Damascus falls on 1 October 1918. Lawrence, after wrestling with the difficulties of post-War governance in Damascus for three days, persuades Allenby to let him return to London to lobby for the Arab cause. British and Arab forces keep the Turks on the back foot and over the next 30 days drive them from what we now call Syria.
Amid the jubilation, Lawrence had to head off a rival Arab take-over; organise a new city administration with trusted Arab allies like Shukri Ayubi; sort out sanitation, electricity, police, fire-brigade, trams and telegraphs. But ‘successful rebels [often made] bad subjects and worse governors.’ So sadly Feisal might have ‘to rid himself of his war-friends.’

That evening, Lawrence ‘was sitting alone in [his] room, [pondering] the turbulent memories of the day … when the Muedhdhins began [their call to] prayer … One, with a ringing voice of special sweetness, cried from a near mosque:

“God alone is great: I testify there are no gods, but God; and Mohammed is his Prophet. Come to prayer: come to security. God alone is great: there is no god – but God.”

At the close, he dropped his voice two tones … and softly added: ‘And He is very good to us this day, O people of Damascus.’”

1 October – Damascus

Before dawn Lawrence was wakened to ‘word that Abd el Kadir [a rival Arab leader] was making rebellion’ with the Druze; by noon it had been quelled by Arab machine-guns.

After lunch, he had to sort out a disease-ridden Turkish military hospital. Then ‘a bunch of urgent matters: some death sentences, a new justiciary, a famine in barley.’ Yet amid all this, he found time to visit Saladin’s tomb and to sit for a portrait by James McBey. No wonder he looked tired!

2 October – Damascus

Allenby arrived in his grey Rolls-Royce: ‘In ten words he gave his approval to my having impertinently imposed Arab Governments, here and at Deraa, upon the chaos of victory. He confirmed the appointment of Ali Riba Rikabi as his Military Governor, under the orders of Feisal’ and regulated responsibilities between Arab and British Armies.

The burden of responsibility lifted from Lawrence: ‘In ten minutes all the maddening difficulties had slipped away. Mistily I realized that the harsh days of my solitary battling had passed. The lone hand had won against the world’s odds, and I might let my limbs relax in this dreamlike confidence and decision and kindness which were Allenby.’

Feisal arrived by special train from Deraa about 2pm. ‘It was fitting the two chiefs should meet for the first time in the heart of their victory; with myself still acting as the interpreter between them. Feisal, smiling through the tears which the welcome of his people had forced from him,’ thanked Allenby for his trust. These contrasting individuals: ‘Feisal, large-eyed, colourless and worn, like a fine dagger; Allenby, gigantic and red and merry’, forged a bond of mutual respect.

‘When Feisal had gone, I made to Allenby the last (and also I think the first) request I ever made him for myself – leave to go away. For a while he would not have it; but I reasoned, reminding him of year-old promise … In the end he agreed; and then at once I knew how much I was sorry.’

3 October – Damascus leaving for Cairo next morning. Lawrence arrived back in England on 24 October, making a brief visit to his family in Oxford, his first after four years away, before rushing off to London on 28 October.

On the afternoon of 29 October Lawrence presented his vision for post-War Arabia to the War Cabinet’s Eastern Committee as an alternative to the Sykes-Picot agreement of May 1916, now regarded as long overtaken by most (even Sykes) and dismissed by Lawrence as: ‘an old-style division of Turkey between England, France, and Russia.’ Sykes-Picot had at first been kept secret, and when it was ‘made public by the Soviets’ in November 1917, the Turks made propaganda ‘of the more spiteful paragraphs at a banquet in Beyrout.’ As Lawrence admitted: ‘for a while the disclosure hurt us; justly, for we and the French had thought to plaster over a split in policy by a formula vague enough for each to interpret in his divergent way.

Lawrence reveals in Seven Pillars that he ‘early betrayed the treaty’s existence to Feisal [so its later disclosure came as no surprise to him], and had convinced him that his escape was to help the British so much that after peace they would not be able, for shame,’ to disregard the Arab claims. ‘He begged [Feisal] to trust not in [British] promises … but in his own strong performance.’ That performance had now been delivered; Lawrence sought to capitalize.

Lawrence’s proposal retained many aspects of Sykes-Picot but dispensed with any French involvement in the region save their long standing (since the 1860s) commitment to the Christians of the Lebanon. The ‘Confederation of Arab States’ option in Sykes-Picot was confirmed, with Lawrence going so far as to allocate realms between Hussein’s sons (see map left): Feisal was to get the majority (modern Syria and Jordan) unencumbered by any ‘spheres of influence’, while Abdullah would have to make do with Iraq under British rule. The only problem would be to get the French and other claimants to go away; not an easy task!

30 October – Lawrence called on the War Office and was then summoned to a private audience of King George V at Buckingham Palace in the afternoon where he was to be invested with the CB and DSO. Lawrence unexpectedly declined, citing Britain’s failure (as he saw it) to deliver its promises of Arab independence. Many were scandalized but the King seems to have understood Lawrence’s angst.

That same day, Britain and the Ottomans signed an armistice aboard HMS Agamemnon, a British battleship, at Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos; the ceasefire came into effect at 12 noon on 31 October.