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Research Title: Britain's Policy Towards The Kurdish Question,  
1915-1923

Research Student: Saad Basheer Eskander

Thesis Degree: PhD

Institute: The London School Of Economics And Political Science

The end of the First World War in 1918 signalled the downfall of the old order in the Middle East by the virtual death of the Ottoman Empire, with its ancient social, economic and political system. The consolidation of Britain's strategic, economic and political position in that region was bound to affect Kurdistan's political future, given its determination to re-construct a new regional order. Indeed, by virtue of its control over most of the former Ottoman territories, Britain was able to play a leading part in the formation process of the modern Middle East, which witnessed the emergence of the so-called national states in Mesopotamia and Palestine. The main objective of this thesis is to understand Britain's role in the re-partitioning of Kurdistan between Mesopotamia, Syria and Turkey by examining the evolution of its Kurdish policy and the various factors that re-shaped it.

Three major conclusions can be derived from the evolution of Britain's position on the Kurdish question. The first conclusion is the supremacy of strategic considerations over economic ones as the principal driving force behind Britain's policy towards Kurdistan's future. The second conclusion is that certain British officials on the ground played an important part in influencing the future of Kurdistan after the war. Between 1918 and 1920, Colonel J Wilson, in his capacity as the Civil Commissioner, and Major Noel, in his capacity as the most important British expert on Kurdish affairs, played a crucial part not only in colouring London's views on the Kurdish question, but also in influencing the direction of political developments in Southern Kurdistan. In the following period, 1921-1923, Percy Cox, the new High Commissioner, played a crucial part in Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Iraq. Lastly, examination of British policy reveals that in none of its historical phases were Britain's strategic interests compatible with the nationalist aspirations of the Kurds, unlike those of the Zionist<sup>and</sup>/Sharifian nationalist movements. There was always a clear contradiction between the requirements of a successful British policy towards Turkey and Persia, and the political objectives of the Kurdish nationalist movement.

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## A Note On Transliteration

With as much consistency as possible, I have used the system of transliteration adopted by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* for Arabic and Turkish. The only exceptions are those words which have become standard, such is 'Sheikh' and 'Hussein'. The plural of Arabic words has been marked by an additional 's' to the singular.

## Glossary Of Political & Administrative Terms

Eastern Kurdistan	Iran's Kurdistan
Northern Kurdistan	Turkey's Kurdistan
Southern Kurdistan	Iraq's Kurdistan
Western Kurdistan	Syria's Kurdistan

Amir:	Prince (An Arab Term)
Hakim-i-Shar'	In charge Of Qadha (A Kurdish Term)
Hukmdar:	Governor (A Kurdish Term)
Levies:	Troops Of Assyrian Soldiers Led By British Officers (Later Included Arabs And Kurds)
Liwa:	Largest Unit Of Local Administration In Iraq (Division)
Mudirliq:	Sub-district
Mudir:	Administrator Of A Mudirliq (Nahiah)
Mutassarif:	Administrator Of A Liwa
Nahiya:	Smallest Unit In Local Administration In Iraq (Mudirliq=Sub-district)
Qada:	An Administrative Unit Between A Nahiah And A Liwa (District)
Qaimmaqam:	Administrator Of A Qada
Senjaq:	Largest Administrative Unit within A Wilayet (Liwa)
Wilayet:	Main Administrative Unit In The Ottoman Empire (Province)
Wali:	Administrator Of A Wilayet

## Guide To Abbreviations In Citations

CAB	Cabinet Records, Public Record Office, (PRO) Kew
Capt.	Captain
CO	Colonial Office Records, PRO
Col.	Colonel
DBFP	Documents On British Foreign Policy
Egy.Ex.Force	Egypt Expeditionary Force
FO	Foreign Office Records, PRO
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
HMSO	His Majesty's Stationery Office
IDCM	Interdepartmental Conference On Middle Eastern Affairs
IIR	Iraq Intelligence Report
IO	India Office
L/P & s/	Political And Secret Files Of The India Office, Commonwealth Relations Office, London
Maj.	Major
Mes.Ex.Force	Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force
MIR	Mesopotamia Intelligence Report
PRO	Public Record Office (Kew)
S/S	Secretary Of State
TPC	Turkish Petroleum Company
WO	War Office Records, PRO

## Introduction

Spanning nine eventful years, from the formation of the Bunsen Committee in April 1915 to the conclusion of the Lausanne agreement in July 1923, this thesis focuses on Britain's secret diplomacy and its official policies towards British-controlled Kurdistan. These years are arguably the most fateful period in modern Kurdish history. They witnessed dramatic political developments that initially raised and then dashed Kurdish hopes for unity and independence. Given its control of Southern Kurdistan and its leading role in the formation of the modern national states of the Middle East, the examination of Britain's policy is central to any understanding of the Kurdish question in the period 1915-1923. Indeed, at the post-war peace conferences in Paris (1919-1920), San Remo (1920) and Lausanne (1922-1923), Britain was the most influential power in determining the outcome of the Turkish political and territorial settlements, with which Kurdistan's future was closely linked. For the first time, such international meetings considered the political future of the non-Turkish nationalities, such as the Kurds, the Arabs and the Armenians.

The central argument of this thesis is that Britain both explicitly and implicitly played a major part in the post-war re-partitioning of Kurdistan. Moreover, it will be argued that in the period 1918-1923, British officials on the ground played a critical part in influencing the direction of British Kurdish policy, as they not only prevented the evolution of an autonomous entity in British-controlled Kurdistan, but also paved the way for its incorporation into the Iraqi state in 1923. Throughout this thesis, emphasis is placed on identifying and examining the considerations that influenced Britain's short and long-term objectives in all parts of Kurdistan during and after the First World War. These British considerations were of a strategic, economic and political nature, but as this thesis argues, the strategic considerations -notably the security of the sea and land-routes to the British Empire in the east- were of paramount importance. They influenced the nature of the different political schemes which were advocated by British policy makers for Kurdistan's future.

British policy is analysed from three different perspectives: local, regional and international. The first perspective illuminates the interactive relations between Britain's imperial interests and the political aspirations of the Kurdish nationalist movement, particularly in the period 1918-1923. These matters are the focus of chapters two and six, where British motives for the establishment and the destruction of the first and second Kurdish self-governments are analysed in depth. Secondly, like other nationality questions that surfaced in the post-war Middle

East -such as those of the Palestinians and the Jews- the Kurdish question was interconnected with both the Armenian and the Sharifian questions. Chapters four and seven focus on the effects of the separate political desires of the Armenians and the Sharifian Arabs for the formation of their own national states on British policy towards Kurdish nationalist aspirations. Indeed, after the end of the First World War, the British became increasingly aware of the close connection between deciding Kurdistan's future and the solution of both the Armenian question in the period 1918-1921 and the Mesopotamian question in the period 1921-1923. Thirdly, as a great power, Britain was determined to consolidate its position *vis-à-vis* other rival powers in the post-war Middle East. Examination of the objectives of Britain's Kurdish policy in chapters five and eight shows that they were partly defined in response to the policy objectives of the other powers, especially France. This thesis explains how Kurdistan's future was affected by the rivalry between Britain and France from 1918 to 1923, which manifested itself both in their agreement on directly controlling southern and western parts of Kurdistan, and in their disagreement over the future of the remainder of Kurdistan.

Indirect control, direct control, buffer state and unitary state represent different courses in British Kurdish policy between 1918 and 1923. These constitute the conceptual framework of the thesis. The concept of indirect control is used to describe the way in which the British exercised and consolidated their influence in Kurdistan through local Kurdish nationalists without making military, financial or political commitments. This indirect control took the shape of forming an autonomous Kurdish entity under the supervision of British officials in late October and early November 1918. The concept of direct control is used to describe the way in which British officials conducted the political, economic and security affairs of Southern Kurdistan after June 1919, without paying any attention to the wishes of local Kurds. The use of the concepts of direct and indirect control is essential to explaining the development of British policy in Southern Kurdistan in the period 1918-1920, while the concepts of buffer state and unitary state guide the analysis of British Kurdish policy in the mandate period 1921-1923. According to the concept of the buffer state -which was developed by Winston Churchill, the Colonial Secretary- Southern Kurdistan was to be formed as a separate entity from Mesopotamia in order to consolidate the security of the British position in the latter. The unitary state concept was advocated by Percy Cox, the British High Commissioner for Mesopotamia, who advocated Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Mesopotamia in order to strengthen Britain's positions in the newly-emerging Iraqi state.

The existing literature on modern Kurdish history is very limited in comparison to that on the history of other Middle Eastern nations. Most of the studies that have been carried out in the past seven years are mainly concerned with the present Kurdish question and its increasing effects on political stability in the Middle East following the end of the Cold War. Having said that, the historical debate among Kurdish and foreign scholars on Britain's role in influencing Kurdistan's post-war political future has traditionally been dominated by two contentious issues. The first is concerned with the way in which Britain became interested in Kurdish affairs and the reasons for that interest. The second deals with the extent to which Britain and Kurdish nationalists were responsible for the non-materialisation of a Kurdish national state after the end of the First World War.

The first British contacts with the Kurds go back to the Eighteenth Century, when British travellers and officials of the East India Company began to make journeys to various parts of Ottoman and Qajar Kurdistan. From the political point of view, Britain's interest in Kurdish affairs began in the mid-Nineteenth Century and was manifest in several political developments which reflected the rise of Kurdish nationalism and its subsequent embodiment in the outbreak of several revolts. The same period witnessed, as Kemal Madhar Ahmad's book *Kurdistan during the First World War* demonstrates,<sup>1</sup> the evolution of Czarist Russia's interest in the political, social and economic conditions in Kurdistan. The interferences of European Powers in Kurdistan's affairs from the mid-Nineteenth Century onwards became "a permanent factor" in the modern Kurdish history.<sup>2</sup> In his examination of the Nineteenth Century Kurdish nationalist revolts, Nezan Kendal, a Kurdish scholar, speaks of British and French opposition to the Kurdish revolt of 1855 and underlines their fears concerning an independent Kurdistan under Russian influence.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in his assessment of the Kurdish revolt of 1880-1881, Robert Olson, an American historian, underlines the antagonistic British attitude towards it.<sup>4</sup> Britain's involvement in Kurdish affairs and its opposition towards the insurgent Kurds was primarily based on strategic considerations, namely the maintenance of the unity of Ottoman Turkey and Qajar Persia. Britain feared that such revolts at the heart of Asia Minor and north-

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1\* Kamal Madhar Ahmad, *Kurdistan during the First World War*, Translated by Ali Maher Ibrahim (London: Saqi Books, 1994).

2\* Nezan Kendal, 'The Kurds: Current Position and Historical Background' -in- *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, [ed.] Philip G. Kreyenbroek & Christine Allison (London: Zed Books, 1996), p.13.

3\* Nezan Kendal, 'The Kurds under the Ottoman Empire' -in- *A People without a Country, the Kurds and Kurdistan*, (ed.) Gerard Chaliand, Translated by Michael Pallis (London: Zed Books, 1993), p.22.

4\* Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989) p.7.

west Persia would cause the collapse of Ottoman Turkey and Qajar Persia or, at least, give Russia an opportunity to extend its influence southwards to the Persian Gulf, India and the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, British records reveal that through senior diplomatic contacts, the British Foreign Office relentlessly endeavoured to bring about a *modus vivendi* between Constantinople and Tehran in order to put down the Kurdish revolt of 1880-1881.<sup>5</sup> The principal objective of British diplomacy was to pre-empt any direct Russian intervention in the affairs of Persia.

By the early Twentieth Century, British interest in Kurdistan entered a new phase when it acquired economic and political influence in what was perceived to be the most important Kurdish area: the Mosul *Wilayet* (province). This noteworthy development was a consequence of the steady decline in the power of the central Governments in Constantinople and Tehran. This intensified the rivalry among European powers over economic and political spheres of influence. The construction of the Baghdad Railway was a symbol of German political and economic control over Ottoman Turkey which threatened British strategic and commercial interests in Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf. It was this development that gave strategic and economic importance to Southern Kurdistan by virtue of its overlooking the Mesopotamian plain and containing potential oil sources. In his book *British Policy in Mesopotamia, 1903-1914*, which gives a thorough examination of British interests in Mesopotamia before the First World War, Stuart Cohen illustrates how Southern Kurdistan (the Mosul *Wilayet*) became one of the regions where the British endeavoured to consolidate their position in the face of the threat posed by their German rival.<sup>6</sup> The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 presented Britain with an opportunity to devise more direct means of expanding and consolidating its future influence in Southern Kurdistan and Mesopotamia. Kemal Madhar Ahmad, a Kurdish historian, considers British interests in Kurdistan during the war to be primarily of an economic nature, namely controlling Kurdish oil.<sup>7</sup> However, the recommendations of the 1915 Bunsen Committee and the terms of the 1916 Sykes-Picot (Tripartite) agreement, in particular, illustrate that Britain's interest in Southern Kurdistan was primarily strategic, and only secondarily economic, as seen in the consolidation of British control over the Persian Gulf and potential Kurdish oil fields. Such interests were clearly embodied in Britain's acquisition of a

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5\* See 'Correspondence Respecting the Kurdish Invasion of Persia', No.s 1,2,3 and 4, *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol.C, Year 1881.

6\* Stuart A. Cohen, *British Policy in Mesopotamia, 1903-1914* (London: Ithaca Press, 1976).

7\* Ahmad, *Kurdistan during the First World War*, p.189.

sphere of influence in Southern Kurdistan under the Sykes-Picot agreement.<sup>8</sup>

The existing interpretations of the reasons why Britain extended its control to Southern Kurdistan at the end of the First World War and immediately after the signing of the Mudros armistice (30 October 1918) are contradictory. In his analysis of the British advance towards Southern Kurdistan, David McDowall suggests that Britain's interest in that area was accidental, resulting from its occupation of Arab Mesopotamia.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, Ahmad, who argues that Britain had "*long-term plans*" in Kurdistan before the war, considers the British occupation of Southern Kurdistan to be a response to the outbreak of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917.<sup>10</sup> In his view, "*the most important result*" of the October Revolution was to increase Britain's interest in Kurdistan, now viewing it as a strategic buffer.<sup>11</sup>

Central to any debate of the reasons why Britain decided to bring Southern Kurdistan under its control is the political impact of the dramatic changes that occurred before the end of the war, notably the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The subsequent Russian withdrawal from the war and the entry of America into the war against Germany affected the Sykes-Picot agreement to the extent that it could no longer serve as a basis for a post-war Middle Eastern order without undergoing considerable modifications. The disappearance of Russia as a major player in that important region awakened the old rivalry between Britain and France over strategic, political and economic spheres of influence. In the short term, British control of Southern Kurdistan was dictated by the need to drive the Turks out of the area. The sudden Russian withdrawal left such a dangerous vacuum in Kurdistan that the British position in Mesopotamia became increasingly vulnerable to Turkish counter-attacks. At the same time, the war conditions, as McDowall states, offered the British an ideal opportunity to extend their control to the French sphere in Southern Kurdistan,<sup>12</sup> which was now perceived to be strategically and economically important to the short and long term security of Mesopotamia.

When the war ended, Britain found itself in a strong position to determine Kurdistan's future because it had under its control large Kurdish areas in Southern and Western Kurdistan. Now Britain needed to frame a well-defined policy in accordance with the strategic, politi-

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8\* Political Department, India Office, Note on Kurdistan, 14 December 1918, FO371/3386, Public Record Office (PRO). This Note refers to the Lesser Zab River as the boundary between the British and French spheres of influence in Southern Kurdistan.

9\* David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996) pp.117-118.

10\* Ahmad, *Kurdistan during the First World War*, pp.105 & 187.

11\* Ahmad, *Kurdistan during the First World War*, p.101.

12\* McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p.118.

cal and economic realities on the ground. The extension of British control to southern and western parts of Kurdistan was welcomed by the majority of local Kurds, whose towns and villages had been devastated by the war. The Allies' wartime propaganda generated great expectations among the Kurds. Some Kurdish nationalists took the Russian side, such as Abdul Razaq Bedirkhan, a Kurdish prince, while some others attempted to establish political contacts with the British, such as General Cherif Pasha, a high-ranking Ottoman diplomat. Kurdish nationalists genuinely believed that if they persuaded the Allies, and particularly Britain, of their nationalist cause and the compatibility between British interests and Kurdish political aspirations, an independent Kurdish state might emerge. Early British measures in British-controlled Kurdistan reinforced such Kurdish optimism, notably the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish entity in the British sphere of influence. The immediate aim was to assign local Kurdish leaders the task of restoring normal economic, social and administrative life under the supervision of British officials. In the absence of a clearly-defined policy towards Kurdistan's post-war future and in view of London's growing anxiety about military, political and financial commitments, the British authorities in Baghdad decided to experiment with the idea of Kurdish autonomy.

The co-operation of the Kurdish nationalist leaders with Britain has been subjected to some criticism. In his article *The Kurds under the Ottoman Empire*, Kendal argues that the Kurds lost a unique opportunity to achieve a united Kurdistan, largely because their leaders pinned their hopes entirely on Britain and France. In his view, had Kurdish nationalists taken the initiative to establish a "national Kurdish state" and imposed it as a *fait accompli*, the Allies would have been unable to reverse this development.<sup>13</sup> Given the weakness of the Kurdish nationalist movement and the inter-connection between the Kurdish question and the Turkish political and territorial settlement, one can argue that without the material support of Britain, the nationalist Kurds were not capable of taking any major initiative to establish an independent Kurdistan as a *fait accompli*, as the failure of several Kurdish revolts in the period 1919-1925 illustrated. The issue, however, was further complicated by the fact that the settlement of the Kurdish question not only affected the Kurds but also the Armenians, the Turks, the Arabs and, above all, the imperial interests of Britain and France. Therefore, the establishment of an independent Kurdistan would have required appropriate internal, regional and international conditions. In the case of the Arab territories, for instance, Britain, to some extent, was

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<sup>13</sup>\* Kendal, *A People without a Country*, pp.30-31.



able to reconcile its strategic and economic interests with Arab nationalist aspirations through the establishment of several Arab states. But, the geopolitical position of Kurdistan and Britain's acute financial problems at home -which made it unwilling to commit itself militarily or politically in Kurdistan- stood in the way of such reconciliation between British strategic interests and Kurdish nationalist aspirations. Moreover, Major Edward Noel, the British advisor to the Kurdish Government in 1918, was the only British official who considered such reconciliation to be viable, and he ultimately failed to persuade London.

It is widely accepted by Kurdish and foreign scholars, such as Ahmad, McDowall and Olson, that the Kurds lost an unprecedented opportunity to establish a state (or several states) prior to the Sèvres treaty. They, however, disagree on the reasons why the Kurds failed to realise their aspirations. At the centre of this historical debate is Britain's role in the post-war partition of Kurdistan. The main conclusion one draws from the writings of Kurdish scholars is that the "*imperialist*" objectives of Britain's policy towards Kurdistan had devastating effects on the future of Kurdistan and the Kurdish nationalist movement. It must, however, be remembered that Kurdish historical interpretation of British policy towards Kurdistan was, to a considerable extent, influenced by the Soviet point of view in that every political development or step taken by the Allies, particularly Britain, has been interpreted in the context of the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union. The containment of Bolshevik Russia, in Ahmad's view, was the reason why the Allies decided to turn part of Kurdistan into a buffer zone under the terms of the Sèvres treaty (August 1920).<sup>14</sup> Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, a Kurdish scholar, believes that Britain sought the creation of a "*reactionary*" Kurdish state ruled by Kurdish feudalists. This would be in the form of a British protectorate and directed against Bolshevik Russia.<sup>15</sup>

As the existing Kurdish approach to Britain's Kurdish policy is ideological in nature, it tends to simplify the historical events of the period 1915-1923. One cannot deny the fact that the growing Bolshevik threat to British imperial interests in the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar Kingdom was an important factor that influenced Britain's post-war Middle Eastern policy. Having said that, evidence used in this thesis demonstrates that there were other interactive factors which particularly influenced Britain's Kurdish policy, such as the post-war British-French

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<sup>14</sup>\* Ahmad, *Kurdistan during the First World War*, p.197.

<sup>15</sup>\* Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, *Kurdistan and the Kurds*, Translated by Miriam Jellinková (Prague: Publishing House of the Czechoslovakia Academy of Science, 1965) pp.47-8. It is worth noting that Ahmad finished his higher education in Moscow, while Ghassemlou lectured in Eastern Europe.

rivalry, the revival of the Kurdish nationalist movement, the future of Armenia and the solution of the Sharifian-Mesopotamian question.

A totally different interpretation of British Kurdish policy from that of the Kurdish scholars has been produced by McDowall. He shifts the blame for the failure of the Kurds to establish their own national state onto the Kurdish nationalist leaders. McDowall's book *A Modern History of the Kurds*, portrays Britain's partition of Kurdistan as a reflection of the existing economic realities: "*trade routes and grain-producing hinter lands*".<sup>16</sup> According to this interpretation, Britain acted realistically when it modified the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement by bringing Southern Kurdistan under its mandate in order to create a viable economic and administrative unit in Mesopotamia. McDowall agrees with the logic of the British authorities in Mesopotamia, that adopting ethnic boundaries between a separate Mesopotamia and a separate Kurdistan was "*strategic and economic nonsense*".<sup>17</sup> At the same time, he holds the nationalist Kurds -and their disunity- responsible for the non-materialisation of a Kurdish state. In his view, Britain searched for one Kurdish leader in order to reach a solution for Northern Kurdistan's future. But, "*the failure of the Kurds to produce a credible leadership was undoubtedly a blow to British hopes*".<sup>18</sup>

The striking fact about McDowall's interpretation of the relation between British policy and Kurdistan's future is its close resemblance to Colonel Arnold Wilson's account of the events given in his own book *Mesopotamia 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties*. This book has been described by Peter Sluglett as giving "*a vivid picture of the working of the imperial mind*".<sup>19</sup> McDowall stops short of explaining the effects that British actions had on the development of the Kurdish nationalist movement, especially in Southern Kurdistan. He also makes no distinction between those Kurdish areas which were of prime importance to Britain, notably Southern Kurdistan, and those which were not, such as Northern Kurdistan. This thesis will, therefore, identify the Kurdish areas where British strategic, political and economic interests were located, and then highlight their interactive relations with the political aspirations of the Kurdish nationalist movement.

Generally, in spite of its evident importance, the international aspect of the Kurdish question has received very little scholarly attention. Writers on the history of the Middle East

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16\* McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* , pp.119, 121.

17\* Ibid, p.121.

18\* Ibid, p.134.

