The Iraqi Mandate: An Examination of the Relationship between Britain and Iraq in the Aftermath of the First World War

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The First World War had a major impact on the development on the whole of the Middle East. It saw the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the evolution of political Zionism, culminating in the spread of Jewish and Arab nationalism. During the war, the British launched their Mesopotamian Campaign in an attempt to retain control over valuable natural resources in the Persian Gulf, as well as provide a base of operations to protect India, the crown jewel of the British Empire. While the European allies, victorious against Germany, Austro-Hungary and the ill-fated Ottomans, all turned their colonial attentions on the region, it was the actions of the British government that ultimately laid the foundations of many issues still unresolved in Iraq and the Middle East. The British establishment of the Iraq Mandate and British occupation of the three Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra following the cessation of war formed the precursor to the creation of the state of Iraq.

While the establishment of Iraq as an independent state did not result in the same level of chaos that the creation of the state of Israel incurred, both are examples of the mismanagement of British policy in the region. The British, mired in imperialist thought and suffering economic distress after an expensive war, did not seek to establish a permanent colony in Mesopotamia. They already possessed a presence through the interaction of merchants in Basra, but the British hardly considered Iraq in the same vein as they did India or the Americas two hundred years earlier. However, as with the Palestine Mandate, the British failed to give adequate provision to the Arabs, who collectively demanded that Britain deliver on the promises given by Sir Henry McMahon to the Sherif of Mecca for an independent Arab state. The British had given promises "in return for Arab support against [the] Ottomans."[1]

Revolts against British rule, unbalanced representation in government, and divisions between religious sects and ethnic groups plagued the creation of Iraq. In essence, the British could be held accountable for the history of Iraq, the events that

allowed for the rise of Saddam Hussein, and the eventual U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Many of the same issues deter the effectiveness of the Iraqi government today, which ultimately prevent Iraq from establishing a credible and unified political foundation. By analyzing the events of the past, it may be possible to rectify the situation in Iraq. Indeed, had the British not lacked a strong, cohesive plan for Mesopotamia in the early twentieth century, Iraq may have developed along a different path.

The British Mesopotamian Campaign

At the outbreak of war in 1914, the primary focus of France and Russia was on the events unfurling in Western Europe. The Western Front occupied much of France's time and energy. In comparison, the British, while still active in direct confrontation against the Central Powers on the European continent, cast their field of vision wider. Protecting India greatly concerned Britain, and to the British, the Ottoman-held *vilayet,* or province*,* of Basra provided a key point of anxiety. The Ottomans, who had cast their lot with Germany and Austro-Hungary, faced the threat of military force in southern Mesopotamia.

It would be easy to suggest that control of the valuable, and at that point untapped, oil reserves located in the region drove the British occupation, however, Basra's location and its importance vis-a-vis access to the Indian Ocean determined Britain's actions. Above all, "it was this geographical position which drew the area into the military operations of both world wars."[2]

The India Expeditionary Force (IEF) formed the manpower behind the operation. That is not to say that the military force was particularly strong. The IEF 'D', which captured Basra in November 1914, was only 5,000 strong; though by 1915, its numbers had increased dramatically.[3] The British seriously underestimated the amount of manpower it would take to wrest control of Basra, Baghdad (and later Mosul) from the Ottomans, in part, as Britain had no clear government policy on the matter. Competing with demands for British troops on the Western Front, the IEF— under the direction of the India Office (rather than the Foreign Office)—had limited operational ability. Furthermore, individual military commanders were apt to take certain liberties with their interpretation of military orders. For example, General Townsend's orders were to "protect the sources of oil and safeguard Basra, lower Mesopotamia, the Shatt-al-Arab, and Kuwait against Turkish advances,"[4] but he

"interpreted his mission more loosely … [and]… probed the country further north."[5]

Once the British gained control of Basra, however, it became clear that the British government had to formalize its presence somewhat to cement their authority in Basra, and generate public support back home. Sir Percy Cox, who played an important part in the creation of Iraq following the end of the war, was quick to fill the void: "[He] immediately proceeded to issue a proclamation to the effect that the British were not at war with the 'Arab inhabitants of the river banks.'"[6] History demonstrates "that by 1915 the Entente allies were agreed on the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire."[7]

Originally, the British intended to capture and control the *vilayet* of Basra, which provided direct access to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Baghdad, and Mosul, further north, did not possess the same strategic military position. Nevertheless, by 1915, the British ordered the IEF to advance to Baghdad, but it would not be until 1917 that British forces entered the city (and they did not secure Mosul until after the peace agreement with the Ottoman Empire).[8]

Essentially, the British Mesopotamian Campaign was a haphazard and poorly executed operation. Political differences between the Foreign Office and the India Office, coupled with the intense focus on the European arena undermined its success. With declining morale of both British troops and its public, Britain often subjected the operation in Mesopotamia to delays and a distinct lack of fiscal support. The British government's opinion on the importance of Mesopotamia was lukewarm at best. Indeed, "the campaign in Mesopotamia was not part of the planning of the Supreme Military Command."[9] The India Office was the primary supporter, and instigator, of the campaign.

