

Peace brokers: The legacy of Annapolis

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [December 25, 2007](#) issue

The local public library asked me to introduce and discuss the 1962 movie *Lawrence of Arabia*. The screening happened to coincide with the day of the multinational Annapolis Conference on the Mideast, so I could not resist showing a segment from the final moments of the film. The parallel between *Lawrence of Arabia*, which ends in 1918 in Damascus, and the 2007 gathering of peacemakers at Annapolis, Maryland, is this: in both situations there is a deep imbalance of power and a pervasive distrust.

In the closing moments of *Lawrence of Arabia*, British general Lord Edmund Allenby (Jack Hawkins) sits on one side of a table across from Prince Feisal (Alex Guinness), leader of the Arab revolt. Feisal's Arab army has helped Allenby defeat the Turks, but Feisal has little cause to trust Allenby, who eventually betrays all promises of freedom made to Feisal. Standing nearby is a subdued T. E. Lawrence (Peter O'Toole). As British army liaison to Prince Feisal, Lawrence too has seen the betrayal up close.

Prince Feisal turns to General Allenby, slaps his hand on the table and says: "The power house, the telephone exchange, these I concede. The pumping plant I must retain."

Allenby: "If you retain the pumping plant there will be no water, sir."

Feisal: "I shall be glad of any technical assistance."

Allenby: "In fairness, then, you must bring down your flag."

Feisal: "I shall not bring down my flag."

Allenby then turns to his diplomatic adviser, who responds: "Well. It seems we're to have a British waterworks with an Arab flag on it."

They continue to play the game, making surface agreements that do not affect the basic power arrangements. It was this way in Damascus in 1918, and it was this way in Annapolis in 2007. Prince Feisal was not naive, nor is his great-great nephew, the current King Abdullah of Jordan, who was at the conference at Annapolis.

Feisal took what came his way. When he became king of Syria he joined in an agreement with Chaim Weizmann, head of the Zionist Commission to Palestine at the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919. The agreement was designed to create a peaceful coexistence between Arabs and Jews, but Feisal added a handwritten note: "If changes are made, I cannot be answerable for failing to carry out this agreement."

Feisal knew that he and Weizmann were both under the heavy hand of the Western powers. When Feisal lost his throne in Syria, the agreement died. Feisal settled for a kingdom in Iraq, and ruled under British guidance until his death in 1933. The agreement that died so abruptly had opened with hopeful words:

The Arab State and Palestine in all their relations and undertakings shall be controlled by the most cordial goodwill and understanding, and to this end Arab and Jewish duly accredited agents shall be established and maintained in the respective territories.

The British were not interested in implementing any agreement reached by these parties. Instead of acting as honest brokers, this racist colonial power divided the spoils of war with the French.

Now in 2007 there are again peace talks. And once again an empire-building colonialist power is pretending that it will be an honest broker between Israelis and the Palestinians.

It is possible that the U.S., Israel and the Palestinians could emerge from the negotiations begun at Annapolis and agree, with international law and international opinion, that the 1967 Green Line must be the recognized border between Palestine and Israel.

No successful peace accord will be reached, however, without the moral and financial force of the U.S., which alone has the power to bring peace to the region. After seven years of inaction there is no reason to believe that President Bush will be able to push both parties toward peace in the final year of his term.

Nor can Bush hide the fact that he is not an honest broker. At Annapolis this became obvious when he declared that Israel has to be a Jewish state, a position that Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat immediately rejected. Erekat knows that officially declaring Israel a Jewish state when 1.5 million Arab Israelis are within its borders is a contradiction in terms. He also knows that by defining the future state as Jewish, Bush signals that he favors the Israeli position in future negotiations on the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

Still, Annapolis has begun a process that could provide the next U.S. president with a momentum to lead Israelis and Palestinians toward a just peace. Will that happen? It could, but as Prince Feisal says to Major Lawrence in *Lawrence of Arabia*, "We will need a miracle."