19\* Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq, 1914-1932*, (London: Ithaca Press, 1976) p.333.

have briefly examined the Kurdish question as a pawn in the game of power-politics played among the Great Powers in the aftermath of the First World War. There is, however, no systematic and comprehensive study in the existing literature of the international dimension of the Kurdish question and its place within the context of the British endeavours to establish a new regional order in the post-war Middle East. By undertaking such a task, this thesis aims to fill this distinct and explicit gap in the existing literature. This thesis, while underlining the importance of this critical period in modern Kurdish history, intends to contribute to the current understanding of the historical roots of the Kurdish question, which has, from the late 1980's and early 1990's, once again unequivocally imposed itself upon the stage of international politics.

### ***Kurdistan And The Kurds: Past And Present***

The origin of Kurds has been a source of controversy as Arabs, Turks and Persians continually seek to prove that they are of Arab, Turkish and Iranian origins respectively. The Kurds, however, trace their origin to the Medes, an Indo-European tribe descended from Central Asia into Kurdistan, where they established a pre-Islamic dynasty between 614 and 550 B.C.<sup>20</sup> Most Kurds converted to Islam in the Seventh Century. In the following four centuries the Kurds played a prominent political part in the history of the Middle East. *Sultan* Saladin was one of those Kurds who has been renowned for his outstanding rule during the Mediaeval Crusades, when he led the Muslims against Richard Lion-Heart's Christian forces. From the early Sixteenth Century onwards, the importance of Kurdistan's geopolitical position as a natural buffer zone came to the fore, following the establishment of the Safavid Empire in Persia, which entered into a long and a bloody struggle with the Ottoman Empire for control of the Middle East. Kurdistan is situated at the crossroads between the routes linking Asia to Europe and the Caucasus to Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean Sea, which make it one of the world's most strategically sensitive region. Kendal convincingly argues that these factors helped facilitate "a series of great invasions which, across the centuries, destroyed the internal social and political process which would have led to the emergence of a united Kurdish political entity."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Kurdistan is a country of extremely rugged mountains and enclosing valleys, descending to foothills and plains. Its inaccessibility has always made it a

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<sup>20</sup>\* Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Ethnonationalism*, (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup>\* Kendal, 'The Kurds: Current Position and Historical Background', -in- *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, [ed.] Philip G. Kreyenbroek & Christine Allison (London: Zed Books, 1996), p.12.

natural strategic buffer for the states of the region able to protect their heartland from outside invasions.

The first major partition of Kurdistan took place in 1515 following the defeat of the Safavids at the hands of the Ottomans. The latter extended their control to two thirds of Kurdistan. However, the mountainous nature of most Kurdish areas made it extremely difficult for the Ottomans and Persians to directly control them. This factor, and the need of the Ottomans and Persians to enlist Kurdish support for their war efforts against each other, enabled several autonomous *Emirates* to emerge. In Ottoman Kurdistan, sixteen sovereign Kurdish *Emirates* were established which were recognised by Constantinople. For more than four centuries these *Emirates* had made the most of the irreconcilable differences between the Turks and the Persians in order to maintain their autonomous status.<sup>22</sup> Yet, the very geopolitical position of Kurdistan, notably its being squeezed between two powerful states, eventually prevented these Kurdish *Emirates* from being transformed into much larger political entities, and by the mid-Nineteenth Century they had disappeared altogether. Kurdish nationalism began to take shape in reaction to the destruction of these autonomous *Emirates* by the Ottoman and Persian authorities, who both perceived them as a major threat to their territorial unity. It expressed itself in several bloody revolts led by the ousted Kurdish princes and influential religious leaders. Thus, the Kurdish nationalist movement came into being long before the emergence of the so-called national states in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, and not after (contrary to the argument of a Persian scholar, Nader Entessar).<sup>23</sup> At present, the Kurds are fully aware that they form the third most populous nationality in the Middle East behind the Arabs and the Turks, and that they are the largest nationality in the world without a national state. These facts have made them even more determined to establish an autonomous or independent Kurdistan.

It is not only ancient and modern Kurdish history that is controversial, but also Kurdish society, land and culture. The term 'Kurdistan', which means the land of the Kurds, has been used since the Twelfth Century, when a large province of that name was established during the Seljuk period.<sup>24</sup> This was, in Kendal's view, early evidence of "*the distinctive personality*"




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22\* Maria T. O'Shea, 'The Question of Kurdistan and Iran's International Borders', -in- *The Boundaries of Modern Iraq*, [ed.] Keith McLachlan, (London: UCL Press, 1994), p.15.

23\* Entessar, *Kurdish Ethnonationalism*, p. 1.

24\* See entry on 'Kurds' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol.V, [ed.] W.C. Brice (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), pp.438-485.

Map One: The Administrative Division Of Ottoman And Qajar Kurdistan Before The First World War

-  Ottoman-Persian Frontier
-  Limits Of Kurdistan
-  Provincial Boundaries

Source: PRO, FO925/17149 & FO371/9021



of the Kurds,<sup>25</sup> which Sanjar, the Seljuk ruler of Persia, recognised. At that time, the province of Kurdistan comprised the present Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan. Under Ottoman rule, the Diyarbekir *Wilayet* was called Kurdistan, while in Persia, Kurdistan was (and still is) a province, comprising one quarter of Eastern Kurdistan. Prince Sharaf Khan Badlisi, the famous Kurdish historian of the Sixteenth Century, was the first person to define the geographical limits of a greater Kurdistan in his book *Sharafname*.<sup>26</sup> There are several maps of Kurdistan in the Public Record Office (Kew Gardens), the oldest one going back to 1854. The existence of such specific maps, which were sketched by western travellers and scholars in the Nineteenth Century, demonstrates that Kurdistan had been recognised as being a distinctive geographical, cultural and social concept long before the Allies would officially use it as such at the Paris peace conference (1919-1920). At present, Kurdistan consists of east and south-east Turkey (Northern Kurdistan), northern Iraq (Southern Kurdistan), north and north-west Iran (Eastern Kurdistan) and northern Syria (Western Kurdistan). In other words, Kurdish areas are directly contiguous with each other and stretch from the Taurus mountains in the west to the Persian plateau in the east, from Armenia in the north to the Mesopotamian plain in the south. Having

25\* Nezan Kendal, 'The Kurds: Current Position and Historical Background', p.10.

26\* Amir Sharaf Khan Bedlisi, *Sharafname*, [ed.] M. Abbasi (Tehran).

said that, there is no official or approved demarcation of Kurdistan. The Turks and the Syrians not only refuse to use Kurdistan as a term, but also deny the existence of the Kurdish people, whereas Iran and Iraq have considerably reduced the size of the Kurdish areas under their control.

As in the case of Kurdistan's geographical extent, the exact number of Kurds is very difficult to specify since Turkey, Syria and Persia do not separate the Kurds from the rest of the population in their official censuses. In Iraq, where the Government has to indicate the size of its Kurdish population because of its recognition of nominal Kurdish autonomy, the number of Kurds is considerably under-counted. Such Kurds as the Yazidis have been registered as Arabs, and the same criterion has been applied to all Kurds who live outside the so-called autonomous region. Martin Van Bruinessen calculates the number of Kurds to have been between 13,500,000 to 15,000,000 in the mid-1970's.<sup>27</sup> Kendal, who estimates the number of Kurds at 31,000,000 in the mid-1990's, states that Turkish sources admitted the existence of around 15,000,000 Kurds in Turkey in 1992. He estimates the numbers of Kurds in Iran, Iraq and Syria at 8,000,000, 5,200,000, and 1,500,000 respectively.<sup>28</sup> It must be remembered that large Kurdish communities live outside Kurdistan. The Kurdish population in Istanbul is estimated at 2,500,000.<sup>29</sup> The Iraqi Government acknowledged the existence of 800,000 Kurds in Baghdad during its 1991 negotiations with the Kurdish nationalist leaders. There are sizable Kurdish communities in Western Europe, in places such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Britain, France, Belgium, Austria and Switzerland. The German authorities recently estimated the number of Kurds resident there to be 500,000, mostly immigrants from Northern Kurdistan.

The vast majority of those Kurds who have left Kurdistan were forced to do so. The economic and social policies of the central Governments have kept all parts of Kurdistan grossly under-developed, with high-level of unemployment and poverty, despite it being exceptionally wealthy in minerals and agriculture. This factor, and the continuing anti-Kurdish oppression and ongoing armed conflicts between the Kurdish nationalist movement and the states of the region, has forced many Kurds to leave their towns and villages and seek jobs or a new life in non-Kurdish regions as well as in Western Europe. Through these calculated

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27\* Martin Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Sheikh and State, the Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*, (London & New Jersey: Zed Books, 1992), p.15.

28\* Nezan Kendal, 'The Kurds: Current Position and Historical Background', pp.7-9.

29\* Kendal, 'The Kurds: Current Position and Historical Background'.

economic social and political policies, the central Governments of the region have been seeking to de-populate Kurdistan and de-ethnicise the Kurds, so as to create<sup>a</sup> homogeneous state where the Kurds would lose their own cultural identity and thus be assimilated by the dominant nationality, i.e. Arabs, Persian or Turks. Having said that, there are still about 25,000,000 Kurds living in partitioned Kurdistan.<sup>30</sup> (Map one illustrates the area where the Kurds form the large majority of the population and also the administrative division of Kurdistan before 1914).

In spite of the on-going assimilation and integration policies consistently adopted by the central Governments, the Kurds still enjoy a distinctive national identity and national consciousness which make them a nationality *per se*. Furthermore, Kurdistan asserts itself as a distinct social, cultural and political concept against the wishes of the central Governments. The most crucial component of Kurdish identity is Kurdish culture, even though it has not undergone striking development, given the absence of a national Kurdish state and the existence of an anti-Kurdish environment in the Middle East. As Philip Kreyenbroek and Christine Allison point out, the Kurds have, in general, "*a valid and mature identity of their own*",<sup>31</sup> contrary to the claims of the states where they live. It is remarkable that Kurdish culture has been able to survive decades of fanatic nationalist policies adopted by the central Governments, successive civil wars, large-scale deportations of the Kurdish population, massacres of civilians and the premeditated destruction of the Kurdish countryside, especially in Southern Kurdistan, where more than 4,000 villages and small towns were destroyed and more than 180,000 civilians lives lost. Kendal argues that the lack of freedom of expression and the persecution of Northern Kurds in the towns under Turkish rule have made Kurdish culture take refuge in the privacy of family life and in the countryside, where Kurdish music, language, habits and customs have continued.<sup>32</sup> This partly explain why many aspects of Kurdish culture are not in written form. Kreyenbroek and Allison list material culture, such as costume and artefacts, as an "*essential element*" of Kurdish cultural identity.<sup>33</sup>

Kurdish language is a vital part of Kurdish identity, and has survived the relentless anti-Kurdish cultural policies of the ultra-nationalist Governments of the region. Like the Persian and Urdu languages, the Kurdish language belongs to the Indo-European family of languages, but has a distinct grammar, syntax and vocabulary of its own. It consists of different

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30\* Kendal, 'The Kurds: Current Position and Historical Background', p.9.

31\* Philip Kreyenbroek & Christine Allison, 'Introduction' -in- *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, op. cit., p.1.

See also David McDowall, *The Kurds*, (London: Minority Rights Group, Report No.23, 1982), p.7.

32\* Kendal, 'The Kurds: Current Position and Historical Background', p.17.

33\* Kreyenbroek & Allison, 'Introduction', p.4.

Kurdish dialects, a fact which applies to many other languages such as Arabic and Persian. Generally speaking, the Kurdish language has developed little, and never become standardised because the Kurds have not been given the opportunity for this by the states in which they live. However, there are two main literary languages in Kurdistan which have developed out of the two main Kurdish dialects: Kurmanji and Sorani. The first dialect is spoken by the greater number of Kurds in Northern and Western Kurdistan, the former Soviet Union, Lebanon and Israel as well as by a substantial number of Kurds in Southern and Eastern Kurdistan. The second dialect is spoken by the majority of Kurds in Southern and Eastern Kurdistan. There are other much smaller dialects such as Gurani and Zaza. At present, Kurdish scholars are seeking to create a united written language based on the rich profusion of Kurdish dialects. This being said, the absence of a united written language has not been a major obstacle in the way of the development of Kurdish culture or the evolution of a Kurdish national consciousness. The rigorousness of the anti-Kurdish policies at cultural, political and economic levels by the central Governments have helped strengthen Kurdish national consciousness, and have motivated the Kurds more than ever to assert their autonomous cultural identity.

In terms of religion, the overwhelming majority of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims, while the Shi'i Kurds form a minority. Apart from the non-Muslim Kurds, such as the Yazidis, Christians and Jews, there are smaller religious groupings, notably the Alevis, Ahl-e Haqq and Kakais, that combine features of ancient non-Islamic beliefs with some Shi'i beliefs.<sup>34</sup> The existence of these pre-Islamic elements in Kurdish culture, and most importantly, the fact that the Sunni Kurds belong to the Shafi'i school of Law (*madhab*) -which clearly separates them from their Turkish and Arab counterparts who are mostly Hanafi- has caused religion, as Kreyenbroek illustrates, to contribute to "a sense of Kurdish culture".<sup>35</sup> In the last five decades, religious and sectarian beliefs have not hindered the development of either the Kurdish nationalist movement or the Kurdish nationalist consciousness. In Eastern Kurdistan, where the Kurds are subjected to Shi'i-Persian rule, Sunni and Shi'i Kurds have exhibited no religious hostility towards each other.<sup>36</sup> In Southern Kurdistan, many Christians, Yazidis and Shi'is are members of several Kurdish nationalist parties at leadership and rank and file levels.

What all the Kurds have in common is the social, economic and political inequalities they have experienced throughout this century. Such inequalities have given rise to a condi-

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34\* Philip G. Kreyenbroek, 'Religion in Kurdistan' -in- *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, op. cit., p.95.

35\* Ibid, p.93.

36\* Entessar, *Kurdish Ethnonationalism*, p. 5.



tion akin to internal colonialism. The annual income of a Kurd has always been far less than that of his Arab, Persian and Turkish counterparts. Illiteracy, poverty and unemployment are very high in Kurdistan compared with non-Kurdish regions. The same inequality applies to many other public services such as health, drinking water and electricity. While Kurdistan has an abundance of natural resources, such as oil, iron ore and fertile land, all industries are situated outside it. The policies of the central Governments have been designed to keep partitioned Kurdistan economically and socially backward and totally dependent on the centre, with a view to consolidating their control over the Kurds, and thus, incapacitating the Kurdish nationalist movement. The Government of President Saddam Hussein has gone so far as to destroy the entire Kurdish countryside, annihilating tens of thousands of civilian Kurds, so as to resolve Iraq's Kurdish problem once and for all. From the mid-1980's, the Turkish authorities have started a similar process in Northern Kurdistan, where more than 1200 villages have been destroyed and hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to leave their lands.

The ceaseless endeavours of the Turkish, Iraqi, Syrian and Iranian states to demonstrate the non-existence of a distinctive Kurdish culture, so as to deny the existence of the Kurdish question, explains why asserting Kurdish cultural identity and developing Kurdish culture both lie at the heart of the political programmes of the Kurdish nationalist movement in all parts of Kurdistan. In the liberated areas of Southern Kurdistan, where a Kurdish administration has been established since 1991, there is an unprecedented cultural revival led by Kurdish intellectuals, including writers, poets, artists, musicians and journalists, who have been engaged in studying all aspects of Kurdish society and history. The operating educational system is based on the Kurdish language, and has created a Kurdish cultural life not subjected to the censorship of the pan-Arab Government in Baghdad. This cultural revival has also taken the form of re-building the Kurdish countryside, which is the most important source of Kurdish culture. Special emphasis is placed on the pre-Islamic aspects of Kurdish cultural identity, such as by re-integrating the Yazidi Kurds into Kurdish society. In Europe, where several Kurdish cultural centres have been established, Kurdish intellectuals have begun "a *renaissance*" of Kurmanji literature"<sup>37</sup> (as well as Sorani literature) through the publication of journals, magazines, books, the holding of art exhibitions and the founding of Kurdish radio and television satellite stations.

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37\* Joyce Blue, 'Kurdish Written Literature', -in- *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, op. cit., p.25.

## Chapter One

### From British Wartime Partition Schemes To The British Occupation Of Southern Kurdistan

The term 'Eastern Question' has often been used to describe the problem of filling up the political vacuum created by the gradual disappearance of the Ottoman Empire not only from Europe, but also from North Africa and the modern Middle East.<sup>1</sup> In the decades before 1914, apart from Lord Salisbury who contemplated a large-scale partition of the Ottoman Empire during his Premiership (1886-1892 and 1895-1902),<sup>2</sup> British statesmen were consistent in pursuing the same policy towards the Eastern Question. This consisted of preserving the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar Kingdom insofar as their heartland was concerned, and using them as bulwarks against Russian, and later German, expansionism. Central to the British approach to Middle Eastern affairs was the security of India. Lord Curzon described the Suez Canal, Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf as "*part of the maritime frontier of India*".<sup>3</sup> To consolidate its control over the strategic sea-route to India, Britain made the most of the power vacuum resulting from the steady decline in the power of both the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar Kingdom by creating, and then consolidating, its strategic position along their coasts, notably the Persian Gulf and Sinai Peninsula. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 forced Britain to re-consider its Middle Eastern policy in response to Turkey's entry into the war in support of the Central Powers, i.e. Germany and Austria-Hungary. Britain and its main Allies, France and Russia, concluded several agreements to partition the Ottoman territories according to their own interests. Kurdistan was at the heart of such territorial re-arrangements of the Ottoman Empire.

This chapter explores the historical background of Britain's interest in the affairs of Ottoman and Qajar Kurdistan in the context of its Middle Eastern policy. It focuses on the British reaction to early Kurdish nationalist revolts as well as the policies of other Powers in the region. This chapter then proceeds to examine the effects of the outbreak of the First World War on British attitudes towards Kurdistan by focusing on the recommendations of the 1915 Bunsen Committee and, most importantly, on the 1916 Sykes-Picot (Tripartite) agreement.

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1\* J.A.R. Marriott, *The Eastern Question, an Historical Study in European Diplomacy*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp.1-3.

2\* Keith M. Wilson, *Empire and Continent: Studies in British Foreign Policy from the 1880's to the First World War*, (London & New York: Mansell Publishing, 1982), p.18.

3\* Marian Kent, *Moguls and Mandarins: Oil, Imperialism and the Middle East in British Foreign Policy, 1900-1940*, (London: Frank Cass, 1993) p.11.

These two developments reflected Britain's pressing need to re-define its post-war strategic, political and economic interests in Ottoman Asia. Finally, this chapter analyses the military and political circumstances surrounding the extension of British control to the southern parts of Ottoman Kurdistan and how this set the stage for subsequent political developments.

## **Historical Background: The Position Of Kurdistan In Britain's Ottoman And Persian Policies Before The First World War**

### ***i- The Nineteenth Century: Britain And The Rise Of Kurdish Nationalism***

Britain's views and reaction to the affairs of Kurdistan between the 1830's and 1914 were primarily conditioned by strategic considerations, namely the preservation of the territorial integrity of Turkey and Persia insofar as their heartland was concerned. In other words, the British Government was always in favour of consolidating the authority of the central governments in Constantinople and Tehran over Kurdish regions in east and south-east Turkey and north-west Persia. The prevalence of political stability in these regions, Britain hoped, would thwart Russia's attempts to extend its influence southwards by interfering in the internal affairs of Turkey and Persia. Britain's desire for the maintenance of the *status quo* in the heartland of Turkey and Persia manifested itself in its hostile reaction to several Kurdish revolts and the existing autonomous Kurdish *Emirates*, for posing a serious threat to Ottoman and Qajar territorial unity.

In 1826, Muhammad Pasha of Rowanduz, a Kurdish notable, declared the Kurdish regions of Mosul, Mardin and Jezirah-ibn-Omar independent of Ottoman rule. During his revolt, which lasted until 1837, Muhammad Pasha established contacts with Ibrahim Pasha, the son of Muhammad Ali, the Viceroy of Egypt, who threatened the very existence of Ottoman rule. At the time, Britain took the diplomatic initiative by forming a common European stance in favour of maintaining Ottoman rule and against any such threats from within. In 1842, Prince Bedirkhan established the autonomous Kurdish *Emirate* of Botan in Jezirah-ibn-Omar and then extended his control to large parts of Kurdistan. Fearing for the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, Britain as well as France exerted direct pressure on Constantinople to destroy the Kurdish *Emirate*. They used the issue of the Christian communities' interests as an excuse to interfere in internal Ottoman affairs. Local Christians' opposition to the Kurdish *Emirate* was, in Kendal's view, a result of the anti-Kurdish activities of American and English

missionaries.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, the combination of both British and French pressure and growing Ottoman fears led to the destruction of the Kurdish *Emirate* in 1847 in the interest of maintaining the authority of the central government. During the Ottoman-Russian War of 1853-1856, a great Kurdish revolt broke out against the Ottomans with the support of local Christian communities. Yazdan Shir, the leader of this revolt, attempted to co-ordinate his military efforts with the Russian armies. But he failed to establish a direct communication line with Russian forces. According to Ahmad, the Ottoman forces succeeded, with direct British support, in suppressing this revolt.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of the international factor in Kurdish affairs was first felt by Sheikh Ubeidullah of Neri, who was the most prominent religious and nationalist leader of his generation. The political events of 1880-1881 in Kurdistan show that he was well aware of the European and British suspicion of Kurdish nationalism, and how this could jeopardise his efforts to establish an independent Kurdistan. As soon as Ubeidullah declared his revolt in September 1880, he attempted to establish direct contacts with the European Powers, especially Britain, hoping to avoid incurring their hostility towards his nationalist aims. In one of his letters to the British General-Consul at Tabriz, Ubeidullah stated that

*the object of his son being sent to Persia was in order to obtain redress for Kurdish grievances; the Kurds, having been subjected to ill-usage at the hand of both Turkey and Persia; he and the other Chiefs of Kurdish tribes are now desirous of establishing Kurdistan upon a united and [an] independent basis.*<sup>6</sup>

Ubeidullah's intention was first to defeat the weaker side, Persia, and then turn against the stronger side, Turkey. The execution of these objectives also entailed the achievement of an alliance with the Christian communities living on both sides of the Ottoman-Persian frontiers.<sup>7</sup> Ubeidullah continually reassured the European Powers of his political and religious inclination, emphasising that he was not anti-Christian or anti-European and that in an independent Kurdish state, he would "*place Christians and Muslims on a footing of equality*".<sup>8</sup> His emissary explained to the British Consul-General, William G. Abbott, in October 1880 that all he asked for was

*the moral support of the European Powers, especially of England, for whom he had the greatest friendship and regard. The Sheikh asked to be put on trial. If he failed to organise [an independent and stable] Kurdistan, he then was prepared to be judged by the Tribunal of Europe*

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4\* Kendal, *A People Without A Country*, p.21.