Following the end of the war, the British position in Mesopotamia came under international consideration; particularly after U.S. President Woodrow Wilson presented his ideas on self-determination to the League of Nations. In 1970, historian and author V. H. Rothwell effectively summed up the operation and the resulting position the British found themselves in:

> War aims fluctuated with the war situation, politically and militarily, locally and generally. The powerful hold which the doctrine of self-determination gained in Britain and the United States in 1917-18 was a political development with consequences in Mesopotamia that were important in leading to the establishment of the largely self-governing kingdom of Iraq in 1921.[10]

The next step in the development of Mesopotamia into the independent state of Iraq came during the ensuing years. Wilson's doctrine of self-determination prevented thought of colonial implementation. Yet at the same time, no one, not even Wilson, could see the Arab people sustaining their own state without considerable help and governance by more advanced nations. From this conundrum was born the concept of the Mandate System, which found infamy over the next few years not only in Mesopotamia but in Palestine as well. Fundamentally, "the major aim of the British administration [during the First World War] was to maintain order in the area until the future status of the country was decided upon."[11]

The British Mandate

What makes the British Mandate over Iraq stand out is the lack of organization and decision making on the British side. The government in London was notoriously "undecided about [Iraq's] future."[12] As mentioned previously however, the evolution of international relations marked the decline of colonialism, which forced the European nations to consider how their relationship with such territories would change. Following the emerging idea of self-determination, "the Mandate System was designed to modify colonialism and prepare the way for independence."[13]

After the end of the war, and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the question of the British Mandates over Palestine and Mesopotamia came to the forefront of international affairs. Palestine, which is beyond the scope of this paper, became a deeply

Figure 1 Emir Faisal's party at Versailles, during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. At the centre, from left to right: Rustum Haidar, Nuri as-Said, Prince Faisal, Captain Pisani (behind Faisal) T. E. Lawrence, Faisal's assistant (name unknown), Captain Tahsin Qadri, c. 1919.

divisive situation that still remains chaotic and unstable today. In Mesopotamia, the experience was different, though still demonstrated the British tendency to mismanage the affairs outside of the main sphere of national influence.

So it was that "on 28 April 1920 Britain was awarded a Mandate over Iraq under the San Remo Agreement."[14] Britain, who already had knowledge and experience in the region, was thus given the authority over Basra, Baghdad, and breaking from the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Mosul. As was the case with many colonial empires, even in the Mandate System, there was an "outstanding [tendency] . . . to dispose of the territories of the Ottoman Empire without . . . consideration of the wishes of the indigenous inhabitants."[15] There was no exception in Iraq.

In 1933, Nigel Davidson, alumna of Christ Church at Oxford University (and later a graduate from the British Army officer training at Sandhurst), published an article entitled "The Termination of the 'Iraq Mandate'" that sheds some light on the British perspective, and offers a contemporary idea of their discernment of their legitimacy. In particular he states that:

> That policy combined the honouring [sic] of our pledges to the Arabs, the diminution of British commitments and burdens, and the performance of our mandatory obligations; and every important step has received the approval of the civilized [sic] world as expressed through the Council of the League and the Permanent Mandates Commission. It cannot, therefore, be alleged with any regard to the real facts that British policy is a sudden impulse of sentimentalism or pro-Arab partiality; whether right or wrong, it has received the considered approval of every British party when in power and the authority of the League's confirmation.[16]

The Kurdish and Assyrian people inhabiting the territory viewed the British as a preferable evil compared to Arab domination, due to the fear of discrimination and ethnic backlash.[17] A few decades later, the rise of Saddam Hussein confirmed this fear. On the other hand, the Arabs, Sunni and Shia alike, though grateful to be out from under the yoke of the Ottomans, were resentful of the governance of a non-Arab – or infidel – country. The two main reasons for this was the development of a new sense of Arab nationalism, which the British encouraged during the war[18] and Wilson's Fourteen Points supported; but also the fact that "the philosophy behind the Mandate System was unfamiliar and extremely distasteful to the Arabs."[19]

