials' conviction that external enemies were always entangled with internal ones ensured they put the widest possible construction on their brief. Ambassador Sir Francis Humphrys in Baghdad affirmed that the success of postindependence Iraq would "largely depend on the moral influence which the RAF will continue to exert, on a people naturally lawless and averse to the payment of taxes." (The difficulty was that, though it was politically impossible to let it be known that aircraft might still be used to maintain internal order, not letting this fact be known might itself cause unrest, given that air control operated, in theory, largely through its moral effect.) Thus, while Iraq was launched on the path to independence, existing arrangements remained intact. Every effort was made to ensure that key elements of Iraqi defense—aircraft, wireless, armored cars, intelligence sources—were not shared with the nascent Iraqi Army. None of this was to be construed as an effort to prevent the growth of Iraqi forces; it was merely a call for a "long institutional period." In the end, the British concession of Iraqi independence in 1932 was confessedly nominal; the Air Staff made it clear that the change would be "more apparent than real." The regime's austerity allowed discreet continuity in these arrangements, for "in countries of this sort... the impersonal drone of an aeroplane... is not so obtrusive as the constant presence... of soldiers." The RAF could occupy and control the entire country without apparently doing so, simply by projecting a silent threat. Squadrons were gradually reduced, but the country was reoccupied during World War Two after Britain quashed Rashid Ali's pro-Axis government. The RAF finally departed during the Iraqi revolution of 1958.⁴⁵

In 1960 (the year the CIA made its first attempt to assassinate the Iraqi president), John Glubb reflected on the ease with which humans justify their actions: Ibn Saud, a benign patriarch, had unleashed the massacring power of the Ikhwan to consolidate his power, all the while "breathing the benevolence and the service of God," and the United States, breathing its own lofty ideals, had dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Neither, he explains, was guilty of hypocrisy, for "the human mind is a surprising mechanism." "Hypocrisy" is indeed useless as an *explanation*, however useful it may be as a description, of the failures of avowedly enlightened regimes. I am endeavoring here to lay bare the "surprising mechanism" of the British official mind which enabled it, with mostly clear conscience on the count of hypocrisy—indeed, with confidence in a consistent paternalism—to invent and implement the world's first air control regime. The "idea of Arabia" circulated by agents over the previous twenty years provided them with a key for evading all charges of hypocrisy and brutality. Though the gulf between airmen and some of their critics may never have

been bridged, enough people were convinced, indeed impressed, for the regime to remain viable for the entire interwar period.⁴⁶

Air policing has been called "the salvation of the Royal Air Force" and "the midwife of modern Iraq"; it saved each from being swallowed into another service and country, respectively. Whatever one feels about Iraq as a nation-state or the air force as a military arm, there is, I think, a more useful reading of air control: it created a space in the air for empire at a time when imperialism was no longer at home in the world. Besides diminishing reliance on tired British and Indian troops (whose employment abroad was inciting ever louder protest in India), it allowed "control without occupation" and, as we shall see, without the approval of public opinion. Similarly, today's drawdown plans for Iraq include little-discussed plans to replace troops with firepower that could "strike everywhere—and at once," in the ominous words of a Pentagon consultant. Air control was (and is) a mechanism of control for a region and in a time in which more overt colonial rule was (and is) a political impossibility. This was the moment of covert empire, whose gossamer earthly framework we will turn to next.⁴⁷

8 Covert Empire

At the basis of bureaucracy as a form of government... lies [the] superstition of a possible and magic identification of man with the forces of history. The ideal of such a political body will always be the man behind the scenes who pulls the strings of history.... The two key figures in this system, whose very essence is aimless process, are the bureaucrat on one side and the secret agent on the other.

—Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951

Agents' individual acts of cunning were but a drop in an ocean of lies; even the Arab Revolt, particularly the freedom that was its object, was a ruse, one that troubled some agents (Lawrence's pricks of conscience are famous), although never enough to cause them to desist from complicity in it. They knew its aim was merely, as Sykes put it, "the façade of an independent Arab Empire." Likewise, the Baghdad civil administration was informed in no uncertain terms that "free" Mesopotamia was to be a British protectorate administered behind an Arab "façade." Such were the auspicious foundations of the postwar empire in the Middle East for which air control provided the material, if ethereal, coercive foundation. On the ground, the agents ran the show. "The British agent-Orientalist... during and after World War I took over both the role of expert-adventurer-eccentric... and the role of colonial authority, whose position is in a central place next to the indigenous ruler," writes Edward Said. In fact, their position was not so