5\* Ahmad, *Kurdistan During The First World War*, p.70.

6\* Thomson to Granville, 30 October 1880, Inclosure No.22, Correspondence Respecting the Kurdish Invasion of Persia, *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. C, No.5 Year 1881, p.16.

7\* Maj. Trotter to Mr. Goscher, 20 October 1880, *ibid*, p.16.

8\**Ibid*.

*and to abide by the consequences.*<sup>9</sup>

Influenced by the success of the Armenian nationalists in obtaining the sympathy of the European governments, Ubeidullah sought to internationalise the Kurdish question by putting it on the agenda of international conferences. He particularly appealed to Britain to look into the reasons for the Kurdish revolt in order to find a solution<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, he attempted to involve British officials on the ground in his contacts with the Persian governors in Eastern Kurdistan.<sup>11</sup>

Despite all his efforts, Ubeidullah failed to get anything out of his contacts with, and appeals, to Britain. In his replay to Ubeidullah, Abbott stated that the British Government was in no way concerned in his dispute with Persia. He therefore declined to discuss the dispute with Ubeidullah, but stated that Britain was "*most anxious that peace and security should be maintained*" within the Ottoman-Qajar borders.<sup>12</sup> The significance of Britain's attitude towards the Kurdish revolt lay not so much in its unwillingness to study the Kurdish grievances as in its relentless efforts to bring the Ottoman and the Qajar governments together against the Kurdish insurgency. British diplomacy focused on urging -and even pressurising- the Turks, via the British Ambassador at Constantinople, to reach an urgent understanding with the *Shah* (King) of Persia to suppress the Kurds by co-ordinating military campaigns on both sides of the Ottoman-Persian frontier.<sup>13</sup> In one of his telegrams, following the early manifestations of the British failure to bring the Turkish and Persian governments together, Ronald F. Thomson, the British Minister in Tehran, informed Earl Granville, the British Foreign Secretary, that he "*continued to urge the Persian Government to co-operate with the Turkish authorities in maintaining order amongst the Kurdish tribes residing in proximity to the Persian border*".<sup>14</sup>

Although there was no Russian complicity in the Kurdish revolt, Britain seemed to believe that any internal disturbance in the Kurdish areas in Turkey or Persia would give Russia a golden opportunity to weaken the two states. Such a prospect would enable Russia to expand its influence southwards and thus form a serious blow against British strategic interests. Ironically, the Kurdish revolt alarmed Russia even more than Britain. The former went so far as to accept the *Shah's* appeal for military assistance and to intervene directly against the revolt. Russia informed Britain that the Kurdish revolt also posed a direct threat to its own terri-

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9\* Extracts from Consul-General Abbott's Diary, Enclosure 1, *ibid*, p.39.

10\* Sheikh Ubeidullah to Dr. Cohran, Inclosure 2, *ibid*, p.47.

11\* *Ibid*, p.38.

12\* *Ibid*, p.39.

13\* Mr. Thomson to Earl Granville, 14 May 1880 & Earl Granville to Mr. Goschen, 1 July 1880, *ibid*, p.1.

14\* Mr. Thomson to Earl Granville, Tehran, 24 August 1880, *ibid*, p.10.

tory, where more than 44,000 Russian Kurds lived close to the Russian-Ottoman and Russian-Persian frontiers, and to the Armenians, its local allies.<sup>15</sup> Russian military preparations to intervene in support of the Persian Government against the Kurdish revolt, in turn, increased the anxiety of the British, who failed to persuade the Turkish and Persian governments to normalise their bilateral relations or to co-ordinate temporarily their military efforts against the Kurds. Eventually, as soon as it became clear that the Persian forces were gaining the upper hand in the war with the Kurdish insurgents, Russia reassured Britain that it would not intervene.<sup>16</sup> However, to forestall “*the recurrence of these disorders*” in Kurdistan, Russia proposed co-ordinated British-Russian efforts in the future,<sup>17</sup> but, Britain was not interested in any proposal that gave Russia the right to intervene in the internal affairs of Turkey and Persia.

The Ubeidullah revolt underlines the point that Britain adopted a less favourable approach to Kurdish aspirations than to those of the Armenians. Britain encouraged the Ottoman and Qajar governments to deal with the Kurdish grievances by force, rather than by adopting political and administrative changes to alleviate Kurdish suffering. The British position on the issue of reforms in Kurdistan was clearly expressed by the British Vice-Consul at Van, Emilius Clayton:

*It seems unquestionable that autonomy or representative government would be at present totally out of place in these parts [i.e. Kurdish areas] and what is required is a strong executive in the hands of a capable man [i.e. Turkish governor] possessing the confidence of Europe. But, I feel sure also that he will require to be assisted by European subordinates to some extent.*<sup>18</sup>

However, the outbreak of the Kurdish revolt in September 1880 brought to the attention of some British officials on the ground, such as Maj. H. Trotter, the British Consul at Erzeraum, the need to understand Kurdish suffering under Ottoman rule:

*There is no doubt that in very many places the Kurds suffer more from misgovernment than the Christians do. They have no Consuls to look up to as their special protectors, no Bishops to telegraph sensational and often exaggerated accounts of their woes; in fact no one to look for [sic] for redress or protection... I can see no reason whatsoever why the sedentary Kurds should not be subjected to the same laws and institutions as the Christians.*<sup>19</sup>

This call for some modification of the British position on Kurdish affairs, through extending British and European protection of the Kurds under Ottoman rule, passed unheeded by the British Government. The latter still seemed to believe that any move in the direction of devolution was a step towards dismembering the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar Kingdom, thus giv-

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<sup>15</sup>\* Mr. Plunkett to Earl Granville, 8 November 1880 & 17 November 1880, *ibid*, pp.18-19.

<sup>16</sup>\* Earl Granville to Mr. Plunkett, 16 November 1880, *ibid*, p.24.

<sup>17</sup>\* Earl Granville to the Earl of Dufferin, Foreign Office, 28 January 1881, *ibid*, p.75.

<sup>18</sup>\* Vice-Consul at Van, Clayton to Maj. Trotter, 11 July 1880, *ibid*, p.7.

<sup>19</sup>\* Maj. Trotter to Mr. Goschen, 14 September 1880, *ibid*, p.162.

ing the Russians the sought-for opportunity to expand their strategic, political and economic influence southwards. The British encouraged those political and administrative reforms that principally strengthened the authority of central rule, while offering some improvements as far as the Christian subjects were concerned. The latter measures were designed to deprive Russia the opportunity of using Christians as an instrument of its expansionist foreign policy.

## ***ii- The Early Twentieth Century: The Intensification Of European Powers' Rivalry For Political And Economic Spheres Of Influence***

In the early Twentieth Century, the Kurdish nationalist movement in Qajar Kurdistan, like that of Ottoman Kurdistan, confronted unfriendly British attitudes. During the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, the Eastern Kurds played a notable part in supporting the Persian democratic movement. Like the remainder of the country, Kurdish cities and towns, such as Kermanshah, Saujbulaq, Senna and Saqiz, established their own Popular Councils (*Anjumans*) to take over the running of their own affairs from the representatives of the central government.<sup>20</sup> Many armed Kurds defended the Constitutional movement both against Russian and Turkish interventions. The disregard of Kurdish political aspirations by the leaders of the Constitutional movement disappointed the Kurds, who intensified their agitation for self-rule. The growing strength of the Kurdish nationalist movement that turned East Kurdistan into a state of constant disorder and rebellion, and the explicit threat to foreign control over Persia by the Constitutional movement, were the background against which Britain and Russia decided to transform their relations from rivalry to *rapprochement* over Persian affairs. As a result, Britain and Russia concluded the agreement of 1907 to reconcile their respective interests in various parts of Persia. It was important, as Keith Robbins points out, that the India Office and the Government of India approved of the agreement since it directly affected India's security.<sup>21</sup>

The agreement stated that both countries had

*for geographical and economic reason, a special interest in the maintenance of peace and order in certain provinces adjoining or in the neighbourhood of the Russian frontier... and the frontiers of Afghanistan and Baluchistan. [Both sides seek to avoid] all causes of conflict between their respective interests in the above-mentioned provinces of Persia.*<sup>22</sup>

Britain and Russia divided Persia into three spheres of influence. Northern Persia, including

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<sup>20</sup>\* Ghassemlou, *Kurdistan And The Kurds*, p.43.

<sup>21</sup>\* Keith Robbins, *Politicians, Diplomacy and War in Modern British History*, (London: the Hambleton Press, 1994), p.106

<sup>22</sup>\* Convection between the UK and Russia, Relating to Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet, Signed at St. Petersburg, 31 August 1907, *Treaty Series*, No.34, 1907, His Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO).

most of Eastern Kurdistan, formed the Russian zone. Central Persia became a neutral zone, while southern Persia, which overlooked the Persian Gulf and adjoined the Indian frontier, was the British zone. Both sides undertook to respect each others strategic, political and economic interests in their own respective spheres of influence. Four years later, in the face of the continuing political instability in Eastern Kurdistan and Persian Azerbaijan, coupled with frequent Turkish military incursions across the frontiers, Britain and Russia signed a new protocol on the Ottoman-Persian frontiers in 1911. Consequently, the Russians superseded the Turks as the occupying force in some unstable Kurdish and Azari areas. Noel Buxton, a British scholar and a liberal politician who closely observed the policies of the Great Powers towards the Kurdish and Armenian situation, wrote in 1913 that the 1907 agreement between Britain and Russia helped restore "*public order*" to North-West Persia, an aim which they shared with the Persian Government. He hoped that the Powers would take a similar step towards Ottoman Kurdistan and Ottoman Armenia to restore political stability.<sup>23</sup>

The British-Russian agreement of 1907 was also aimed against Germany, the new powerful rival on the political stage of the Middle East. The growing German political and economic influence in Ottoman Asia, especially after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, caused the British to relegate to the background their rivalry with the Russians and to pay special attention to certain areas that linked with, or were close to, their strategic areas in the Middle East, such as the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Ottoman Kurdistan and Mesopotamia were among the areas that took on new strategic, political and economic stature. Strategically, Southern Kurdistan became increasingly valuable to Britain because of it being both part of the land-route to India and overlooking Mesopotamia. This was clearly manifest in British reaction to the construction of the Baghdad Railway, which was to cross Kurdistan. Britain was also alarmed by Russia's agreement with Germany at Potsdam in 1910, whereby Russia was to build a railway line from Tehran to Khanaqin across Eastern Kurdistan, while Germany undertook to link this line with the main Baghdad Railway Line. In response to these unwelcome developments for the British, calls were made for establishing British control over part of the Baghdad Railway Line, which linked Kirkuk to Kifri in Southern Kurdistan (see map two).<sup>24</sup>

There was also growing concern in official British circles, especially the Admiralty and





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23\* Noel Buxton, 'The Russians in Armenia' *The Nineteenth Century And After*, Vol.IXXIV, July-December 1913, p.1362. Noel was particularly interested in the affairs of the non-Turkish ethnic and religious minorities.

24\* The 1907 Baghdad Railway Committee, 20 March 1907, FO371/12, PRO, p.10.



Map Two: The Baghdad Railway Line & Other Proposed Railway Lines In Kurdistan In 1914.

-  Completed Part Of The Baghdad Railway Line
-  The Proposed Baghdad Railway Line
-  The Proposed Russian Railway Line
-  The Proposed French Railway Line

Source: Enlarged Extract, Wolf, J.B., *The Diplomatic History of The Baghdad Railroad*, P.6 & *British Documents On The Origins Of The War, 1898-1914* (Ed) Gooch, G.P. & Temperley, H. Facing Page 796



the Foreign Office, about the future destination of the oil concessions in Southern Kurdistan and Mesopotamia, stemming from the construction of the Baghdad Railway Line. British interest in oil was principally motivated by strategic rather than commercial considerations, even though private British companies pressed London for official support for their efforts to acquire oil concessions in the Middle East. In the early years of the Twentieth Century, most of the world's oil supplies came from the United States and Mexico, the latter being under American domination. With the increasing use of oil by the British navy, the Admiralty perceived as essential to Britain the need to secure its own access to oil sources away from foreign domination. Oil was becoming central to the Admiralty's efforts to modernise the navy simply because it was far more economical and efficient than coal.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the German navy emerged as a major rival to the British navy and therefore it was vital for Britain to prevent Germany from monopolising all oil-related concessions in the Ottoman territories. Indeed, the German Baghdad Railway concession contained a close link between the construction of that railway and the right to carry out oil inspection in the surrounding areas. Against this background, and as the British were alive to the geological similarity between Southern Kurdistan

<sup>25</sup>\* Kent, *Moguls and Mandarins*, pp.35-36.

and the oil-bearing zone in neighbouring Persia, which was strong evidence of the existence of oil fields in the former, they began to exert pressure on Constantinople to grant British companies oil concessions in the Mosul and Baghdad *Wilayets*. However, the only important British achievement in the oil sphere by 1914 was to secure 75% of the Turkish Petroleum Company, which searched for oil in Southern Kurdistan and the Baghdad *Wilayet*, leaving a mere 25% of the shares to the Germans, who had obtained the original oil concession from the Ottoman authorities in 1903. By 1914, as a result of economic imperialism and the imposition of indirect political control by the European Powers, the Asiatic parts of the Ottoman Empire were practically turned into various economic and (implicitly) strategic-political zones of interests. In June, Britain and Germany temporarily reconciled their conflicting interests by signing an agreement to draw the boundaries of their commercial zones. Under this agreement, the southern part of Kurdistan fell into the German zone, whereas most of Mesopotamia came within the British zone. The agreement was short-lived as the First World War broke out two months later.

One of the important consequences of the construction of the Baghdad Railway Line, and the intense rivalry it created among the Powers, was to lend to Southern Kurdistan a new strategic and economic importance. The British policy of acquiring economic and political influence was in response to the policies of other Powers, and was still based on the idea of maintaining the territorial unity of Ottoman Turkey insofar as its heartland was concerned. During this period of European rivalry, the British had been engaged both secretly and publicly in gathering information, through missionaries, agents, travellers, scholars and diplomats, about Kurdistan's social, economic and political conditions. This is not, however, to suggest that Britain was planning for -or thinking of- directly controlling the most important part of Kurdistan, but to emphasise the point that by the time the First World War broke out, Britain could not afford to adopt an indifferent position on Kurdish affairs, and that the direction of its imperial policy was bound to affect Kurdistan's future.

### **The Position Of Kurdistan In Britain's Imperial Schemes: From The Bunsen Committee To The Sykes-Picot (Tripartite) Agreement**

#### ***i- The Recommendations Of The 1915 Bunsen Committee***

The outbreak of the First World War and Turkey's subsequent decision to enter the war against the Allies did not immediately alter the British stance on the issue of preserving Otto-

man territorial integrity. J.C. Hurewitz points out how Britain did not yet consider the prospect of partitioning the Ottoman Empire, even though the war entered its tenth month.<sup>26</sup> The reversal in British policy towards the Ottoman Empire took place a few months later, when Britain realised that its imperial strategy no longer depended on the territorial unity of the Ottoman Empire or even Qajar Persia. This reversal manifested itself in the Constantinople agreement (4 March-10 April 1915), the Hussein-McMahon understanding (July 1915- March 1916) and, most importantly, the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement. It became clear beyond doubt that the aim of Britain and its main Allies, France and Russia, was to dismember the Ottoman enemy, especially its non-Turkish *Wilayets* in Mesopotamia, Greater Syria, Kurdistan and Armenia. These striking developments stemmed from the war, and had direct and long term implications for Kurdistan's future, as will be explored later.

The Constantinople agreement was initiated by Sergey Sazonov, the Russian Foreign Minister,<sup>27</sup> and contained diplomatic exchanges among Russia, Britain and France. Under the agreement, Britain recognised Russian claims to Constantinople and the Straits in exchange for extending its influence to the neutral zone in Persia and keeping the Muslim Holy Places and Arabia "*independent Mussulman dominion*".<sup>28</sup> France was to be compensated in Greater Syria, the Gulf of Alexandretta and Cilicia up to the Taurus mountain range. The Constantinople agreement was an incomplete partition scheme for the Ottoman Empire and made no reference to the future of Anatolia, Kurdistan, Armenia and Mesopotamia. Moreover, Britain was under pressure from its Allies to formulate quickly its war aims and territorial ambitions in the Middle East.<sup>29</sup> Against this background, Herbert Henry Asquith, the British Prime Minister, appointed an interdepartmental Committee in April 1915, so as to define post-war British interests in the Ottoman Empire, and to identify necessary measures to consolidate them by political means. Maurice de Bunsen, the Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, chaired the Committee which included representatives from the Foreign, War and India Offices, the Board of Trade and the Admiralty. Lieutenant-Colonel Mark Sykes was the personal representative of Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, at the Committee. The

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26\* J. C. Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East*, Vol. I, (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1965), p.26.

27\* Howard M. Sachar, *The Emergence of the Middle East, 1914-1924*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1969), p.153.

28\* Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East*, pp.18-19.

29\* Aaron S. Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World: the Cairo Conference of 1921*, (London: the Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p.4.

outbreak of war in the Middle East drew the India and War Offices into the policy-making process insofar as it affected the future of the Ottoman territories. The main reason for this development was that the India Government provided and controlled the expeditionary force that invaded southern Mesopotamia in November 1914,<sup>30</sup> with a view to consolidating British control over the Gulf region. By contrast, the War Office under Lord Kitchener was anxious over creating political conditions in the Middle East that would prevent a Turkish-Arab Coalition, and thus, help the Egyptian expeditionary force to defeat the Turks in Arabia and Greater Syria.

Having held thirteen meetings in the period between 12 April and 28 May 1915, the Bunsen Committee submitted its final report on 30 June. Its recommendations were never officially approved or fully applied by the British Government. Nevertheless, apart from providing useful insights into British foreign policy thinking, the recommendations influenced, in one way or another, British post-war policy towards the Middle East and Kurdistan in particular. Therefore, it is necessary to examine its four proposed alternatives for the political and administrative future of Ottoman *Wilayets* and its implications for Ottoman Kurdistan. The report identified two main factors that imposed limitations on any future British policy towards Ottoman Asia. Firstly, Britain had to take into consideration the aims and interests of its Allies, especially France and Russia, in post-war Ottoman territories.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, the British Government had to strike a balance between imperial advantages, resulting from any re-drawing or modification of the political and economic conditions in Ottoman Asia, and imperial responsibilities.<sup>32</sup> The latter factor was too great to ignore due to the huge size of the British Empire.

Based on Alternative A, which entailed the partition of the Ottoman Empire among Britain, France and Russia, the first scheme of the Bunsen Committee included British annexation of the largest part of Ottoman Kurdistan (see map three). The second largest part would be under "*Special Administration*", i.e. not under the control of a single Power. The Baghdad Railway Line passed through these would-be British controlled areas of Kurdistan. Strategically, the British motive was to secure firm control over the Basra *Wilayet*, vital to the security of the Persian Gulf. In other words, to prevent other Powers from threatening its interests in the Basra *Wilayet*, Britain had to control the Baghdad *Wilayet*. Similarly, to establish firm control over the Baghdad *Wilayet*, Britain had to extend its direct control northwards where

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30\* Sachar, *The Emergence of the Middle East*, p.54.

31\* Cabinet, Ad Hoc Committee (Secret) Report, Proceedings and Appendices of a Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister, 1915, British Desiderata in Turkey and in Asia', CAB 27/1, PRO, Paragraph 7.

32\* Ibid, Paragraph 10.

Map Three: The Bunsen Committee's First Scheme Of Annexation In Kurdistan

B Britain      F France  
 R Russia      SA Special Administration

Source: Enlarged Extract, CAB 37/1, PRO



the rough mountains of Kurdistan could serve as natural strategic barriers against southwards expansionism by rival powers.<sup>33</sup> Kurdistan, the report explained, offered both favourable weather conditions for “white British troops”, and an “excellent source for recruits” from the native Kurds.<sup>34</sup> It is worth noting that the argument concerning the strategic value of Kurdistan reemerged following the war, when Col. Arnold Wilson, the future Acting Civil Commissioner, presented it as his rationale for replacing indirect British control with direct British administration in Southern Kurdistan. Between 1921 and 1923, the strategic argument was once more used to justify the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into the newly-established Iraqi state.

Although the above mentioned Kurdish areas had less economic value ~~in comparison with its strategic importance~~ in comparison with its strategic importance, the report pointed out that:

*oil again makes it desirable for us to carry our control on to Mosul, in the vicinity of which place, there are valuable wells, possession of which by another Power would be prejudicial to our interests.*<sup>35</sup>

British control of the Kurdish areas was also necessary for the irrigation of Arab Mesopotamia and the existing river navigation system. Moreover, Kurdistan was considered by the India

33\* Ibid, Paragraphs 21-22.  
 34\* Ibid, Paragraph 22.  
 35\* Ibid, Paragraph 26.

Map Four: The Bunsen Committee's Second Scheme Of Annexation In Kurdistan

B Britain      F France  
 R Russia      SA Special Administration

Source: Enlarged Extract, CAB 37/1 PRO



Government as being an essential part of any British scheme to revive the agriculture of Mesopotamia and make it the granary of the Empire. In irrigation and river navigation, the British not only had pre-war concessionaires, but also inaugurated some schemes which made them even more concerned about consolidating their position in the country.<sup>36</sup> Following the war, the potential oil wealth of Southern Kurdistan and its economic value for British interests in Mesopotamia become one of the reasons for its inclusion in the British mandate over Mesopotamia and its later incorporation into the Iraqi state. According to these strategic and economic considerations, Ottoman Kurdistan had to be partitioned. To achieve its strategic and economic aims, Britain, the report remarked, should be prepared to adopt a second partition scheme (see map four). This would enable France to extend its territories from the Mediterranean coast in the west to Urmia (East Kurdistan), with Britain giving up part of its share in Kurdistan.<sup>37</sup> Russia also had to be compensated by incorporating northern Persia and East Kurdistan, which were already within its sphere of influence before the war.<sup>38</sup> The latter concession, the report underlined, would make it more significant to Britain to establish firm control

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, Paragraphs 24, 27-29.