The dissatisfaction with the British Mandate led directly to the Arab

revolt in 1920, which occurred primarily "in the name of Iraqi independence and Arab self-determination."[20] Interestingly, this revolt was one instance in which the two main sects of Islam in Iraq, the Sunni and the Shia, managed to cooperate together with no antagonism, united by their joint desire for independence.[21] Despite this, there was generally a lack of cohesion between the participants demonstrating against British rule, and ultimately the revolt failed to dislodge the British Mandate. It did however cement the idea of a nationalism unique to Iraq.[22]

The British government however did press forward with the decision of allowing indirect rule over Iraq. This would allow the establishment of an Iraqi government, but still remain ultimately under the authority of Britain, a plan supported by the League of Nations as a suitable position for the emerging states to be in whilst they matured.[23] To this end, the British offered the "Hashemite Amir Faisal" the throne of Iraq.[24]

Whilst not entirely satisfactory to the Iraqi people, mostly because it allowed the British to control the direction of government, King Faisal I proved to be suited to the position. Possessing Arab nationalist sympathies, he nevertheless was politically astute enough to both cooperate with the British and provide leadership to the Iraqi people.[25] In fact, "King Faisal I refused the throne unless assurances were given that he would not remain ruler of a country under a mandate."[26] Other scholarship suggests a different viewpoint but emphasizes Faisal's link with the Pan-Arabism movement: "King Faisal and his advisers were … Arab nationalists, but they considered that acceptance of . . . questionable clauses was a price worth paying."[27]

As the Mandate System was never intended as a permanent measure, the British—who were suffering economic hardship on the domestic front following the war—were increasingly willing to divest themselves of the expenses associated with the Mandate. Their condition for Iraqi independence, though, was the securing of British economic interests in the region.

Creation of an Iraqi State

The level of resentment against the British and the Mandate System by the Iraqi people encouraged the British government to attempt to change their relationship. In June 1930, both signed the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty and "formed the basis of Iraq's relations with . . . Britain after Iraq's independence in 1932."[28]

Shedding the concept of the Mandate, the British government felt that the treaty provided a better concept of authority and acknowledged that Britain was planning an eventual retreat from the state. It provided the Iraqi government with direct control over the internal affairs of the country but gave the British rights of military usage of the country in case of war.[29]

For their part, the British were willing to grant complete independence to Iraq in an attempt to curtail spending and salvage the economic situation on the home front. The inter-war period during the 1930s saw an increase in popular opinion that the government should divest itself of responsibilities that did not provide considerable economic income. However, the issue with state creation was that the British, and indeed the League of Nations in general, had "doubts . . . concern[ing] . . . the willingness of Iraqis to accept, and their ability to operate, the institutions of representative government, and . . . the position of minorities."[30] The treaty of 1930 went a long way towards changing the image of Britain as an occupying force, and the "promise of imminent independence" kept much of the opposition in check.[31]

The independence of Iraq in 1932 did not automatically end Britain's influential role in the state or region. The Hashemite monarchy and the government of Iraq had a greater role in developing Iraqi national and international policy, but "Iraq's foreign policies would not be allowed to run counter to perceived British interests."[32] This position became clear during the Second World War, which erupted only a few years later.

The main problem facing Faisal and the fledgling state was the unification of its population and the satisfactory accommodation for all sections of society. The British had been concerned prior to granting independence that the Arabs were not yet capable of sustaining a state run along the lines of a democracy, and that old tribal feuds and ethnic confrontations would rear their heads. The issue of creating an Iraqi nationalism that faced Faisal was of profound importance. However, "the state apparatus that the British set up . . . [did not] . . . serve to forge the various segments of the society into an organic nation."[33] This issue in particular has remained for the most part unresolved.

The position of the minority communities, which included the Kurds and the Assyrians, became tenuous. Under British rule, they had enjoyed a respite from Arab dominion. The Assyrians, predominantly of Christian persuasion, had sought to obtain autonomy from the League of Nations but met with failure.[34] Following

the death of a number of Iraqi and Assyrian soldiers in 1933 during a violent confrontation, the Iraqi news media targeted the Assyrians as "a threat to the national integrity of Iraq . . . and…part of a . . . [plan] of Great Britain to reestablish its control [in the north]."[35] The resulting slaughter of the Assyrian community marked only one of many bloody conflicts that would erupt both within the state, and between Iraq and its neighbors. For many Iraqis though, this episode served as part of the building blocks of Iraqi identity because they had "crushed a community associated with . . . Britain."[36]