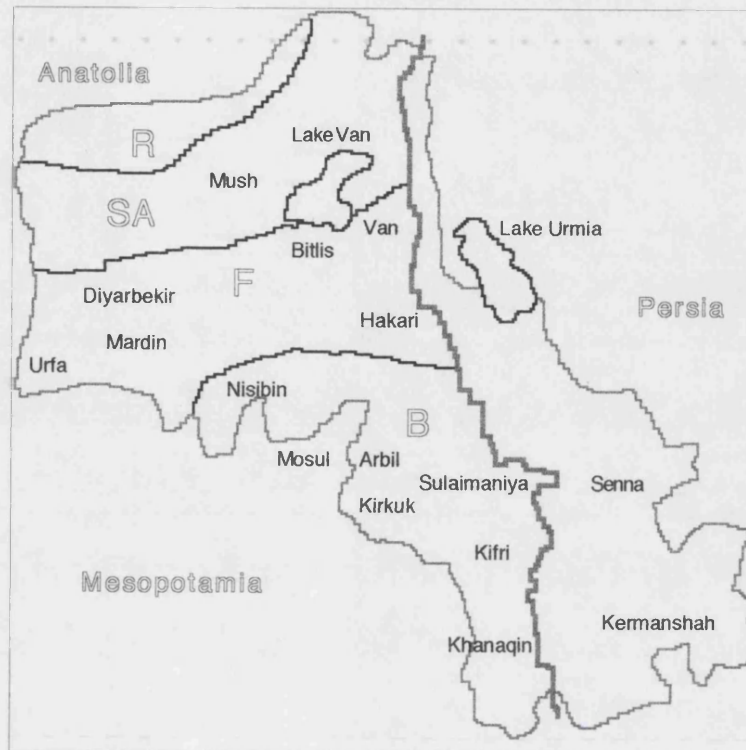
<sup>37</sup> Ibid, Paragraph 34.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, Paragraph 41.

Map Five: The Bunsen Committee's Zones Of Interest In Kurdistan

B Britain    F French  
 R Russia    SA Special Administration

Source: Enlarged Extract, CAB 37/1 PRO



over Southern Kurdistan, with a view to preventing future Russian expansion southwards to Baghdad and Basra.<sup>39</sup>

Alternative B consisted of dividing Ottoman Asian territories into zones of interests under the domination of the European Powers (see map five).<sup>40</sup> Apart from giving Constantinople to Russia, the Basra *Wilayet* to Britain and, perhaps, Smyrna to Greece, the rest of the Ottoman Empire was not to be dismembered. The British zone would include, as in the second scheme of Alternative A, Southern Kurdistan and Mesopotamia.<sup>41</sup> British motives were the same as those in Alternative A. The French zone would include a sizable part of Northern Kurdistan. Britain and other European Powers might contemplate the idea of implementing certain social and administrative reforms within their respective zones in order to put an end to Ottoman maladministration. Such reforms might require the establishment of a “*permanent international board*”.<sup>42</sup> However, applying Alternative B, the report warned, might “*easily lead to a condition of anarchy*” in Kurdistan and Asia Minor, as a direct consequence of undermin-

39\* Ibid, Paragraph 43.  
 40\* Ibid, Paragraph 48.  
 41\* Ibid, Paragraph 52.  
 42\* Ibid, Paragraphs 62-64.

ing the authority of the Ottoman *Sultan*.<sup>43</sup>

Alternative C was based on “*the maintenance of an independent Ottoman Empire*” as it existed. Under this scheme, Turkey would only cede the same above mentioned territories to Britain, Russia and Greece. It would have to apply an Armenian reform scheme on the lines adopted in 1914. The report did not recommend this alternative, fearing certain consequences, such as consolidating the political and economic influences of Russia and France respectively, as well as the outbreak of rebellions within the unreformed Turkey. The latter development would practically result in unplanned partitions of the Ottoman Empire, which Britain had to avoid.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Britain opposed any spontaneous partition of Ottoman Asia and the emergence of new political and administrative entities, without giving prior considerations to its implications for British strategic, political and economic interests.

Alternative D was based on the maintenance of an independent Ottoman Empire with a de-centralised system of administration. As “*Turkey in Asia falls ethnically and historically into five great provinces- Anatolia, Armenia, Syria, Palestine and Iraq-Jezirah*”,<sup>45</sup> the report concluded, the Ottoman Government should adopt “*a measure of devolution, which would satisfy the aspirations of the Arabs and Armenians to have a voice in the administration of their immediate affairs*”.<sup>46</sup> In case it failed, this scheme left the way open for the creation of “*several autonomous states*”: Turkey proper in Anatolia, an Armenian and an Arab federation under a nominal suzerainty of the *Sultan* (see map six).<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, if the Ottoman Empire disintegrated, Britain would still be able to pursue its policy with regard to the Syria and Iraq-Jezirah *Wilayets*. Britain could declare them “*independent states*” under its protection, “*annex*” them, or declare them to be part of its “*sphere of influence*” according to the circumstances.<sup>48</sup>

While dismissing the first three alternatives, the report eventually recommended the last one because it would not compel Britain to assume any immediate or direct military responsibilities in the region. It also offered the ideal way to control the prospective disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in a manner that served to consolidated British strategic, political and economic interests. This alternative was seemingly based on the idea of self-rule for non-Turkish nationalities. Yet, it overlooked political aspirations of the Kurds, who, in Mark Sykes’

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43\* Ibid, Paragraph 67.

44\* Ibid, Paragraphs 73-73.

45\* Ibid, Paragraph 81.

46\* Ibid, Paragraph 85.

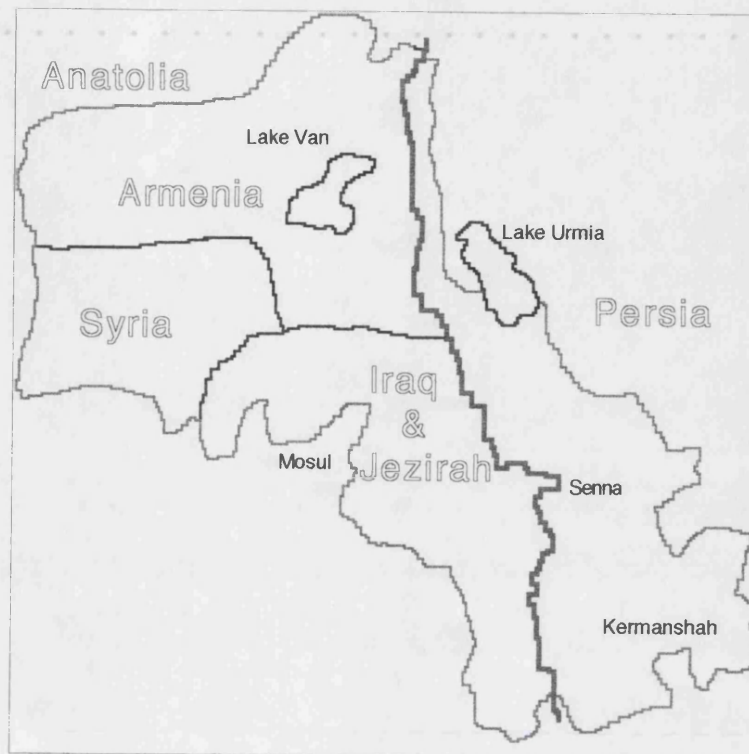
47\* Ibid, Paragraph 87.

48\* Ibid, Paragraph 88.



Map Six: The Bunsen Committee's Devolutionary Scheme For The Ottoman Empire

Source: Enlarged Extract, CAB 37/1, PRO



view, had no "sense of nationality" of any kind whatsoever:

*A consolidated Kurdistan is an impossibility. There is no reason why the distribution of the Kurds should dictate frontiers or why [the] Kurds should be regarded as a people who required consolidation.*<sup>49</sup>

Thus, Alternative D meant a partition of Ottoman Kurdistan among new ethnic entities. Northern Kurdistan would be part of Armenia, while Southern Kurdistan would be within Iraq-Jezirah. Following the war, British officials in Mesopotamia advocated similar schemes by reiterating Mark Sykes' argument.

#### ***ii- The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence And The Sykes-Picot Agreement***

Official contacts with Hussein, the Sharif of Mecca, were jointly initiated by the Foreign Office and the War Office in July 1915.<sup>50</sup> Their immediate objective was to detach the Asian Arabs from their allegiance to the Sublime Porte, and enlist their support for British war efforts against Ottoman forces, whereas Hussein's principal objective was to establish a great Arab state with Britain's assistance. The India Office opposed the idea of enlisting Arab support

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, Appendix IX, Remarks on Sir A. Hirtzel's Note by Lieut.-Col. Sir M. Sykes, 15 March 1915, pp.100-101

<sup>50</sup> Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East*, Vol. I, p.47.

Map Seven: The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, 1915-1916



Hussein's Territorial Claims In Kurdistan



because it feared that the ensuing political commitments might diametrically contradict post-war British imperial interests,<sup>51</sup> notably the colonisation of Mesopotamia for the benefit of the Government of India. The formal correspondence between Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner for Egypt, and Hussein, stretched out over an eight months period (14 July 1915-10 March 1916) and consisted of ten letters. The first striking point in these letters is Britain's abandonment of the principle of preserving Ottoman territorial integrity. At another level, it formed the beginning of Arab claims to a large segment of Ottoman Kurdistan. In this correspondence, Sharif Hussein demanded the inclusion of a large portion of Ottoman Kurdistan into his future Arab state after the war (see map seven). The opening letter of the formal correspondence contains Hussein's proposal:

*England [is] to acknowledge the independence of the Arab countries, bounded on the north by Mersina and Adana up to the 37 latitude, on which degree fall Birijik, Mardin, Jezirah [ibn-Omar], Amadia up to the border of Persia.*<sup>52</sup>

Initially, Britain viewed the question of the limits and boundaries of the would-be Arab state as

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Letter No. 1, From Amir Abdullah to Ronald Storrs, The Correspondence between Sir Henry McMahon, His Majesty's High Commissioner at Cairo, and the Sharif Hussein of Mecca, July 1915-March 1916, Cmd 5957.

*“premature”*,<sup>53</sup> whereas Hussein insisted on discussing it first, arguing that *“within these limits”* he had not included places inhabited by *“a foreign race”*.<sup>54</sup> After accepting Hussein’s demands in principle, McMahon excluded such Arab areas as Alexandretta from the future Arab state, while not objecting to the inclusion of a large portion of Kurdistan into that state.<sup>55</sup> Hussein based his demands for the inclusion of the Mosul *Wilayet* within his future state on the historical and sentimental grounds that in the middle ages it had been part of the Arab-Islamic Empire and therefore had a special value for the Arabs.<sup>56</sup> The issue of the boundaries of the Arab state was significant because it was used later by Sharif Feisal (as King of Syria in 1919 and as King of Iraq in 1921) as British acknowledgement of his legitimate demands for including Western Kurdistan in Syria and then Southern Kurdistan into Iraq.

Just one month before Hussein declared his revolt against Turkey, the Foreign Ministers of Britain, France and Russia entered into a secret agreement, governing their own partition of the Ottoman Empire. Unlike the Constantinople agreement, the Sykes-Picot agreement (26 April-23 October 1916), which is also known as the Tripartite agreement (following Russia’s entry into the negotiations between France and Britain), formed the most comprehensive scheme for the partition of the Ottoman Empire and represented a radical change in Britain’s interest in Kurdistan. It not only aimed to bring under British influence part of Kurdistan but also to directly determine the future of the remainder of the region. These agreements were the outcome of the exchange of eleven letters among the principal Allies: Britain, France and Russia. It constituted an urgent plan for the post-war political and territorial future of the Ottoman Empire. It was Britain that took the initiative, after the war lingered on in spite of Allied initial optimism about its early conclusion. In contrast to the Bunsen Committee’s recommendations in favour of adopting the decentralisation option, the Sykes-Picot agreement was based on the partition of the Ottoman Empire. The territorial unity of the latter was no longer the cornerstone of British imperial strategy, which now focused on establishing direct and indirect British control in Mesopotamia and Southern Kurdistan with the aim of consolidating British authority over the important sea and land routes to ~~the~~ India.

Points One, Two, Four and Nine in the French-British agreement particularly affected Kurdistan’s future. Point One consisted of a British-French undertaking to recognise and protect an independent Arab state or a confederation of Arab states under an Arab Chief in the

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53\* Letter No.2, From Sir Henry McMahon to Sharif Hussein, 30 August 1915, *ibid.*

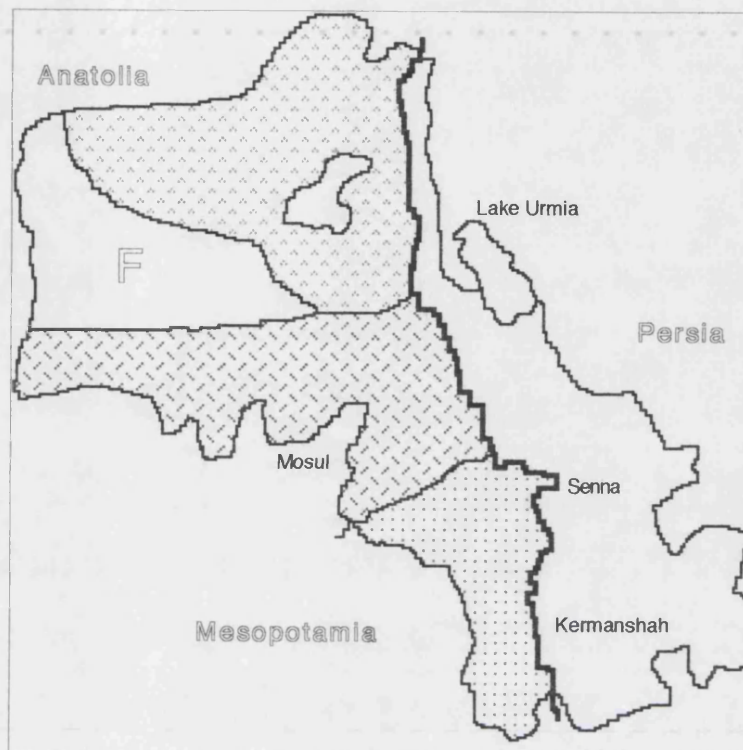
54\* Letter No.3, From Sharif Hussein, 9 September 1915, *ibid.*

55\* Letter No.4, From Sir Henry McMahon, 24 October 1915, *ibid.*

56\* Letter No.5, From Sharif Hussein, 5 November 1915, *ibid.*

Map Eight: The Partition Of Kurdistan Among The Allies Under The Terms Of The 1916 Sykes-Picot (Tripartite) Agreement

-  French Sphere Of Influence (Blue Area)
-  British Sphere Of Influence (Red Area)
-  Direct Russian Control
- F** Direct French Control



areas A and B. Point Two allowed France and Britain to create a “*direct or indirect administration or control*”. Point Four granted Britain, apart from the port of Haifa and Acre, “*a given supply of water from the Tigris and Euphrates in the area A for area B*”. In Point Nine France agreed not to enter any negotiation or cede its rights in the blue area to any third party, apart from the Arab state or confederation of Arab states.<sup>57</sup> Under the Tripartite agreement Russia was to “*annex*” the regions of Erzerum, Trebizond, Van and Bitlis up to a point subsequently to be determined on the littoral of the Black Sea to the west of Trebizond. Russia would also bring under its control “*the region of Kurdistan to the south of Van and Bitlis between Mush, Sert, the course of the Tigris, Jezirah-ibn-Omar, the crest-line of the mountains which dominated Amadia and the region of Merga Van*” (see map eight). Britain and Russia also agreed that “*the frontier of the Arab state*” would start from the region of Merga Van and follow the crest-line of the mountains, which divided the Ottoman and Persian Dominions.<sup>58</sup> Britain and France in particular hoped that the spirit of their co-operation and consultation, which charac-

57\* Grey to Cambon, 16 May 1916, Tripartite (Sykes-Picot) Agreement on the Partition of the Ottoman Empire: Britain, France and Russia, 26 April-23 October 1916, Documents on British Foreign Policy (DBFP), 1st series, Vol. IV, (ed) Woodward & Butler, p.24151.

58\* Edward Grey to Count Benckendorff, Russian Ambassador in London, 23 October 1916, *ibid*.

terised their agreement, would continue to govern their post-war bilateral relations.<sup>59</sup>

The main feature of these secret agreements was not only its disregard of the Kurdish question, but also its aim of further partitioning Kurdistan. Moreover, through turning Southern Kurdistan into French and British spheres of influence under nominal Arab rule, Mark Sykes sought to reconcile the claims of the French, the British and the Sharifians to the area.<sup>60</sup> In light of this, it can be said that Sykes-Picot underlined direct British interest in southern parts of Kurdistan, contrary to what McDowall assumes.<sup>61</sup> In Point One of the French-British understanding, Area A, which belonged to the French sphere of influence, included the area west of the Lesser Zab River in Southern Kurdistan, whereas Area B, which belonged to the British sphere of influence, extended from the area east of the Lesser Zab River to the old Ottoman-Persian frontier. In Point Two, the French blue area of direct control included the western part of Northern Kurdistan. In Points One and Two of the British-Russian understanding, Russia was to annex the eastern part of Northern Kurdistan and a small strip of land in Southern Kurdistan. This and Point Nine of the French-British understanding revealed how the War Office was anxious, on military grounds, to avoid any direct contact with Russian territories. In this respect, the Bunsen Committee's final report pointed out earlier that, if Russia became Britain's neighbour in Mesopotamia, Britain should take into consideration, when making defensive arrangements for the new annexed territory, that Russia put "in the field in Manchuria an army exceeding three quarters of a million men".<sup>62</sup> It clearly implied that Britain should avoid the prospect of creating a common British-Russian boundary when making new territorial arrangements in the Ottoman Empire. It was hoped, from the British viewpoint, that by turning Area A into a French sphere of influence and the blue area into French direct control, a barrier would be created against any future Russian expansion towards the south, where direct and indirect zones of British control existed.

Even though Britain included in its sphere of influence (i.e. Area B) the Kurdish area of Kirkuk, where oil was strongly suspected to exist, the Admiralty was still critical of the partition of the Mosul Wilayet between Britain and France. It wanted Britain to exclusively control the potential oil sources to the north and the south of the Lesser Zab River. In a Cabinet memorandum, Admiral Edmond Slade reiterated the importance of oil to the Admiralty's plans to

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59\* Klieman, Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World, p.13.

60\* Secret Memorandum for the War Department No.2522, 5 January 1916, FO371/2767, PRO.

61\* McDowall, A Modern History of the Kurds, p.117.

62\* The Bunsen Committee..., op. cit., Paragraph 43.

modernise its navy and the need to secure all oil rights in Mesopotamia and elsewhere.<sup>63</sup> After all, oil considerations were what motivated the Admiralty, under Winston Churchill, to encourage the Indian Government to organise the Mesopotamian campaign at the start, so as to protect the oil fields of southern Persia.<sup>64</sup> As the war dragged on, the Admiralty's argument found support among other official circles in London, such as the Air Ministry and, most importantly, the Foreign Office. The war was a new factor that accentuated Britain's need to obtain secure oil supplies under war conditions, and this could not be achieved unless Britain imposed its direct and indirect control over those areas which had potential oil sources, such as the Mosul Wilayet.

## **The British Occupation Of Southern Kurdistan, 1917-1918**

### ***i- Britain And Kurdish Affairs On The Eve of the First World War***

By the late Nineteenth Century, Kurdish nationalists became convinced that the way to realise their political aspirations was to internationalise their cause by acquiring the support of European Powers. As previously mentioned, Ubeidullah unsuccessfully attempted to establish contacts with the existing Powers, especially Britain. The outward orientation of the Kurdish nationalist movement was influenced by two factors. The first factor was that it encountered two powerful enemies: the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar Kingdom. The second factor was the very unfavourable geopolitical position of Kurdistan as a land-locked country, surrounded by its adversaries on all sides. In order for Kurdish nationalists to succeed in their struggle for national rights, they realised that outside help was needed. As far as this eventuality was concerned, the Kurds had two options, reflecting the existing political and geographical circumstances: to seek the assistance of either Great Britain, the most liberal Power, or of Czarist Russia, the nearest geographical Power to Kurdistan. This is not, however, to suggest that Kurdish nationalists had a clear strategy towards the Powers, but to emphasise the point that there was general realisation among Kurdish nationalists that they needed to prevent any clash between Kurdish national aspirations and whatever interests the Powers might have in Kurdistan, and that they should make the most of any deterioration in international and regional relations.

In spite of many Kurdish efforts to obtain some form of outside support, none of the

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<sup>63</sup>\* Vice Admiral Edmond Slade, Memorandum on The Political Position in the Persian Gulf at end of the War (Cabinet Paper, G118) 31 October 1916, CAB21/119, PRO.

<sup>64</sup>\* Kent, Moguls and Mandarins, p.24.

Powers was willing to support the Kurds prior to the outbreak of the First World War, apart from Russia, whose geographical closeness to Kurdistan made it an important player in Kurdish affairs. With Russian assistance -in the form of arms and money- Prince Abdul Razaq Bedirkhan, a Kurdish nationalist and a former Ottoman diplomat, secretly organised an anti-Turkish movement, which included Kurdish officers of the Ottoman army and the tribes of the Bitlis, Van and Botan regions. His aim was the establishment of Kurdish rule under direct Russian protection.<sup>65</sup> Buxton argued, after visiting Armenia in 1913, that Russia's aim in sponsoring the Kurdish movement was to keep the Kurds from "*making terms with the Turks or with the Christians so as to keep up the excuse for possible intervention*".<sup>66</sup> In April 1913, an organised Kurdish revolt broke out in Northern Kurdistan under Abdul Razaq and spread to Southern Kurdistan. Other principal Kurdish nationalists of Eastern Kurdistan, such as Ismail Agha Simko (the head of the Shikak Kurds) and Said Taha (the grandson of Ubeidullah), took part in this revolt. It seems that the Kurdish nationalists hoped that the present Turkish military retreat in the Balkans in 1912-1913 and Kurdish appeals to the Armenians and other Christians to join the armed revolt -a step which also aimed to reassure the European Powers of their political intentions- would bring broader international support for the Kurdish cause. The British Consul in Mosul, who closely watched these developments, dismissed Turkish claim that the revolt was a Russian plot, emphasising its internal origin, which stemmed from the anti-Kurdish policies of the Young Turk Government.<sup>67</sup> Following the failure of the Abdul Razaq movement, an unsuccessful revolt took place in Bitlis in Northern Kurdistan, which spread to Southern Kurdistan. The latter was the scene of another revolt by the Barzani Kurds which broke out in spring 1914. According to Madhar Ahmad, the leader of the Barzans, Abdul Salam asked for British and Russian assistance.<sup>68</sup> In other parts of Southern Kurdistan, the Hamawands were in a state of continuous rebellion, while the Bajlan of the Khanaqin region and the Jaf tribes had serious friction with the Turkish Government.<sup>69</sup>

On the eve of the First World War, Sheikh Mahmud, the most influential nationalist figure in Southern Kurdistan, made his first contacts with European Powers via the Mixed Boundary Commission, which attempted to resolve the outstanding boundary dispute between the

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65\* G. Lowther to Edward Grey, Pera, 9 December 1911, Enclosure 2 in No.1, from Acting Vice Consul Safrastian to Consul McGregor Bitlis, 17 November 1911, FO371/1263, PRO.

66\* Noel Buxton, 'The Russians in Armenia', pp.1362-1363.

67\* G. Lowther to Edward Grey, Constantinople, 22 May & 8 August 1913, FO371/1773, PRO.

68\* Ahmad, *Kurdistan During The First World War*, p.67.

69\* Cox, Memorandum, 7 December 1918, FO371/3407, PRO.

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Ottoman Empire and the Persian Kingdom. The Commission included Russian and British representatives. Mahmud hoped that with European aid he could drive the Turks out of Southern Kurdistan by force.<sup>70</sup> Only the Russians showed some interest in Mahmud's proposal and established contacts with him through their Consuls in Turkey and Persia. Yet nothing concrete came out of these contacts. A similar orientation was displayed by such principal Kurdish tribes in Southern Kurdistan as the Hamawand, Jaf and Dizai, who were prepared to call in Russian aid against the Turks.<sup>71</sup> In Eastern Kurdistan, political disorder was the prevailing feature, as the power of the central government was rapidly declining. Thus, on the eve of the First World War, the opposition of the Kurdish nationalist movement to Turkish and Persian rule was reaching an unprecedented degree throughout partitioned Kurdistan.

### ***ii- The Outbreak Of The First World War***

It was not until the outbreak of the war that the Kurds believed the new conditions offered an ideal opportunity to realise their national aspirations with the aid of the Allies, who were at war with the Turks. In spring 1915, a Kurdish revolt broke out in Botan, while the Kurds of Dersim drove the Turks out of their region for a year. In summer 1917, Botan and Dersim revolted again, as well as Kharput. In August of the same year, Mardin and Diyarbekir revolted, followed by Bitlis. The common feature of these Kurdish revolts is the non-existence of outside support, apart from the revolt of August 1917, which enjoyed limited Russian support. The absence of outside support partly explained why these revolts failed, and this deepened the belief that Kurdish efforts would not succeed, unless outside support was secured for the Kurdish cause. The war offered such a prospect for those nationalist Kurds who lived in exile, such as Surreya Bedirkhan in Egypt and Cherif Pasha in Europe, both of whom established contacts with the British. Indeed, Cherif Pasha, who was a former Ottoman ambassador, was renowned for his opposition to the rule of the Young Turks.

The military necessity of weakening the Turkish enemy made the Russians resort to the Kurds' support. Their action was also dictated by their territorial ambitions under the Sykes-Picot (Tripartite) agreement, whose terms placed the largest portion of Ottoman Kurdistan under Russian control. However, Russian occupation policies of destroying, looting, mass killing and creating total anarchy in Kurdish towns and villages in all parts of Kurdistan

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<sup>70</sup>\* M.R. Hawar, *The Leader Sheikh Mahmud and Southern State of Kurdistan*, Vol.I, (London: Jaf Press, 1990) p.184.

<sup>71</sup>\* Cox, Memorandum, 7 December 1918, FO371/3407, PRO.



alienated the Kurds. The British watched very closely all developments in Kurdistan because of both their growing interest in the fate of the Turkish and Persian territories and their advance northward in Mesopotamia. Nevertheless, they displayed no interest whatsoever in making political arrangements with Kurdish leaders that would satisfy the immediate interests of both parties, as they did in Arabia, where the British materially supported the Arab revolt. British actions were confined to seeking the loyalty of certain Kurdish regions in Eastern Kurdistan and were dictated by the need to maintain the security of British interests in the Persian Gulf and Persian oil fields, and to further keep open a direct land communication line with the Russian Allies in Eastern Kurdistan. The British were alarmed by a certain degree of success achieved by German agents, who turned some Kurds, such as the Sanjabi tribe, against the Russians. These Kurds were temporarily able to prevent the meeting of Russian forces with their British counterpart in Mesopotamia. The British thus remained uninvolved in Kurdish affairs in the first three years of the war:

*Up until this period [the capture of Baghdad in March 1917] the [British] civil administration had little need to interest themselves in Kurdish affairs. It had been recognised, indeed, as early as 1914 that an eventual advance to Baghdad or even to Mosul might finally bring us into contact with the Kurds, but so remote did this contingency appear that in December 1914, when General Cherif Pasha offered his services to the [British] force, in spite of being a man of standing and a bitter opponent of the new regime in Turkey, it was found necessary to refuse his offer, for even were there possibility of an advance to Baghdad at this period, there could be no chance of an extension of the movement beyond and such Kurdish communities which might be met with between Amarah and Baghdad were utterly insignificant.<sup>72</sup>*

While stimulating leading Kurdish families in and around the city of Baghdad to ask for British protection of the Kurds in the manner of the French protection of Christian communities in Ottoman Asia, and for the establishment of a Kurdish confederation,<sup>73</sup> the British occupation of Baghdad had the effect of changing the attitudes of British officials on the ground towards the military and political value of Southern Kurdistan for the security of Mesopotamia:

*With our occupation of Baghdad, followed by our advance up the [River] Diyala, problems connected with Kurdistan assumed a new and vital interest for us, not only in connection with the wants of the immediate military situation, but owing to the increasing certainty that the Kurds would not only be neighbours during the period of the War but some of them permanent subjects after it. The importance of securing their support and trust at this juncture could, therefore, scarcely be over-estimated.<sup>74</sup>*

British authorities on the ground became increasingly anxious about the negative effects of the brutal Russian policies in Eastern and Southern Kurdistan, which enormously

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<sup>72</sup>\* Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>\* Political, Baghdad, to Secretary of State (S/S) for India (No.9915) 16 November 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

<sup>74</sup>\* *Precis of Affairs in Southern Kurdistan during the First World War*, Office of The Civil Commission, Baghdad, 1919, FO371/4192, PRO, p.3.

benefited the Turks. The policies of Britain's close ally, Russia, even seemed to affect its own prestige among the Kurds,<sup>75</sup> who had made it clear earlier that they would not only welcome any Allied advance towards their regions, but would also rise against the Turks.<sup>76</sup> Percy Cox, the Chief Political Officer in Mesopotamia, who underlined the considerable value of the "good will" of Kurds to the British in Mesopotamia,<sup>77</sup> recommended the establishment of a Kurdish Bureau, so as to influence Southern Kurds with propaganda and money with a view to winning them over against the Turks.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, the British were unable to interfere in the affairs of those Kurdish areas which were under Russian military occupation. The military aspects of the Allied wartime agreements prohibited the British from interfering in the affairs of those areas which were occupied by the Russians, even though they were within the British spheres of influence.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the British Government feared the prospect of having "serious frictions with the Russians" during the war, while it still needed them to continue the fight against the Turks in Kurdistan.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, the British Government rejected the idea of extending British control to certain important Kurdish areas, such as Badrah, Mandali, Qizil Robot and the Hamrin mountain range. The subsequent Russian evacuation of the Kurdish areas close to Baghdad and the return of the Turkish forces compelled the British to enter Southern Kurdistan in late 1917, hoping to maintain the security of Mesopotamia. Furthermore, the Bolshevik takeover and the subsequent Russian withdrawal from the war left a dangerous military and political vacuum in Eastern and Southern Kurdistan and thus exposed the British presence in neighbouring areas. In other words, it was not in Britain's initial plans to advance into Southern Kurdistan.

As soon as British forces began to advance northwards, prominent Kurds in most parts of Southern Kurdistan such as Khanaqin, Kifri, Kirkuk and Sulaimaniya, expressed their readiness to co-operate against the Turkish forces. Indeed, Col. Wilson, Cox's successor, reported on 15 October 1918 that the majority of Kurdish tribes to the east of the Lesser Zab were "actively anti-Turk" and "anxious to throw off their allegiance to Turkey and to come under British influence".<sup>81</sup> The manner in which the British advanced northwards and captured key Kurdish towns such as Khanaqin, Kifri and Kirkuk, without confronting any real resistance, was

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75\* Cox, Baghdad, 18 May 1917, AIR20/504, PRO.

76\* *Precis of Affairs ...*, op. cit., p.3.

77\* Cox, Memorandum, 7 December 1918, FO371/3407, PRO, p.6.

78\* Cox, Baghdad, 18 May 1917, AIR20/504, PRO.

79\* *Precis of Affairs ...*, op. cit., p.2.

80\* *Ibid*, pp.3 & 5.

81\* Political, Baghdad, 15 October 1918, FO371/3407, PRO.

partly due to the refusal of the Kurds to give any help to the Turks, either in terms of men or food supplies. Such locally powerful Kurdish tribes as the Dawadi and Talabani resisted all Turkish attempts to force them to hand over their supplies of food or to provide new recruits for the Turkish war efforts. The Hamawand Kurds, while denying the Turks, offered the British forces food supplies. To avoid Turkish pressure to supply food stuff, smaller and weaker Kurdish tribes such as those of Kifri, left the Turkish-controlled areas for British-controlled ones.<sup>82</sup> A British memorandum attributed the failure of Turkish propaganda to mobilise the Kurds against the advancing British forces to the anti-Turkish attitudes of Kurdish religious leaders, who unanimously refused to preach "*the Jihad*" (a holy war), as demanded by the Turks. They proclaimed the war to be one of "*self-aggrandisement*", and stated that the Turks were "*the hereditary enemies of the Kurds*".<sup>83</sup> The general anti-Turkish attitudes of the Kurds played some part in forcing the Turks to retreat hastily from Southern Kurdistan, without putting up any real resistance, as they had done in Mesopotamia.

Despite Russia's brutal policies, the Kurds had not lost faith that the British would allow them to establish a form of Kurdish autonomy free of Turkish hegemony. Such Kurdish expectation was considerably stimulated by British war propaganda after the capture of Baghdad in 1917. The British newspaper *Tigeyshteni Rasti* (Understanding The Truth), which was published in Kurdish, stated in its first issue on 12 January 1918, that

*as soon as Great Britain wins the war... it will save all the nations of the World without exception, especially the Arab and Kurds of Mesopotamia and its neighbours, from unhappiness and bring them the joy of liberation, freedom and unity. The realisation of such sacred demands would be impossible without assistance from a just and [an] equitable government like that of Great Britain.*<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, in their attempts to extend their political control to the remainder of Southern Kurdistan, the British did not have to send any military force to occupy Kurdish towns and the countryside, where the Kurds had already taken the initiative by expelling the Turks, as was the case in Sulaimaniya, Keuisenjaq, Rania and Rowanduz.<sup>85</sup>

### ***iii- Sheikh Mahmud And The British Advance Towards Southern Kurdistan***

In the context of explaining the extension of British influence to Southern Kurdistan, it is important to shed some light on Sheikh Mahmud, who played a considerable part in shaping

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<sup>82</sup>\* *Precis of Affairs ...*, op. cit., p5.

<sup>83</sup>\* Cox, Memorandum, 7 December 1918, FO371/3407, PRO, p.6.

<sup>84</sup>\* Quoted by Ahmad, *Kurdistan During The First World War*, p.107.

<sup>85</sup>\* Political, Sulaimaniya, to Political, Baghdad, 19 November 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

early British-Kurdish relations. By virtue of his outstanding religious position, his social position as a landed aristocrat, and his outstanding role during the war, Mahmud was by far the most influential Kurdish figure in Southern Kurdistan during and after the war.<sup>86</sup> Mahmud's efforts during this time turned the town of Sulaimaniya into an important centre for the Kurdish nationalist movement (a status which it still occupies). As previously mentioned, he approached the Russians before the war, hoping to mobilise the Kurds against the Turks. His disappointment with the general attitudes of the Allies and his faith in the Young Turks' promise of Kurdish autonomy made him mobilise some Kurdish forces to fight alongside the Turks at the early stages of the war.

It was not long before he withdrew his Kurdish forces from the war, having lost his faith in the Turks and their promises. However, he mobilised some Kurdish forces against the Russians in Eastern Kurdistan, where Russians had committed atrocities against local Kurdish population. This nationalist stance helped to create a notable popularity for Mahmud among the local Kurds in Eastern and Southern Kurdistan.<sup>87</sup> Like other Kurdish nationalists, Mahmud was well-informed of the important implications of the international developments associated with President Wilson's Fourteen Points and the outbreak of the October Revolution in Russia, both of which had a great impact on the national aspirations of the non-Turkish nationalities under the Ottoman Empire. After the Russian evacuation of areas in Southern Kurdistan, Mahmud, like other Kurdish notables, contacted the British authorities, with a view to expelling the Turks from Kurdistan. He hoped to set up a Kurdish government under British supervision.<sup>88</sup> For this purpose, Mahmud dispatched two Kurdish notables to the British authorities, carrying a letter, in which he appealed to the British Government "*not to exclude Kurdistan from the list of liberated peoples*".<sup>89</sup> He also asked for British views on the expulsion of Turkish forces from Southern Kurdistan.<sup>90</sup> Without even awaiting the British advance, Mahmud took the initiative by holding a meeting -which was attended by all the notables of the Sulaimaniya region- to determine the Kurdish future in light of the Turkish retreat. As a consequence, a Kurdish government came into being, and Mahmud was elected as its head.<sup>91</sup>

After the British occupation of Baghdad, the political and military value of winning the

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86\* Rafik Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol.I, (Publication of Culture and Young, Baghdad, 1988), pp.35-6.

87\* *Ibid*, p.50.

88\* *Ibid*, p.51.

89\* Political, Baghdad, 1 November 1918 , FO371/3407, PRO.

90\* *Ibid*.

91\* *Precis Affairs...*, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

Kurds over to the British or Turkish sides increased rapidly. The Kurds could not only provide fighters, but also supplies of food and information for the armies. This state of affairs, in turn, increased Mahmud's stature and importance because of his being the most politically influential Kurdish figure in Southern Kurdistan. This also explains why the Turks, after their reoccupation of Kirkuk and arrest of Mahmud for his contacts with the British, released him, hoping that he could again mobilise the Kurds against the British.<sup>92</sup> For this purpose, the Turks even installed him as the mayor of Sulaimaniya. Meanwhile, the British were alarmed by the new Turkish approach to the Kurdish situation, while the Turks were making considerable military advances in Eastern Kurdistan, where the pro-British forces of the Armenians and other Christians were retreating. All this, as British authorities in Mesopotamia noted, coincided with negative military developments in Europe:

*The Turks, at this time, were able to make great political capital out of the German successes and the Allied retirement on the western front. The Turkish Commander, too, adopted a conciliatory attitude towards [Kurdish] tribes which bore good fruit... All this coupled with the distrust engendered by our evacuation of Kirkuk... turned the political scales for the time being against us.<sup>93</sup>*

Despite everything, Mahmud kept pinning his hopes on the British and as soon as the British reoccupied Kirkuk he not only resumed his direct contacts with them, but captured Turkish troops present in his district and declared the termination of Turkish rule. Other Kurdish regions followed suit, such as Rania and Keuisenjaq. At the same time, Kurdish notables invited the British authorities in Baghdad to send their political representatives to Southern Kurdistan, so that an arrangement could be worked out to run the country. The fact that British penetration had barely begun in Southern Kurdistan when the Mudros armistice was signed on 30 October 1918, made Kurdish initiatives in expelling the remaining Turkish military and civilian officials, and declaring Kurdish allegiance to Britain, politically significant. By leaving a few Kurdish figures as their civilian representatives, backed by a small Turkish force in most of the unconquered Southern Kurdistan, the Turks sought to demonstrate that the region was legally under Turkish rule, unaffected by the armistice terms. By taking the British side and inviting British representatives to their own areas, the Kurds in effect brought most of Southern Kurdistan under British political control without resorting to military occupation.

The initial advance of British forces into Southern Kurdistan during the last stages of the war coincided with significant political and military developments, which immediately influ-

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<sup>92\*</sup> Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol.I, pp.52-3.

<sup>93\*</sup> *Precis Affairs ...*, op. cit., p.6.

enced the course of the events in the Middle East. One of these developments was the Russian withdrawal from the war and the subsequent Bolshevik publication and denunciation of the Allies' secret schemes to partition the Ottoman Empire and divide the Persian Kingdom into spheres of influence. This unforeseen development had immediate and profound effects on the attitudes of British policy makers towards the political future of the Ottoman Empire. As previously mentioned, Britain had agreed to divide the Mosul *Wilayet* with France, so as to create "a wedge of French territory" between its own zone in Kurdistan and that of Russia.<sup>94</sup> The temporary disappearance of Russia as a major player from the regional scene following the Bolshevik Revolution meant that the consolidation of Britain's strategic interests no longer required the division of the Mosul *Wilayet*. Thus the idea of reconciling British and French interests in that *Wilayet* was abandoned in favour of sole British control. The modification of the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement on the Mosul *Wilayet* seemed to be the ideal way to maintain the British position in Mesopotamia in the long term. Having entered Southern Kurdistan in the wake of the Russian departure, the British were in a very strong position to deprive the French of their sphere in the Mosul *Wilayet*.

The decision of the British Government to capture the town of Mosul, which would symbolise British control over all the Mosul *Wilayet*, was also motivated by oil considerations. At a meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet, just two months before the conclusion of the war with Turkey, Arthur Balfour, the Foreign Secretary, drew the attention of those present to the bright prospect for the development of oil in Mesopotamia, and called for a political settlement in Mesopotamia that would enable the British Empire to have secure oil sources.<sup>95</sup> Thus there was an urgent need to modify the Sykes-Picot agreement in a way that would enable Britain to establish its control over the Mosul *Wilayet* as a whole. Partly against this background, both Balfour and Lord Curzon stated in August 1918 that the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement were "out of date", a position accepted by the Eastern Committee.<sup>96</sup> The latter was organised by the War Cabinet to specifically deal with issues relative to territories extending from India's western frontier to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Lord Curzon chaired this Committee, whose principal members were, apart from Balfour, Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, and Henry Hughes Wilson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. It was at

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94\* Macdonogh to Nicholson, 6 January 1916, FO371/2767, PRO.

95\* Imperial War Cabinet, 13 August 1918, CAB23/7, PRO.

96\* War Cabinet Minute No.457, 13 August 1918, CAB23/7 & Eastern Committee Minute No.34, 3 October 1918, CAB27/24, PRO.

this point that the idea of a British advance towards the town of Mosul was raised and received the backing of Lloyd George, the new British Prime Minister.<sup>97</sup> To achieve this aim, it was decided that Britain should control Mosul before the end of the war. Despite all their military efforts, the British were unable to achieve their aim as Turkey signed the Mudros armistice on 30 October. But the armistice did not prevent the British forces from capturing the town of Mosul one week later. Examination of the terms of the Mudros armistice between Turkey and Britain shows that, while unequivocally providing for Turkish withdrawal from Eastern Kurdistan, they said nothing about a similar step in Southern Kurdistan.<sup>98</sup> The term 'Mesopotamia', which was used in the text of the armistice agreement, was ambiguous. In other words, the agreement did not make clear whether Southern Kurdistan was part of Mesopotamia. This explains why the Turks continually insisted, following the war, that the British illegally controlled the Mosul *Wilayet* and should therefore be returned to their control. Indeed, the question of Mosul's future became the main reason why Turkey refused to recognise the state of Iraq during the period 1921-1926.

The change in British attitudes towards the Sykes-Picot agreement could also be attributed to other important political and military developments. The late entry of the United States into the war against Germany was also a factor that Britain could not overlook in its post-war policy owing to American dislike of European colonialism, which prevented free trade and investment. With the absence of Russia from the regional scene, Britain found France replacing Germany as its main challenger in its efforts to consolidate its political and economic interests in the newly emerging Middle East. It therefore needed to take urgent steps to contain expansion of French influence. At another level, the long duration of the war imposed unprecedented economic, financial and political pressure on the British Government to cut down its military responsibilities and financial commitments, as well as putting into effect rapid demobilisation of its forces. As further expansion of the British Empire became an inconceivable option among British policy makers as well as the British public, Britain needed to review its wartime vision for the new Middle Eastern order.

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<sup>97</sup>\* War Cabinet Minute No.457, 13 August 1918, CAB23/43 & War Cabinet Minute No.482A, 3 October 1918, CAB23/14, PRO.

<sup>98</sup>\* British And Foreign Papers, 1917-1918, V. CXI, (HMSO), pp. 611-613.

## Conclusion

Examination of Kurdistan's position in Britain's Ottoman and Persian policies before and during the First World War shows that Britain looked upon Kurdish affairs principally from a strategic perspective and, secondly, from an oil perspective. As Britain's strategic interests depended on maintaining the territorial unity of both the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar Kingdom, it opposed any internal force that sought to alter the *status quo*. Therefore, Kurdish nationalist agitation was in disharmony with British strategic and economic interests, as the Kurdish revolt of 1880-1881 illustrated. By the end of the first decade of the Twentieth Century, the British began to think of extending their political and economic influence to the heartland of the Ottoman Empire, including southern parts of Kurdistan. This new orientation reflected both Britain's intensive rivalry with other European Powers, especially Germany, and the steady decay that the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar Kingdom had undergone for the past six decades. When the First World War broke out, Britain worked towards re-drawing the political map of the Middle East, with a view to extending and consolidating its political and economic influence in vital areas of Ottoman Asia. The report of the Bunsen Committee, the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence and the Sykes-Picot (Tripartite) agreement illustrated how Britain intended to partition Kurdistan.

At the end of the war, new strategic, political and economic considerations combined to force Britain to re-evaluate its post-war policy towards the future of the former Ottoman territories, such as Armenia, Kurdistan and Mesopotamia. With the Allied war-time agreements being out of date and in the wake of their unplanned occupation of Southern Kurdistan, the British did not have a concrete scheme for running the area, let alone deciding the long term future of Kurdistan in the context of a new regional order in the Middle East. While awaiting the holding of the peace conference and the crystallisation of a definite policy towards Kurdistan's future, London authorised Col. Wilson to take administrative and political measures to ensure political stability, the consolidation of order and peace and the resumption of economic activities in British-controlled Kurdistan. London, however, made it clear that British officials on the ground should avoid taking measures that would increase or create new military, financial or political commitments in the area. As the following chapter will explain, the conditions under which the British extended their control to Southern Kurdistan had immediate implications for their Kurdish policy on the ground. This policy played an important part in influencing subsequent political developments in Southern Kurdistan between 1918 and 1923.



Moreover, British control over Southern Kurdistan dragged Britain into the affairs of Northern and Eastern Kurdistan, as the security of its interests in Mesopotamia depended on political stability and order in the bordering areas outside its control.

## Chapter Two

### British policy In Southern Kurdistan: October 1918 - August 1920

The administration of the new British acquisitions in Kurdistan and Mesopotamia was the responsibility of the India Office, while the Foreign Office retained overall supervision of policy until the time when the forthcoming peace conference would determine the future of these regions within the framework of the Turkish peace settlement. In the meantime, British policy on the ground, which played an important part in influencing the course of events in the absence of a well-defined British position on the Kurdish question, was conducted by Col. Wilson, in his capacity as the Acting Civil Commissioner and the Chief Political Officer. He was assisted in administrative and political matters by a number of political officers who not only conducted the local affairs in their divisions, but also put forward their own proposals regarding the way in which their divisions should ideally be run. Local military authorities expressed their views insofar as they concerned internal security and strategic issues.