Conclusion

Ultimately, mismanagement, misunderstanding, cultural difference, and violent confrontation characterized the relationship between Britain and Iraq. The British should shoulder much of the blame for the resulting emergence of an Iraqi state that would eventually become a belligerent regional player. The history of European economic pursuit in Mesopotamia helped shape the Arab perception of the British, establishing from the beginning distrust. The eventual acknowledgement of the importance of oil, especially to the British who required outside sources—though for the majority of the era, they obtained oil supplies from the United States—would become paramount in the latter half of the twentieth century.[37]

The link between Iraq and India, as a trade route and as a security measure, remained of overriding importance to British foreign policy in the region. Even during the confrontations with Germany and her allies during the First World War, Britain still maintained manpower in Mesopotamia, not as a vanguard on the Ottoman's rear (though that certainly could be asserted) but in order to protect her Indian assets. Indeed, even during the Mandate and in the initial years of Iraqi independence, the relationship was unbalanced; Britain's primary aim was to ensure her national interest and security. Certainly, "Britain . . . adhered after the war to [her] conceptions of national and imperial interests, even when these were clearly not in line with the expressed wishes of the inhabitants [of Iraq]."[38] Consideration for the Iraqi people was not part of the agenda.

The creation of a representative government, headed by the Hashemite monarchy, was not without its critics. Many people "doubted the practicability of imposing European democracy upon an Eastern civilization [sic]."[39] The following decades would arguably prove these detractors right. The monarchy held on to

power until 1958 but fell during an Iraqi revolt that sought to bring the ideas of nationalism and socialism into the governance of the state, ideas emanating from the Soviet Union. This removed the last semblance of British influence from the country. The British relationship with Iraq remained slightly cold, if not outright hostile, throughout the twentieth century. In light of the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, it is worth tracing the history of modern Iraq back to the fiasco of the post-First World War period, and Britain's lack of effective governance and guidance of the Iraqi people. The occupation and subsequent Mandate of Iraq was ill-planned, and executed in such a manner that "Mesopotamia was ultimately taken in a stumble rather than a canter."[40]

Notes

1. Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 596.

2. Edith & E. F. Penrose, *Iraq: International Relations and National Development* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd and Westview Press, 1978), 6.

3. Peter Sluglett, "Imperial Myopia: Some Lessons from Two Invasions of Iraq," *The Middle East Journal*, 62, no. 4 (2008): 599-600, DOI: 10.3751.62.4.12 (accessed March 23, 2012).

4. Penrose, *Iraq: International Relations and National Development,* 32.

5. Ibid., 32.

6. Amal Vinogradov, "The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3, no. 2 (1972): 132, http://www.jstor.org/stable/162680 (accessed March 23, 2012).

7. Alan Palmer, *The Decline and Fall of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Fall River Press, 1992), 263.

8. Sluglett, "Imperial Myopia: Some Lessons from Two Invasions of Iraq," 594.

9. Penrose, *Iraq: International Relations and National Development,* 38.

10. V. H. Rothwell, "Mesopotamia in British War Aims, 1914-1918," *The Historical Journal* 13, no. 2 (1970): 293, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2637939 (accessed March 24, 2012).

11. Vinogradov, "The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered," 133.

12. Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 36.

13. Penrose, *Iraq: International Relations and National Development* , 1.

14. Ibid., 43.

15. Ibid., 32.

16. Nigel Davidson, "The Termination of the 'Iraq Mandate," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931-1939)*, 12, no. 1 (1933): 60, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2602708 (accessed March 24, 2012).

17. Ibid., 42.

18. Ibid., 33.

19. Ibid., 46.

20. Vinogradov, "The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered," 124.

21. Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 41.

22. Ibid., 43.

23. Ibid., 40.

24. Ibid., 46.

25. Ibid., 47.

26. Penrose, *Iraq: International Relations and National Development*, 47.

27. Ibid., 53.

28. Tripp, *A History of Iraq,* 65.

29. Ibid., 65.

30. Penrose, *Iraq: International Relations and National Development,* 54.

31. Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 65.

32. Ibid., 76.

33. Vinogradov, "The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered," 123.

34. Tripp, *A History of Iraq,* 78.

35. Ibid., 78.

36. Ibid., 78.

37. Rothwell, "Mesopotamia in British War Aims, 1914-1918," 288.

38. Penrose, *Iraq: International Relations and National Development*, 37.

39. Davidson, "The Termination of the 'Iraq Mandate," 77.

40. Stuart Cohen, "Mesopotamia in British Strategy, 1903-1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 9, no. 2 (1978): 181, http://www.jstor.org/stable/162370 (accessed March 23, 2012).

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