The primary task of the British authorities in Baghdad was to restore normal administrative, economic and social life to Southern Kurdistan after the end of the First World War. This chapter explores the prevailing military and political conditions that influenced the decision to create an autonomous Kurdish entity under British political supervision in late October and early November 1918. British officials in London and the Middle East often referred to the autonomous entity as the *Kurdish state*, even though it was not fully independent. In summer 1919, this state was disposed of, after the British suppressed a Kurdish rebellion. The political causes and consequences of this reversal in British policy towards Southern Kurdistan will be analysed in detail.


#### **Indirect British Control And The Formation Of An Autonomous State In Southern Kurdistan: Circumstances And Objectives**

In the initial stages of the British presence in Southern Kurdistan, British policy-making on the ground was conditioned by the lack of a sufficient army of occupation and adequate civilian administrators.<sup>1</sup> Britain's political and military position was far from secure in an area that strategically overlooked the Mesopotamian plain to the south. Before the armistice of Mudros of 30 October 1918, British penetration of Southern Kurdistan had hardly begun (see map nine). It was, therefore, necessary for the British authorities in Mesopotamia to seek continuity in the

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<sup>1</sup> W.R. Hay, *Two Years In Kurdistan* (London: Sifgwick & Jackson Ltd, 1921), p.6.

Map Nine: The Advance Of British Forces In Southern Kurdistan During The War

 Kurdish Areas Under British Control

 Ottoman-Persian Frontier



goodwill of the Southern Kurds, who took the lead in liberating many of their towns from the Turks and simultaneously inviting British representatives to these free areas in order to help establish new political and administrative arrangements. This anti-Turkish and pro-British attitude of the Southern Kurds facilitated the immediate British aim of re-establishing stability, without the need for expensive military or civilian administration.

It was also important for the British to maintain a favourable Kurdish attitude in order to rapidly reduce their existing military and financial commitments, while consolidating their political influence throughout Southern Kurdistan. Initially, the British had no intention of expanding their military occupation, when invited by Mahmud to enter important Kurdish areas:

*Military occupation of [Southern Kurdistan] was quite out of the question, for, even after the defeat of the Turks, supply and other difficulties combined to make it impossible even to occupy with a garrison a point so near at hand and so important politically to us as Sulaimaniya. The alternative of adopting purely political methods had, therefore, to be adopted, and it was realised that the best means to that end was the exploiting of the perfectly legitimate feeling of Kurdish nationality which had long been making itself evident amongst the Southern Kurdish tribes.<sup>2</sup>*

It was thus a logical option not to intervene directly, thereby confining the British role to providing political and administrative advice to the Kurds, who were allowed to conduct their own

<sup>2</sup>\* Precis of Affairs..., op. cit. p.9.

administrative, economic and security affairs.

The existence of strong nationalist aspirations among the Kurds was the most important factor influencing British policy making on the ground in its early stages. The advent of British forces in Southern Kurdistan was seen by the local Kurds as liberation from Turkish rule and an opportunity to have a say in the running of their own affairs. According to Percy Cox:

*The idea of Kurdish autonomy, which had taken shape under the Constitutional Regime, was revived and greatly stimulated by the terms of our Baghdad Proclamation to the Arabs which showed a different attitude towards racial susceptibilities and aspirations from that which had been adopted by the Turks.*<sup>3</sup>

Kurdish high expectations of what the British would do explains the warm reception given to Maj. Edward Noel by assembled Kurdish representatives from the countryside and towns at Sulaimaniya.<sup>4</sup> Noel was a British intelligence agent, who served in the Caucasus during the war and in north Persia in 1919. Col. Arnold Wilson appointed him Political Officer responsible for the supervision of Kurdish affairs on the spot.<sup>5</sup>

The decision of the British authorities in Baghdad to experiment with the idea of indirect British control in the Kurdish part of Area B was based on advice from Noel, who saw it as a logical solution in the light of the state of affairs in Southern Kurdistan. In other words, the British authorities in Mesopotamia were not in a position either militarily or politically, to ignore the existence of nationalistic sentiments and Kurdish expectations of the Allies, particularly Britain. Mahmud and the nationalist circle in the Sulaimaniya region had started the process of forming a Kurdish government before the end of the war. They aimed to secure British respect for Kurdish wishes in the wake of the expulsion of the Turks. Apart from having faith in British promises, the crux of Mahmud's approach was pragmatic. He showed tangible willingness to honour whatever interests Britain had in Southern Kurdistan, so that the Kurds, in return, could enjoy self-government. Unlike the Mesopotamian Arabs, the Southern Kurds sought to reconcile their interests with those of Britain in order to fill the political vacuum resulting from the Turkish departure.

Noel played a significant role in convincing British authorities in Mesopotamia of the viability of employing a political approach to consolidating British interests in the Kurdish areas. This political approach was based on respecting Kurdish nationalist aspirations. After his first visit to Sulaimaniya, he reported to Baghdad that the Kurdish nationalist movement "is


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<sup>3</sup>\* Ibid, p.4.

<sup>4</sup>\* Political Officer, Sulaimaniya, to Political, Baghdad, 16 November 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

<sup>5</sup>\* Political, Baghdad, to Political, Mosul, 20 November 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

Map Ten: The Autonomous Kurdish State

-  Autonomous Kurdish State
-  Kurdish Areas To Be Incorporated Into The Kurdish State



so virile that I do not foresee much difficulty in creating [a] Kurdish state under our protection and with control by political officers over general policy, provided we take prompt and vigorous action now".<sup>6</sup> Against this background, Noel was instructed to inform the Kurds that it was not Britain's intention to impose upon them "an administration foreign to their habits and desires".<sup>7</sup> The outcome of both Noel's understanding of Kurdish national aspirations, and Mahmud's willingness to co-operate in such a way, formed the basis of British influence in Southern Kurdistan (see map ten). This took the shape of an autonomous Kurdish state: Kurdish government, judiciary, revenue and Levi (local military force). Mahmud was appointed by the British as Governor of the Kurdish Area B, extending from south of the Lesser Zab River to the old Ottoman-Persian frontier. He was assisted by two senior British officials, apart from Noel: Maj. Denials, who supervised the formation and the training of the Kurdish Levis and Col. Gordon Walker, who oversaw the revenue and the taxes. Later on, British officials in the Middle East and London associated this system of indirect control with Maj. Noel, as opposed to Col. Wilson's policy of direct control. This British recognition of Mahmud's author-

6\* Political, Baghdad, 17 November 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

7\* political, Baghdad, to S/S for India, 31 October 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

ity took place just before the end of the war with the Turks<sup>8</sup> and was in harmony with the election of Mahmud by the Kurds as head of their government when the Turks had left Sulaimaniya.

Noel's choice of indirect British control offered several political and strategic advantages. It was vital in keeping the Kurds on the British side and as a starting point for the possible expansion of British control to other Kurdish districts after the armistice. An unsympathetic and hostile Southern Kurdistan could enable the Turks to return to these areas, either politically or militarily. Indeed, Noel's initial task was to enlist "*the sympathies of the Kurds by an encouragement to nationalist as opposed to Pan-Islamic sentiment*".<sup>9</sup> The return of Turkish rule would constitute a direct threat to British control in Mesopotamia, where the Turks were still plotting by inciting local people to expel the anti-Muslim enemy. British authorities thus had to avoid confronting both the Kurds and the Turks simultaneously. To achieve this, they had to restore political stability and facilitate the resumption of economic activity in Southern Kurdistan. In addition, indirect rule was politically useful for the containment of anti-British propaganda by the Bolsheviks, whose ideological effects seemed to pose a real threat to British influence in Persia, Turkey and elsewhere in the Middle East. Under such circumstances, an autonomous Kurdish government was a commendable idea. It also portrayed Britain as being in line with President Wilson's Fourteen Points, the basis of the Kurdish petition for national self-determination. Moreover, this respectable image also helped the British maintain good relations with Kurdish nationalist circles both in other parts of Kurdistan and in exile.

On a different level, British policy towards Southern Kurdistan was affected by the change in the international alignment of forces as a result of the war. The 1917 October Revolution, and the Bolshevik denunciation of the secret agreements regarding the Ottoman Empire and the division of Persia into various spheres of influence between Britain and Czarist Russia, made the British dispense with the idea of establishing a French zone between their sphere and the Russians in Kurdistan. As soon as the war ended, the British worked quickly to bring the area they occupied under their political control. Whilst wanting the imposition of British political and military control simultaneously in Area A, London informed Wilson that it was hopeful of persuading Paris to "*renounce its claims in the Mosul area*", strongly advising him that Paris should not feel that Britain had violated the terms of the Sykes-Picot

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<sup>8</sup>\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit. p6.

<sup>9</sup>\* E.W.L. Noel, Note -in- Colonial Office Minute No.4958, 22 July 1922, CO730/13, PRO.

agreement.<sup>10</sup> This was just an early manifestation of a change in British views on the post-war political map of the former Ottoman territories. Excluding the French from Southern Kurdistan was mainly based on strategic considerations of British control in Mesopotamia, vital for both the security of the sea and land routes to India. In addition, international recognition of British control over the whole of the Mosul *Wilayet* would be required to exploit its economic potential. Therefore, it was necessary to revise or to drop the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement by convincing the French to give up their political sphere of influence in Area A.

By virtue of the apparently open-minded policy of an autonomous Kurdish government under its political supervision, Britain was in a far stronger position to win over the support of local Kurds in Area A, who mistrusted the French because of their support for Christian communities. The Kurds did not desire to be under French control, at a time when being under British protection seemed to offer them a more promising future. Indeed, London was contemplating the adoption of indirect control in Area A in order to be part of an autonomous Kurdish state in Southern Kurdistan, while the much smaller Arab areas (i.e. the town of Mosul and the areas to the south) would be included in Mesopotamia. British authorities in Baghdad seemingly advocated a similar line, namely uniting Southern Kurdistan by eliminating the French zone. They went so far as to suggest the establishment of "*a central council of chiefs for Southern Kurdistan under British auspices*".<sup>11</sup>

As Far as Wilson was concerned, the adoption of the idea of self-determination for the Kurds seemed to offer him and the India Office a suitable means of thwarting any project to establish or to extend Arab rule to Southern Kurdistan as contained in the 1915 Sharif-McMahon Correspondence. This entailed the creation of *de facto* political and administrative arrangements with the help of local Kurds, the legitimacy of which neither the French nor Sharif Hussein could question. A memorandum by the India Office highlights the existence of such intentions:

*It is clear that, as far, at least, as Southern Kurdistan was concerned, the people have exercised the right of "self-determination" and have elected (with certain exceptions) to form themselves into a separate "Confederation" under British guidance. This pronouncement and its formal acceptance by the Civil Commissioner appear to rule out (at any rate, as regards the Southern Kurds) Col. Lawrence's suggestion of central Arabo-Kurdish Kingdom. But, the difficulty with France remains; and the recent developments in Kurdistan emphasise the necessity of securing revision, at least, of that part of the Sykes-Picot agreement, which relates to the Mosul district and the Upper Tigris Valley. The desire for unity manifested by the Kurds at Sulaimaniya renders it more than ever indefensible to partition their territory into three arbitrary zones.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>\* S/S to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, Confidential, (undated) FO371/3386, PRO.

<sup>11</sup>\* Political, Baghdad, to S/S for India, 30 October 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

<sup>12</sup>\* J.E. Shuckburgh, India Office, Memorandum, 14 December 1918, FO371/3386, PRO.

The establishment of an autonomous Kurdish entity in Southern Kurdistan was a product of a number of factors. Firstly, Britain was not in a position to make new military or financial commitments following the war when there was a pressing need to demobilise its forces and cut down its military expenditure. Secondly, the consolidation of its position in Mesopotamia, whose strategic importance was closely linked with the security of the land and sea routes to India, required a peaceful and British-orientated Southern Kurdistan. Thirdly, Kurdish political aspirations could not be overlooked in the early stages of British control over Southern Kurdistan. Fourthly, such a policy could foil any anti-British propaganda war waged by the Turks and the Bolsheviks. Finally, an autonomous Southern Kurdistan, according to Wilson's political calculations, could be a means, in the short-run, to thwart the attempts of the Sharifian followers to establish an Arab state by merging the three *Wilayets* of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul.

## **The End Of The Autonomous Kurdish State: Circumstances And Objectives**

### ***i- The Attitudes Of British Officials On The Ground***

Wilson was known among British circles in London and the Middle East as a traditionalist imperial official,<sup>13</sup> who firmly believed in turning the new conquered territories in Mesopotamia and Kurdistan into outright colonies. His early desire for tight British political and economic controls was evidently manifest in his first evaluation of the Kurdish areas, when demanding their inclusion into British-administered Mesopotamia:

*Politically as well as strategically, there is much to be said for adopting the line of Lesser Zab as the frontier of Iraq state including in the latter Altun Kupri, Sulaimaniya and Penjwin: the rich districts of Sulaimaniya and Halabjah are susceptible to great development and their products are essential to industries and general well-being of Iraq, viz. petroleum, coal, seed-wheat, gall nuts and tanned material and tobacco. The first two in particular, as HMG were aware, of great potential value.<sup>14</sup>*

During his presence in Mesopotamia between 1918 and 1920, Wilson never expressed any sympathy towards Kurdish demands for self-government nor did he acknowledge the existence of Kurdish nationalist aspirations. Kurdish nationalists did not fail to see the difference between Wilson's position and Noel's regarding the Kurdish situation. In his memoirs, Rafik Helmi, who worked with the British as an interpreter, points out that Wilson did not hide his opposition to both the autonomous Kurdish state and the Mahmud leadership.<sup>15</sup> From Wil-

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<sup>13</sup>\* See, for instance, Foreign Office Minute on 'the Administration Report on the Sulaimaniya division for Year 1919', 23 July 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

<sup>14</sup>\* Political, Baghdad, 15 October 1918, FO371/3407, PRO.

<sup>15</sup>\* Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol. I, p.71.



son's viewpoint, as the Kurds were divided like the Arabs and could not rule themselves, Britain should impose a protectorate, where British officials would be responsible for the formulation and implementation of policies.<sup>16</sup> It is not surprising then that, once established, Wilson spared no time in discrediting the idea of Kurdish autonomy in his reports to London, and in arguing that British interests could be best served by bringing back the old Ottoman administrative arrangements.<sup>17</sup>

Noel was the exception among the principal British officials in Southern Kurdistan, in that he strongly defended the policy of indirect rule, despite its defects. The remaining British officials were opposed to the scheme of an autonomous Southern Kurdistan. Such attitudes reflected their desire to have total control over the conduct of Kurdish affairs, as well as their personalities and beliefs. Moreover, all these officials and their assistants were recruited from the British army because of lack of civilian administrators.<sup>18</sup> This may explain the rigidity with which these officials approached Southern Kurdistan's affairs. Helmi, for instance, describes Maj. E.B. Soane, Noel's successor, as being very arrogant and rough in his treatment of local Kurds.<sup>19</sup> As soon as Soane became the Political Officer of the Sulaimaniya division in 1919, he replaced most Kurdish officials with Indians, Persians and Arabs in order to get rid of the Kurdish characteristic of the administration.<sup>20</sup> The Political Officer of the Mosul division, Col. G.E. Leachman, was also extremely suspicious of the Kurds because of his firm belief that they had committed atrocities against Christians during the war. His suspicion manifested itself in his heavy-handed treatment of the local Kurds and in his desire to displace them from his division.<sup>21</sup> In his memoirs, Humphrey Bowman, who worked as a Director of Education in Mesopotamia, shows how Leachman's sympathy with the Christian "*plight*" earned him a reputation for severity towards local Kurds.<sup>22</sup> Leachman was also renowned for his drastic measures among the Shi'i Arabs, who murdered him during the bloody uprising in Mesopotamia in 1920. Col. J.H. Bill, Leachman's successor, warned the British authorities that the use of Christian refugees against the local Kurds, as a means of consolidating British rule, would

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16\* Political, Baghdad, to Political, Sulaimaniya, 26 November 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

17\* Political, Baghdad, 7 December 1918, FO371/3386, PRO.

18\* Hay, *Two Years In Kurdistan*, pp.5-6.

19\* Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol.I, p.108.

20\* *Ibid*, pp.77, 84-88.

21\* Political, Mosul, to Noel, Rowanduz, 11 January 1919 & Political, Mosul, to Political, Baghdad, 18 January 1919, AIR20/12, PRO.

22\* Humphrey Bowman, *Middle East Window* (London & Toronto: Longmans & Green Co., 1942), p.241.

result in unpleasant consequences.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the first local Kurdish revolts against the British in the Mosul division were of a religious nature, and were mainly provoked by the resettlement of Christian refugees in Kurdish lands.

Given Leachman's above attitudes towards the local Kurds in his division, it is not surprising that he would firmly oppose the policy of indirect British control with which the autonomous Kurdish entity was associated. His opposition to Kurdish autonomy manifested itself during the Khushnaw affairs, which started in early January 1919, when Noel informed Wilson of the desire of the Khushnaw notables, who lived in the Mosul division, to merge their region with the autonomous Kurdish entity.<sup>24</sup> Having heard of Wilson's initial approval of this proposal, Leachman expressed his opposition and asked him to reverse his decision.<sup>25</sup> On learning of Leachman's position, Noel sent a telegram to Wilson, protesting against the reversal of his early decision to expand the autonomous Kurdish entity to the Khushnaw region:

*I see no reason why you should reverse your decision. Firstly, there is no strong reason [why]we should be bound by Turkish division of districts and even if we were, the tribe in question was under Rowanduz from 1896 to 1914. Secondly, representatives of [the] tribe, which is on this side of [the] Zab, have come to see me and to express their desire to accept Sheikh Mahmud. Thirdly, [the] national movement, we [have started] is growing daily in strength. It contains [seeds] of natural and healthy development and.. it may.. attract and absorb all purely Kurdish elements, [which] will naturally prefer it to the hybrid form of administration at Mosul.<sup>26</sup>*

The Khushnaw affair constituted the first manifestation of the emerging division among British officials on the ground over the ideal system of control for the consolidation of British position in Southern Kurdistan.

Other British officials also expressed their opposition to the establishment of the autonomous Kurdish state and its enlargement. Capt. Stephen Longrigg,<sup>27</sup> the Assistant Political Officer at Kirkuk, asked Wilson to remove the Kirkuk district from the control of the Kurdish authority in Sulaimaniya.<sup>28</sup> On the eve of Mahmud's revolt on 3 May 1919, the British Assistant Political Officer at Arbil warned against the dangerous effects of autonomous Kurdish districts alongside the Arbil district. He even saw danger in establishing a looser form of direct control in Southern Kurdistan, such as giving Kurdish officials' a nominal role in the admin-

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23\* J. H. Bill to Civil Commissioner, Memorandum on the Future of the Qaza of Amadia, 21 October 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

24\* Noel, Rowanduz, to Political, Baghdad, 10 January 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

25\* Political, Mosul, to Political, Baghdad, 11 January 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

26\* Noel, Rowanduz, to Political, Baghdad, 12 January 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

27\* Later, S.H. Longrigg compiled two books on Iraq's history based on the official British interpretation of events.

28\* Administration Report of the Sulaimaniya Division for the Year 1919, FO371/5069, PRO, p.3.

istration. He called for the rapid unification of all systems of control before it was too late to prevent any demand for similar treatment, i.e. local autonomy.<sup>29</sup> This overwhelming support for direct British administration among British officials and the military authorities in Mesopotamia would considerably facilitate Wilson's task of preventing the emergence of an autonomous Southern Kurdistan and erasing any sign of Kurdish self-government.

The imposition of direct control was a step by step process. It highlighted the contradiction between the British Government's preference for an autonomous Southern Kurdistan, either as one Kurdish state or as a group of states, and Wilson's actual steps on the ground, which were aimed at bringing the country under direct British control. The timing of the reversal in the Kurdish policy is significant in that it came after Paris's acceptance, in principle, of revising the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement (December 1918) by merging Area A with the British sphere in Southern Kurdistan. Soon Wilson retreated from the idea of uniting the administration of Southern Kurdistan on an indirect basis. Instead, he proposed the "*partition*" of Southern Kurdistan between the existing Kurdish autonomous entity and the directly-administered Mesopotamia. The lowland of Southern Kurdistan was to be attached to the British administration in Mesopotamia and the remaining high-land to the autonomous entity.<sup>30</sup> His immediate step was to prevent Area A from being divided between the Kurdish autonomous state and a future Arab state, as London recommended. He reported that despite the absence of ethnic and religious homogeneity, public opinion in the Mosul division was in favour of "*a single state*" under direct British administration that would include Southern Kurdistan and the two Arab *Wilayets*, Baghdad and Basra.<sup>31</sup>

Wilson entrusted the task of re-organising the Mosul division on a direct control basis to Col. Leachman. As a result, during a period of six to seven months, two systems of control existed in Southern Kurdistan. The first was autonomous Kurdish government, situated between the Greater Zab and the old Ottoman-Persian frontier. The second was direct British administration that included Jabal Sinjar in the west and the Greater Zab River in the east. Having created direct British administration in one part of Southern Kurdistan, Wilson's next step was to extend direct British control over all Southern Kurdistan. Bowman's visit to Sulaimaniya in April 1919 illustrates how Wilson's decision to wind up the Kurdish Government was an open secret among British officials, and that the implementation of the new policy was a matter

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29\* Assistant Political Officer, Arbil, to Political Officer, Mosul, 3 May 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

30\* A.J.Toynbee, Foreign Office Minute No.207981, 21 December 1918, FO371/3386, PRO.

31\* Ibid.

of time.<sup>32</sup> This took the form of preventing the expansion of the autonomous Kurdish entity to include other Kurdish areas, such as Rowanduz and Khushnawati. At the same time, the policy of divide and rule was used to undermine the authority of the Kurdish Government. Certain tribes, especially those who had outstanding differences with Mahmud's ancestors, were encouraged to express their dissatisfaction with his governorship in order to remove their areas from the autonomous entity.<sup>33</sup> In his memoirs, Helmi points out how Capt. H. Bill - with whom he worked as an interpreter in Keuisenjaq- recorded all the details of tribal rivalry and personal enmity, especially those which concerned Mahmud.<sup>34</sup>

At the administrative level, Wilson appointed political officers and assistant political officers who were staunch advocates of direct control in Southern Kurdistan, such as Maj. Soane in Sulaimaniya, Maj. W.R. Hay<sup>35</sup> in Arbil, and Capt. A.G. Rundle in Keuisenjaq. All of them worked quickly to increase their powers at the expense of the Kurdish Government. They explained their actions as having been forced on them by the unjust policies of the representatives of Kurdish rule. In the Keuisenjaq *Qada* [district], the Assistant Political Officer reported that he was "*compelled to intervene*" and administer its affairs in order to "*prevent friction or injustice*".<sup>36</sup> In February 1919, the districts of Kirkuk and Kifri were separated from the Sulaimaniya division and were no longer included within the Kurdish autonomous entity. As a direct consequence of adopting such steps, the power of the Kurdish autonomous entity steadily declined, and the jurisdiction of the Kurdish Government was gradually restricted, except at the heart of Kurdish nationalism: Sulaimaniya and its immediate neighbourhood. Later, this process continued to include the separation of the Rowanduz district from the Sulaimaniya division in June 1919, while Keuisenjaq was transferred to the newly-formed division of Arbil.<sup>37</sup> This process of the political and administrative dismemberment of Southern Kurdistan was aimed at the further dispersal of the Southern Kurds, the forestalling of one central core in Sulaimaniya -which could have formed a basis for a larger national state- as well as pre-empting the emergence of a legitimate political leadership for the Southern Kurds.

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32\* Bowman, *Middle East Window*, p.228.

33\* Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol.I, p.78.

34\* *Ibid*, pp.80-81.

35\* See his diary: *Two Years in Kurdistan op. cit.*

36\* Administration Report on Keuisenjaq., *op. cit.*

37\* The Administration Report on the Sulaimaniya division for Year 1919, FO371/5069, PRO, p.3.

## ***ii- British Versus Kurdish Interpretations Of The Kurdish State***

The reasons for the establishment of the Kurdish state and its destruction were interpreted differently by Kurdish and British contemporaries. After the overthrow of the first Kurdish Government, Wilson downgraded its importance and distorted it as no more than a feudal system under the direct control of British officials.<sup>38</sup> He consistently used the term 'confederation' to define the autonomous Kurdish entity in his communications, implying that it was nothing more than a union among Kurdish tribes based on the willingness of all parties, and not an agreed political-administrative arrangement between the British and Mahmud. Maj. Soane described the Kurdish Government as a retrograde tribal system. Such descriptions of Kurdish autonomy sought to pre-empt any criticism of the overthrow of the Kurdish Government, and avoid any responsibility for the subsequent political instability. Closer examination of the period contradicts Wilson and Soane's claims. Mahmud was not a figurehead in the existing administration and did not want to be one as desired by Wilson. As governor of the autonomous Kurdish entity, he had the authority to run local affairs and to appoint Kurdish officials in different areas under his control. British officials, including Noel, had an advisory role and therefore did not control the government. In other words, the British exercised their influence through Mahmud, and Kurdish officials were directly responsible to him. For example, the administration report on the *Qada* of Keuisenjaq highlighted the fact that the *Hakim-i-Shar'* (local governor) in charge of this *Qada* was directly responsible to Mahmud, while a British assistant political officer was his adviser, not his superior, in terms of administrative issues.<sup>39</sup> All the administration's personnel were Kurdish. The Kurdish Government had its own military force (i.e. Kurdish levies), which was organised under Kurdish officers, who were totally loyal to Mahmud.<sup>40</sup> Kurdish was the official language of the autonomous entity. Laws were modified in line with Kurdish custom. The Kurdish entity had its own budget and was based on a newly-established system of revenue collection and taxation, aimed at developing the area and improve the welfare of the Kurdish people, though the surplus was sent to the British authorities in Baghdad.

From the Kurdish point of view, the establishment of the Kurdish administration was not only a permanent arrangement, but also the nucleus of an independent Kurdish state that would ultimately include the whole of Southern Kurdistan. Moreover, it was not only a recogni-

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<sup>38</sup>\* Ibid, p9.

<sup>39</sup>\* Administration Report on Keuisenjaq., op. cit., p31.

<sup>40</sup>\* Precis of Affairs., op. cit., p16.

tion of Mahmud's authority as a national leader, but, most importantly, a recognition of Southern Kurdistan as having a different political and administrative status from British-controlled Mesopotamia. It is difficult to establish whether Noel informed the Kurdish side of the provisional nature of the political and administrative arrangements relating to the establishment of the autonomous Kurdish entity. Kurdish contemporaries, such as Helmi and Mahmud's brother, Sheikh Qadir, not only rejected this claim but also believed they had been promised an expansion of Kurdish self-government. What encouraged such an interpretation was British approval for merging new Kurdish areas, situated between the Greater and the Lesser Zab Rivers, with the Kurdish autonomous entity. Noel himself asked for Baghdad's approval for uniting the remainder of Southern Kurdistan with the autonomous Kurdish entity. Certain areas in Eastern Kurdistan across the Persian frontier presented similar requests. The British authorities themselves admitted that they had suggested a "*Kurdistan for the Kurds*" under their protection leading to the establishment of a Kurdish entity. This proposal had attracted "*real popularity*", and "*all the neighbouring tribes had shown evident signs of their wish to join the Kurdish confederation*".<sup>41</sup> According to this state of affairs, the British agreed that

*any Kurdish tribes from the Greater Zab to the Dyalah (other than those in Persian territory) who, of their [own] free will, accepted the leadership of Sheikh Mahmud, would be allowed to do so and the latter would have our moral support in controlling the above areas on behalf of the British Government.*<sup>42</sup>

Southern Kurdistan was, according to Noel, "*quiet and contented*"<sup>43</sup> during the few months of the Kurdish Government. Yet, it was this rapid consolidation of the Kurdish entity and the extension of the Mahmud Government's influence to other Kurdish areas that appeared to precipitate Wilson's action to put an end to this unwelcome, albeit successful, experiment. From December 1918 onward, Southern Kurdistan witnessed a gradual deterioration in British-Kurdish relations. On the one hand, Wilson and his like-minded subordinates saw it as necessary to contain the influence of the Kurdish Government and, on the other, Mahmud persistently asked for the expansion of his entity to include other Kurdish areas. Mahmud considered what he asked for as legitimate, given its compatibility with the desires of local Kurds and with British policy. On 1 December 1918, Wilson visited Sulaimaniya, where he held a meeting with the Kurdish Government in the presence of 60 Kurdish

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<sup>41</sup>\* Ibid, p10.

<sup>42</sup>\* Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>\* E.W.L. Noel, Note -in- Colonial Office Minute No.4958, 22 July 1922, CO730/13, PRO.

notables from Southern and Eastern Kurdistan. At this meeting, the Kurdish side sought to obtain a promise from the British regarding the political future not only of Southern Kurdistan, but all parts of Kurdistan, i.e. a united and an independent Kurdistan under British protection.<sup>44</sup>

In Helmi's view, the demands for political unity under Mahmud, by both Eastern and Southern Kurdish notables, persuaded Wilson to overthrow him.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, the British authorities in Baghdad regarded Mahmud's actions and demands as a deviation from their past agreement.<sup>46</sup> Mahmud was now described as a tyrant, who had an unreliable and rebellious background. His ambitions to extend his rule to undesirable areas, such as Arbil and the Mosul division and anti-Allies Kurds, turned Mahmud into a menace to the future peace of the country.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, according to Wilson, steps had to be taken to prevent Mahmud's influence from spreading to "*regions where it was unnecessary or objectionable and where it offered a possible menace to peace in the future*".<sup>48</sup> To sum up Wilson's attitudes towards Mahmud, it can be said that he agreed to the establishment of Kurdish self-government because of the relative vulnerability of the British position in Mesopotamia. He had, however, considered it to be no more than a temporary arrangement:

*Without the full measure of co-operation and assistance which he [i.e. Mahmud] was then giving us, it would have been necessary to bring in a strong garrison which at the time was out of the question. From the political point of view, too, it was of great importance that we should maintain order in the area and, at the same time, [we] should avoid the appearance of using force for this purpose.*<sup>49</sup>

As soon as it was realised that the Kurdish Government no longer needed to render service to the British, following the consolidation of their influence in Southern Kurdistan, Wilson not only removed Mahmud, but also wound up the whole autonomous entity. Wilson's fears grew when indirect British control proved to be successful in achieving its aims in Southern Kurdistan, namely the establishment of peace and order, without entailing any military or financial commitments. He feared that, apart from encouraging London to expand indirect rule to the rest of the Kurdish area, a similar policy would be adopted towards the Arabs in Mesopotamia.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, as soon as he had the military and political means to administer Southern

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44\* India Office, Political Department, 27 August 1919, FO371/4192, PRO, p.2.

45\* Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol.1, p.94.

46\* Administration Report of the Sulaimaniya division..., op. cit.

47\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit., p15.

48\* *Ibid.*

49\* *Ibid.*, p.12.

50\* E.W.L. Noel, Note -in- Colonial Office Minute, No.4958, 22 July 1922, CO730/13, PRO.

Kurdistan on a direct basis, Wilson wasted no time in taking measures designed to overthrow the autonomous Kurdish Government. According to Noel, the decision to end the Kurdish Government was taken by Wilson alone, and implemented by his successor, Maj. Soane, without prior consultations with the British officers who served in that government.<sup>51</sup>

### **The Imposition Of Direct British Rule And Its Impact On The Political Situation In Southern Kurdistan**

Wilson's step by step policy to undermine the Kurdish Government left Mahmud and the nationalist circle around him with no option but to revolt against the British authorities in Baghdad, accusing them not only of going back on their previous promises, but of also destroying what the Kurds had achieved so far. His revolt was a spontaneous reaction against Wilson's new policy of direct rule and had nothing to do with the anti-British activities of the Young Turks, as Briton C. Busch suggests.<sup>52</sup> Wilson's new policy was symbolised by the change in the British personnel who worked as advisers to the Kurdish Government. The revolt sought a restoration of the *status quo ante*, without aiming to terminate British influence or threaten their interests. Mahmud was aware that the defeat of the British was out of question, and hoped that the peace conference would recognise Kurdish nationalist aspirations. The revolt started on 22 May 1919, with the arrest of all British political and military officials in Sulaimaniya. It received support from certain Kurds from Eastern Kurdistan, who jointly captured the Halabjah region, including the town itself. In spite of Mahmud's apparent hope of negotiation and the absence of bloodshed by this point, Wilson adopted a military response, hoping to put an end, once and for all, to the autonomous Kurdish entity. He wanted to make sure that the breach between both sides would be permanent.

In spite of the suppression of the revolt and the arrest of its leader, Kurdish resistance to British direct rule did not die. The followers and sympathisers of Mahmud in Southern and Eastern Kurdistan continued their sporadic military activities.<sup>53</sup> Wilson's policy of ending the autonomous Kurdish entity, and paving the way for the amalgamation of Southern Kurdistan and the directly-administered British Mesopotamia, received no support from the Kurdish

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51\* Ibid.

52\* Briton C. Busch, *Mudros to Lausanne: Britain's Frontier in West Asia, 1918-1923* (New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 1976), p.186.

53\* In their first armed confrontation with Mahmud's forces, the British were defeated. Soon, they organised a much stronger military campaign, which succeeded in suppressing the Kurdish revolt. Sheikh Mahmud was arrested injured. He was put on trial and ultimately sent to India where he served his sentence.



population, apart from what the British authorities described as “a few of the more enlightened members of the community”.<sup>54</sup> The predominant political characteristic of the period after June 1919 was the prevalence instability and disorder, especially in the most mountainous areas.<sup>55</sup> The policy of direct British control not only failed in Southern Kurdistan, but also in Arab Mesopotamia, where a bloody revolt broke out in 1920. As a result, some 426 British soldiers were killed, 615 were reported missing, prisoners or presumed dead, in addition to 1,228 wounded.

Kurdish opposition to and resentment of direct British control was not confined to those areas which had been controlled by, or supported Mahmud’s Government, but also included other areas of Southern Kurdistan. In Arbil, the Dizai Kurds demanded political and administrative arrangements similar to those made south of the Lesser Zab River. The consequent British cosmetic changes that left the structure of direct control intact, such as giving the Kurdish notables honorary ranks and some consultation on administrative matters, did not stop the unrest from spreading. In the Mosul division, the dispatched British officers found the local Kurds in such areas as Zakho and Aqra far more difficult to deal with than those in the southern districts near Sulaimaniya, when attempting to organise districts on a direct rule basis.<sup>56</sup> In early April 1919, the disturbances in Zakho culminated in the murder of its British Assistant Political Officer, Capt. C. Pearson.<sup>57</sup> An extract from the diary of the Political Officer at Arbil showed that the Surchis and the Barzans were actively anti-British.<sup>58</sup> Earlier, the Barzans sided with the Zibars in their anti-British revolt. It resulted in the murder of Col. Bill, Leachman’s successor as the Political Officer of the Mosul division, and Capt. K. Scott, the Assistant Political Officer at Aqra.<sup>59</sup>

What multiplied Kurdish anger against the British in the Mosul division was the latter’s support for the Christian minority at the expense of local Kurds, by resettling Christian refugees from Persia in Kurdish territory and using them as a British instrument of control. This method of consolidating direct control through divide and rule was epitomised in Leachman’s actions in the Kurdish area in his division in Mosul. Indeed, there were very few British officials

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54\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit., p.12.

55\* Sulaimaniya Monthly Progress Report for the Month of August 1919, FO371/5070 & Administration Report of the Kirkuk division for Period January 1st 1919-December 31st 1919, FO371/5069, PRO.

56\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit., p.10.

57\* G.L.Bell, Northern Kurdistan, 8 March 1920, AIR20/513, PRO.

58\* Extract from the Dairy of Political Officer, Arbil, for Month of January 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

59\* Political, Baghdad, 4 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

on the ground who did not believe in the viability of such methods to control the Southern Kurds. For instance, on the eve of the Amadia uprising, Col. Bill expressed his apprehension at implementing the Assyrian repatriation proposal,<sup>60</sup> just days before his murder at the hands of Kurdish rebels:

*The only consideration, which would drive the [Kurdish] tribes into irreconcilable opposition, is the idea that we are going to support the Christians against the Muslims in every way... at the very moment, when we are trying to work out modus vivendi with the Muslims.*<sup>61</sup>

Wilson argued differently in that the question of Christian repatriation had nothing to do with the outbreak of the Amadia uprising, which forced his subordinates to evacuate Aqra.<sup>62</sup> He dismissed the idea that a Kurdish nationalist reaction was the main source of British troubles.<sup>63</sup> By contrast, Helmi attributed the widespread Kurdish resentment to the British heavy-handed policy, following Mahmud's departure to India.<sup>64</sup>

Other British officials on the ground attributed unwelcome events, such as the Amadia uprising in November 1919, to Turkish anti-Christian propaganda and to French pro-Christian propaganda, which raised enormous fears among the local Kurds.<sup>65</sup> Generally, they ascribed the change in Kurdish attitudes towards Britain to two factors. The first factor was the Kurds themselves: their "*ordinary dislike of law*", the "*personal ambitions of their local leaders*" and their internal differences. The second factor was external: the Kemalists' activities among the Kurds such as exploiting their religious feelings and inter-tribal jealousy,<sup>66</sup> the widespread Bolshevik doctrines imported from Persia and Turkey,<sup>67</sup> and the return of Kurdish prisoners from India, who brought with them stories of how the British oppressed the Indians.<sup>68</sup> Kurdish opposition to the British -in the form of hit and run attacks as well as local rebellions- was not confined to Mosul and Sulaimaniya, but also western parts of Kurdistan, such as Jezirah-ibn-Omar. As the British authorities on the ground were unable to put an end to political instability in Southern Kurdistan, fears began to arise in London. The prospect of a general anti-British uprising among the Kurds would call into question the nature of all British commitments in Kur-

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60\* Foreign Office Minute No. 168555, 8 January 1920, FO371/4193, PRO.

61\* H. Bill to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, Memorandum on the future of the Qaza of Amadia, 21 October 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

62\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 9 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

63\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 20 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

64\* Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol.i, pp.14-8.

65\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit., p.11.

66\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, Priority, 11 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

67\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 27 March 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

68\* Administration Report Of the Sulaimaniya Division..., op. cit.

distan.<sup>69</sup> Partly because of this, there were calls in various official circles to formulate a clear-cut British policy towards Kurdistan's future as quickly as possible.

The growing tension between the Southern Kurds and the British aroused the fears of Kurdish nationalist circles in Northern Kurdistan. They must have feared that this state of affairs in British-occupied Kurdistan might lead Britain to react unfavourably towards the Kurdish question at the peace conference, and refuse to take a mandate for the whole of Kurdistan. They probably feared that the Turks would benefit from the situation by winning over the resentful Kurds. However, they believed that the source of Britain's troubles in occupied Kurdistan lay in its policy on the ground. In the wake of the Aqra Incident, the Kurdish Independence Committee in Northern Kurdistan informed the British Government of its opinion regarding the causes of the current disturbances in British occupied-Kurdistan, emphasising its Kurdish origins. It reminded the British that the same Kurdish tribes which had welcomed them now rebelled against them. The Committee attributed this largely to the behaviour of British officials, who ignored Kurdish nationalist feelings and customs, warning against the growing Kurdish enmity towards Britain and calling on the British to improve the situation. It recommended as a short term solution, while awaiting the independence of Kurdistan, the appointment of those British officials who were "*well acquainted with the psychology and character of the tribes*".<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Noel agreed that the reversal of British policy on the ground from sponsoring Kurdish nationalism to undermining it, as a method of maintaining British influence in Ottoman Kurdistan, was the main reason for the consequent British troubles in Southern Kurdistan.<sup>71</sup>

Calls began to be made both by British officials on the ground and Kurdish notables for the return of indirect control via the establishment of a form of Kurdish autonomy. These stemmed from the growing realisation that there was an urgent need to contain the rapidly growing Kurdish resentment of British rule. Despite his firm belief in direct British rule, and having previously expressed strong reservations about Kurdish autonomy,<sup>72</sup> Maj. Soane regarded the re-establishment of a Kurdish governorship under Hamdi Beg Baban, a British-orientated Kurd, as the "*most reasonable*" suggestion, and that "*such a step is advisable sooner or later to disarm propagandists*", namely, Mahmud's' followers, who claimed that the Brit-

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69\* Parliamentary Question, No.151967, 14 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

70\* Residence, Cairo, to Curzon, 9 December 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

71\* E.W.L. Noel, Note -in- Colonial Office Minute No.4958, 22 July 1922, CO730/13, PRO.

72\* Soane, Sulaimaniya, to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 11 January 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

ish had backed down on their promises.<sup>73</sup> Other British assistant officers in Southern Kurdistan, such as Capt. C.T. Beale, called on Wilson to consider the idea of introducing indirect British control in the Rowanduz region through the creation of a tiny Kurdish “state” to re-establish peace and order, after the British failure to control it directly.<sup>74</sup> This latter area was strategically important by virtue of its overlooking one of the main roads between Southern and Eastern Kurdistan. They nominated Said Taha as Kurdish Governor of that tiny Kurdish entity because of his influence in the area. Even Leachman endorsed the idea of installing Said Taha as Governor of such a tiny state in the Rowanduz district.<sup>75</sup>

The calls for the re-establishment of an autonomous Kurdish government in Southern Kurdistan were not confined to the nationalist circles in Sulaimaniya. Soon Wilson found that even those Kurdish notables whom he encouraged to turn against Mahmud’s Government or to adopt a neutral stand, wanted Kurdish autonomy as a guarantee against Southern Kurdistan’s incorporation into a Mesopotamian state. In July 1920, a memorandum was signed by sixty two leading tribal leaders, as well as townsmen, in the Arbil and Sulaimaniya regions, in which they demanded that Kurdistan should be constituted as an independent state under British mandate<sup>76</sup> in line with the British Government’s earlier promises. They also asked that Southern Kurdistan should have its own representative at the peace conference.<sup>77</sup> In March Capt. C.A. Rundle reported that at his meetings with two pro-British notables, Mullah Mohmod Effendi, the *Hakim-i-Shar’*, and his deputy, Jamil Agha, the former “*was very emphatic... in the opinion that Kurdish Hukmdar should be appointed*” and that “*the Hukmdar must have British support and advice*”.<sup>78</sup> They suggested that the proposed autonomous state should include “*all Kurdistan within the British mandatory area*”.<sup>79</sup> Apart from bringing political stability back to Southern Kurdistan following the overthrow of Mahmud’s Government, the motives of these and other Kurdish notables seemed to be the growing Kurdish anxiety about the return of

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73\* Confidential Memorandum From Political Officer, Sulaimaniya, to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 4 August 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

74\* Beale, Rowanduz, to Political, Baghdad, 29 May 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

75\* Beale, Mosul, to Political, Baghdad, 6 June 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

76\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 3 July 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

77\* Translation of [an] Undated Persian Document, Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 17 August 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

78\* Confidential Memorandum From Capt. A.G. Rudly, Arbil, to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, March 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

79\* Confidential Memorandum From Political Officer, Arbil, to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 17 July 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

Turkish rule to Southern Kurdistan, or its inclusion in an Arab state in Mesopotamia.<sup>80</sup> These examples demonstrate that, despite increasing British political difficulties -such as the prospect of military and financial commitments, and the dilemma of not being able to withdraw or to station troops permanently in Southern Kurdistan- Wilson remained adamant in his belief that direct control should continue, and that any autonomous Kurdish state, however limited its size and authority, should not be countenanced.

### **London's Attitudes Towards The Affairs Of Southern Kurdistan**

The most striking aspect of Wilson's position on Kurdish affairs was his ability to pursue a policy remarkably different from what he suggested to the British Government. At one of the meetings of the Interdepartmental Conference of Middle Eastern affairs -which was held under the chairmanship of Lord Curzon to discuss the future administration of Mesopotamia (17 April 1919)- Wilson suggested that instead of establishing a united and autonomous Kurdistan in the British-occupied Kurdish areas, Britain should set up a number of smaller autonomous Kurdish states: one in the Sulaimaniya region, the second in the Rowanduz region, the third in Amadia and the fourth in Jezirah-ibn-Omar, etc.<sup>81</sup> These autonomous states would be governed by local Kurdish notables, who would have as their advisers British officials sent by the British authorities of Mesopotamia. The conference agreed in principle that:

*Wilson should be authorised to take steps for the creation of five provinces [as] suggested by Col. [Evelyn] Howell for Iraq., and for an Arab province of Mosul, surrounded by a fringe of autonomous Kurdish states under Kurdish chiefs, with British political advisers.<sup>82</sup>*

But Wilson never initiated such steps and instead, he set out to reorganise the administration of Southern Kurdistan on a direct control basis, and gave the destruction of the autonomous Kurdish entity an exceptional priority.

The following examination of the structure of British control in Southern Kurdistan undoubtedly shows that the area was being organised by Wilson on a direct control basis. Since December 1918, when it became clear that Area A would be transferred to a British sphere of influence, Wilson had devoted his efforts and time to the establishment of direct British control in Southern Kurdistan. This took two forms. The first was a tribal system, accord-

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80\* Ibid.

81\* Wilson excluded large Kurdish areas from the proposed autonomous Kurdish states, such as Arbil, Zakho and Aqra. These areas were to be part of the Arab province of Mosul, which was to be within the British administration of Mesopotamia.

82\* Interdepartmental Conference on Middle Eastern Affairs (IDCM), Minute No.16 , 17 April 1919, FO371/4149, PRO.

ing to which each Kurdish tribe was viewed as a “*political formation*” under the nominal authority of its chief (or chiefs), who was selected by the British authorities according to his loyalty. British assistant political officers closely supervised these chiefs and through them British orders were put into practice. This form of direct administration was applied mostly to the mountainous sub-districts, such as Qala Diza, and certain powerful tribes, such as the Jaf and Pizhder, as well as remote Kurdish areas. The second form was more outright control via British officials. According to this administrative system, the Sulaimaniya division was divided into five districts: Sulaimaniya, Sharbezher, Chemchemical, Halabjah and Rania. Every district was under an assistant political officer. Their districts were subdivided into *Mudiriqs* (sub-districts) and administered by *mudirs*, who might be Kurdish. This system was applied mostly to the plain areas and towns, where the British could deploy their forces quickly in an emergency.

In May 1919, the Kurds also lost control over the Kurdish Levies, when they were brought under the command of British officers. The number of Kurdish officers decreased from thirty six under Kurdish self-government to nine. Moreover, Kurdish conscripts were forced to take service under the British Government.<sup>83</sup> The Kirkuk division, which had been part of the Sulaimaniya division until February 1919, had closer British control.<sup>84</sup> Wilson began to establish the newly-created division of Arbil on a direct control line.<sup>85</sup> All Kurdish divisions were supposed to have a division council under close British control. Wilson and his subordinates' ultimate objective was to incorporate Southern Kurdistan, as a whole, into the British administration of Mesopotamia. In his comments on the administration report of the Sulaimaniya division for the year 1919, Hubert Young of the Foreign Office describes Wilson's above mentioned administrative steps as “*a very illuminating account of the destruction of the steps originally taken to form an autonomous Kurdistan and the establishment of direct administration in its place*”.<sup>86</sup> It should be borne in mind that the structure of direct British rule in Southern Kurdistan was different from that of Mesopotamia due to the differences between the two regions in terms of British political control and geographical features. Moreover, whereas London was far more directly involved in any decision regarding the political and administrative arrangements for Arab Mesopotamia, it allowed the British authorities in Baghdad to make

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83\* Administration Report of the Sulaimaniya division... op. cit.

84\* Administration Report of the Kirkuk division for Period January 1st, 1919 to December 31st 1919, FO371/5069, PRO.

85\* Administration Report of the Arbil division for the Year 1919, FO371/5069, PRO.

86\* H.W. Young, Foreign Office Minute on the Administration Report on the Sulaimaniya division for Year 1919, No.4958, 23 July 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

decisions on the ground insofar as Southern Kurdistan was concerned. This state of affairs reflected the fact that London knew what would be the political future of Mesopotamia, unlike Southern Kurdistan, whose fate was still undecided upon.

As previously mentioned, Wilson's reversal of Kurdish policy on the ground caused widespread political instability, and the British were forced to take punitive military operations and aerial bombardments of Kurdish villages. Far from consolidating British control, these actions resulted in the restoration of some Turkish influence in the Kurdish areas. These political and military developments were naturally unwelcomed by the British Government. Apart from its opposition to new military and financial commitments, London was worried that Wilson's policy of denying Kurdish national aspirations might turn Southern Kurdistan into a permanent threat to British interests in Mesopotamia as well as in Persia. Even the India Office, which up to this point favoured Southern Kurdistan's subjection, questioned the advantages of Wilson's attempts to impose direct control in such remote areas as Amadia, where British officers were being killed.<sup>87</sup> In August 1919, the India Office telegraphed Wilson regarding London's general anxiety about the Kurdish situation. Apart from acute financial difficulties, and despite the uncertainty about Kurdistan's future, Britain should establish neither direct administration nor effective military occupation, but loose political supervision, as the main method of securing its strategic interests in Kurdistan. The telegram reminded Wilson that the British Government:

*hitherto supported policy of extending British influence to Southern Kurdistan because they believed that inhabitants themselves welcomed it. It was on this understanding that they sanctioned your proposal to create.. autonomous Kurdish States under Kurdish Chiefs with British political advisers.. It would now appear that belief was misplaced and that [the] inhabitants, far from welcoming British influence, are so actively hostile that strategic railway[s] are required to keep them in check. In these circumstances, might it not be [a] better course to withdraw our political officers, &c., and leave Kurds to their own devices? [The] alternative of maintaining order by force among reluctant mountain tribesmen opens up [a] prospect of military commitments, which HMG contemplates with gravest apprehension. Last thing they desire is to create a new North-West Frontier problem [as in India] on the north-eastern borders of Iraq.<sup>88</sup>*

This telegram highlights the degree to which the British Government had mistakenly assumed that Wilson was reorganising Southern Kurdistan's administration on the basis of autonomous Kurdish states. The reason for London's confusion seemed to be the information he sent regarding the real nature of his steps on the ground. The British troubles in Southern Kurdistan, as in Mesopotamia, exposed the shortcomings of direct rule: financially expensive, militarily hazardous and politically harmful.

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<sup>87</sup>\* India Office, Political Department, 27 August, 1919, FO371/4192, PRO, p.2.

<sup>88</sup>\* Ibid.

Yet British authorities in Mesopotamia attributed the reversal of their Kurdish policy to the fact that their original task of establishing “*an independent Southern Kurdistan*” under their auspices was impractical owing to “*the backward and undeveloped state of the country, the lack of communications and the dissensions of the tribes*”. Therefore, the administrative partition of Southern Kurdistan, and then its amalgamation with British-administered Mesopotamia, was presented as a necessary and justifiable course of actions.<sup>89</sup> In the ensuing exchange of telegrams between Wilson and the India Office regarding Southern Kurdistan, the former continued to defend his Kurdish policy by disputing the claim that the Kurdish self-government was a viable alternative. He even argued that the Mahmud Government should not have been established in the first place:

*[The] idea, embodied in President Wilson's 14 points and confirmed in [the] Anglo-French declaration of 8 November, of substituting nationality, religion or race as [a] basis of government in the Middle East in lieu of 'ability and power to govern', has aroused [the] dormant animosities of [the] past hundred years. Coming, as it did, on top of acute misery arising out of war, it was eagerly adopted by every race and sect and interpreted according to their racial idiosyncrasies.*<sup>90</sup>

The existence of widespread anti-British activities in Southern Kurdistan was reported in the British press at home<sup>91</sup> and raised questions in the British parliament about the long-term British policy in that region.<sup>92</sup> Wilson, however, continued to argue that the majority of the population welcomed the policy of direct rule, based not on “*force but consent*”. Kurdish people, according to Wilson, even demanded more British supervision after “*a brief test of nationalist anarchy*” under Mahmud.<sup>93</sup> To mitigate London's fears of an increase in financial expenditure, Wilson argued that the economic wealth of Southern Kurdistan would not lead to increased British financial commitments, and that the prospects for the British administration would be even brighter because of the existence of oil fields and fertile wheat-growing land. He stressed that the overthrow of the Kurdish Government was the only way to foil the attempts of the “*disorderly element*” to control Southern Kurdistan; otherwise, Britain would be forced to make more military commitments to protect Kirkuk, Kifri and Arbil. Wilson wanted London's proposal for an autonomous Southern Kurdistan to be submitted to strategic considerations, and these should alone define the degree of British supervision. According to such considerations, Sulaimaniya, the core of Kurdish nationalism, had to come under far clo-

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89\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit., p.12.

90\* Political, Baghdad, Priority, 29 August 1919, FO371/4192.

91\* Extract from *Glasgow Herald*, No.153000, 13 November 1919, FO371/4193.

92\* Parliamentary Question, 14 November 1919, FO371/4193.

93\* *Ibid.*



ser British supervision than other Kurdish areas because of its geographical and military importance. Furthermore, Wilson argued that an autonomous Southern Kurdistan would have one consequence: total abandonment of the country. This policy would undermine British strategic positions in the Baghdad and Basra *Wilayets*, incurring grave political instability.<sup>94</sup> As a consequence, Britain would be forced to make a far greater military and financial commitment than direct British control would require in Southern Kurdistan. Despite its failure, direct British control in Southern Kurdistan continued as a result of the influence of British officials on the ground. In this respect, a Foreign Office minute reveals how Soane could resist, in his capacity as a Political Officer, the application of a new British approach to Kurdish affairs by preventing the appointment of a Kurdish governor.<sup>95</sup>

One of the consequences of Wilson's failure was the rejection by the British Government of his proposal for the construction of a railway from Qizil Robot towards Kifri and Kirkuk. There were strong suspicions among British policy makers that Wilson wanted to use the railway to consolidate direct British control and to suppress Kurdish revolts. Although Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, initially accepted Wilson's scheme for the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into British Mesopotamia on strategic grounds,<sup>96</sup> most of those British military and civilian officials who attended a meeting held at the India Office recommended the establishment of tiny Kurdish states: one in Sulaimaniya and one in Jezirah-ibn-Omar.<sup>97</sup> But nothing along these lines materialised, as British official circles could not decide upon Southern Kurdistan's long-term future beyond its inclusion in the British mandate for Mesopotamia.

### **The Consequences Of The Imposition Of Direct British Rule In Southern Kurdistan For The Kurdish Question**

The destruction of the Kurdish autonomous entity by the British authorities in Mesopotamia was not due to its failure to fulfil the tasks expected of it, namely establishing political stability, the re-activation of economic life, and above all, obtaining the friendship of the local Kurds. On all these levels, the Kurdish Government led by Mahmud was successful, without entailing

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94\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad 13 February 1920, FO371/5070, PRO.

95\* Foreign Office Minute No.15161, 3 December 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

96\* A. Hirtzel, India Office, 25 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

97\* The meeting was chaired by Arthur Hirtzel, India Office Under Secretary, to discuss Wilson's proposals for the boundaries between Mesopotamia and Kurdistan, dated 27 November, No.14269. Minute of a Meeting Held at the India Office, 6 December 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

military, political or financial commitments from Britain. Furthermore, it helped to consolidate British influence in an area that was growing in importance due to its geographical location. It connected the British to northern and north-west Persia, where the Bolshevik threat was growing, and it adjoined the French sphere of influence and areas where Britain could influence the course of political events, such as Armenia, Northern Kurdistan and Anatolia. In the light of this, the overthrow of Kurdish Government should be attributed not to its failure, but to its success and its immediate political implications. Wilson, who directly took charge of Kurdish affairs in June 1919, feared that the success of the Kurdish experiment would likely lead to the establishment of an autonomous state of Southern Kurdistan. At the same time, he feared that the two Arab *Wilayets* of Baghdad and Basra would follow suit, thereby terminating the direct control system overall Mesopotamia. His views were shared by the majority of local British military and civilian officials, and this explains why it was impossible to re-establish Kurdish autonomy in British-controlled areas up until the formation of the second Mahmud Government in the autumn of 1922.

The period 1919-20 was exceptionally important because direct British rule had dire consequences for the Kurds in terms of their subjection to new methods of control and losing an unprecedented opportunity to achieve their nationalist aspirations. Wilson and his like-minded civil and military officials set an example for the future, by developing the methods by which Southern Kurdistan could be kept under control, and be part of a Mesopotamian administration. Consequently, his successors would find it much easier to incorporate Southern Kurdistan into Mesopotamia, rather than establishing it as an autonomous or independent state. Examination of his reports between 1918 and 1920 shows that Wilson and his subordinates distorted information regarding the actual size of Southern Kurdistan, the demographical distribution of the Kurds, their political aspirations and economic links. For example, such Kurdish towns as Arbil and Kirkuk were not, Wilson reported, Kurdish but Turkish.<sup>98</sup> The Kurds lived only in the mountainous areas and were commercially dependent upon their links with Arab Mesopotamia. They were divided into groups, one of which was ethnically Kurdish (i.e. tribes), the other of which was not Kurdish (i.e. those who belonged to no tribe at all). In addition, Wilson did not consider the Christian, Jewish and Yazidi Kurds to be Kurdish. To contain the Kurdish nationalist movement, Wilson and his subordinates revived old Turkish methods of divide and rule by encouraging localism and tribalism, which were institutionalised

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<sup>98</sup>\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 8 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO. It should be said many of the Kurdish population of Arbil spoke (and still speak) Turkish alongside Kurdish.

within the system of direct rule.

From a military point of view, British military and civilian authorities in Mesopotamia were in agreement that such strategic Kurdish places as Amadia should be turned into settlements for Assyrians, who had fled Persia. These Assyrians could be organised and used as a force to suppress Kurdish revolts.<sup>99</sup> The military authorities in Mesopotamia had for some time been planning to both use and urge the Assyrians to suppress the Kurdish revolts and to maintain British influence in Southern Kurdistan:

*For generations the Assyrians had been fighting the Kurds... It will be much better to allow the commandant of the [ Assyrian] refugees at the camp at Baqubah to invite Malik Khoshaba... and other officers... to form three Drogin battalions or three thousand men to [serve]under a British commander for a while [in] Amadia.<sup>100</sup>*

Among other low-cost military measures that Wilson and the military called for to consolidate British positions in the mountainous parts of Southern Kurdistan, was the air force.<sup>101</sup> From then onward, the use of the Royal Air Force began to emerge as the ideal way of keeping Southern Kurdistan under British control. All these methods of control, used or advocated by Wilson and other like-minded officials in Mesopotamia, were incorporated into future British policy towards Southern Kurdistan, especially after the establishment of the Iraqi state.

The imposition of direct British rule and the disappearance of the autonomous entity had far reaching political effects on the Kurdish question. The suppression of Sheikh Mahmud and the nationalist circle that rallied around him resulted in the considerable undermining of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Southern Kurdistan. The importance of Sheikh Mahmud's leadership for Southern Kurds was even conceded by the British authorities in Baghdad:

*with all his faults, he was at the time a considerable political asset. In Southern Kurdistan, for one who opposed his appointment, there were four others who welcomed it and this is a low proportion of dissent in a country where family ties and internecine feuds play so large a part... The salient factor remained that Sheikh Mahmud was a power in the land and as such his appointment was a distinct asset in our dealings with the bulk of the tribes.<sup>102</sup>*

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<sup>99</sup>\* For example, Wilson suggested to Curzon that Britain should take advantage of the murder of a British official by local Kurds in order to settle Assyrian refugees within the armistice Line. This suggestion sought to create a pro-British basis among population. Letter From Young to Kidston, 15 September 1919. FO371/4192, PRO.

<sup>100</sup>\* Ex. Commander-in-Chief to General Officer Commanding, 5 August 1919, AIR20/513, PRO.

<sup>101</sup>\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, February 1920, FO371/5067, PRO. British aerial bombardments of Kurdish civilian centres during 1919 were probably the first of their kind in modern history when they used to suppress local rebellions. For details on the role of the British air force in Kurdistan see David C. Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: the Royal Air Force, 1919-1939*, (Manchester: 1990)

<sup>102</sup>\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit., p.13.

In Eastern Kurdistan a number of Kurdish regions expressed their readiness to come under autonomous Kurdish rule and recognise Mahmud's leadership. The absence of a Kurdish leadership, as a political alternative to the rule of British officials, made the continuation of direct control inevitable in Southern Kurdistan, despite London's uneasiness. This also had two other political implications. The first was that it paved the way for the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into the British mandate over Mesopotamia, which represented a *de facto* partition of Ottoman Kurdistan. Secondly, when the state of Iraq was created by the British through merging the Baghdad and Basra *Wilayets*, Southern Kurdistan was, in comparison, falling behind in terms of political status, lacking both the bureaucracy and leadership to rally local Kurds. These factors made it easier for the British to concentrate on the success of one experiment, namely Arab rule in Baghdad and Basra, at the expense of other issues, including the future of Southern Kurdistan.

## **Conclusion**

The Allied victory in the First World War and the disintegration of the ancient Ottoman Empire symbolised the end of the old regional order in the Middle East. The process of re-drawing a new political map for the post-war Middle East seemed to offer the new nationalities, such as the Kurds, Arabs and Armenians, an unprecedented opportunity to realise their long-held political aspirations. The impact of the war re-vitalised the Kurdish nationalist movement in Ottoman and Qajar Kurdistan. British control of the southern parts of Kurdistan made the Kurds feel even more optimistic, as they perceived the British, in particular, to be their saviours from the Ottoman Turks. Indeed, the slogan of "*Kurdistan for the Kurds*", which was used to guide immediate British political and administrative measures in Southern Kurdistan after the war, was a very promising start.

The subsequent change in British policy, from indirect to direct control after June 1919, illustrated how premature Kurdish optimism was. In the absence of a defined British policy towards Kurdistan's future, British officials' measures on the ground became an important factor in influencing the subsequent political developments and the way London approached the Kurdish situation at the peace conference. By providing all the strategic, economic and political arguments for the need to consolidate British position in Mesopotamia, British officials, especially Wilson, influenced London's decision to place Southern Kurdistan under

the Mesopotamian mandate. In other words, Southern Kurdistan was not only prevented from becoming an autonomous entity, but politically detached from the remainder of Kurdistan. This was an early indication that the thinking of British policy makers was directed against the idea of a united Kurdistan, which Kurdish nationalists demanded.

The effects of suppressing Southern Kurdish nationalists and the winding up of their government transcended the boundaries of the British-controlled Southern Kurdistan. Such British actions helped to impede the development of Kurdish nationalist movement by disrupting all attempts to co-ordinate Kurdish political efforts on a Kurdistan-wide basis. The absence of the nationalist leadership of Mahmud from the Kurdish political scene after June 1919 partly explains the lack of political co-ordination between the efforts of the Southern and Northern Kurds at a very sensitive time, namely the deliberation of Kurdistan's future at the peace conference. While in Southern Kurdistan Mahmud had engaged in preparing the way for an active role for the Southern Kurds at that conference. To this end, he worked towards granting General Cherif Pasha, the Kurdish representative at the peace conference, a mandate in the form of a petition signed by influential Southern Kurds so that he could speak for both Southern and Northern Kurdistan.<sup>103</sup> Mahmud's other efforts in the direction of a Kurdistan-wide co-operation were frustrated, such as his endeavour to bring many parts of Eastern Kurdistan under Kurdish rule. The British were determined to prevent any political cohesion between Southern and Eastern Kurdistan in order not to undermine Persia's territorial unity. In his memoirs, Rafik Helmi explains how the attempts of the British authorities in Baghdad prevented a Kurdish delegation -sent by the Kurdish Government- from reaching Paris to join Cherif Pasha.<sup>104</sup> Mahmud himself could be partly blamed for the worsening of British-Kurdish relations in Southern Kurdistan, which culminated in his exile. He was over-optimistic, impatient and, in Helmi's words, politically inexperienced when dealing with the British authorities in Baghdad.<sup>105</sup> These characteristics manifested themselves in Mahmud's unceasing pressure on the British to act swiftly to fulfil their promises about expanding Kurdish rule, before gaining full British confidence in his leadership and political intentions.

One of the main consequences of the above mentioned developments was that the Kurds had much less political weight, and were placed in a weaker position than they desired at the start of the peace conference's deliberations on the future of Kurdistan. The Sheikh

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<sup>103</sup>\* Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol. I, pp. 19 & 65-66.

<sup>104</sup>\* *Ibid*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>105</sup>\* *Ibid*, p. 67.

Mahmud affair made the British Government look less favourably upon the Kurds, whom it perceived as troublesome people, who lacked reliable leaders. The termination of the experiment of Kurdish autonomy undermined Noel's efforts to secure London's support for Kurdish nationalist aspirations at the peace conference, as the establishment of that government was associated with his approach to the Kurdish question. Perhaps the most negative consequence of the disappearance of the autonomous Kurdish Government was that nationalist Kurdish circles in Kurdistan as well as those in exile could no longer refer to it as a symbol of their political and moral strength, nor as proof of their ability to operate an indigenous administration. In other words, they were no longer capable of using that government as an important argument to support their claim for an independent Kurdistan under foreign supervision at the peace conference.

## Chapter Three

### The Attitudes Of British Officials On The Ground Towards The Kurdish Question Between 1918 And 1920: Effects And Reactions

When the Paris peace conference started its debate on the Turkish peace settlement in 1919, the British Government had little knowledge about the Kurds, their affairs and aspirations. In most Kurdish areas outside British-controlled Southern Kurdistan a dangerous political vacuum emerged as a result of the steady decline in the power of the central governments in Constantinople and Tehran. This state of affairs enabled certain British officials serving in Kurdistan or in its neighbouring areas, notably Maj. Noel and Col. Wilson, to play an important part in influencing the attitudes of the British Government towards Kurdistan's political future through their views and political schemes. Noel was the first British official who took charge of Kurdish affairs on the ground between November 1918 and June 1919, before being replaced by Wilson, who conducted Kurdish affairs in consultation with the British High Commissioner in Constantinople until December 1920. Their suggestions and views on the Kurdish question were circulated among the Foreign, India and War Offices. They not only prompted the contradictory comments and observations of the British High Commissions in Constantinople and Cairo, but also formed the starting point for any debate on the Kurdish question at the meetings of the Interdepartmental Conference on Middle Eastern Affairs, a body which was chaired by Lord Curzon and concerned with the future of the Ottoman Empire, especially its non-Turkish territories. Thus the analysis of Wilson's and Noel's perceptions of the Kurdish question helps to illuminate why the British Government began to pay more attention to the Kurds, and how the objectives of its Kurdish policy were defined within the Turkish peace settlement.

### **Colonel Wilson's Attitudes Towards The Kurdish Question Between 1918 And 1920**

#### ***i- The Genesis Of Wilson's Thinking***

Wilson was renowned among British officials in the Foreign and India Offices as an imperialist-orientated official, who considered the imposition of outright British control over local affairs as the only viable option to consolidate whatever British interests were at stake in Mesopotamia and Kurdistan. Indeed, during his three years, as the Acting Civil Commissioner for Mesopotamia, he never attempted to prepare the foundation for an autonomous Southern Kurdistan,

as London wished. Instead, he established direct British administration through eliminating the existing autonomous Kurdish entity, and blocking all attempts to establish others. This was contrary to what was generally assumed by some scholars, such as Liora Lukitz, that the formula of indirect control was Wilson's brain-child.<sup>1</sup> At a broader level, Wilson persistently endeavoured to sever all political links between the Southern Kurds and the rest of the Kurds, aiming at permanently detaching Southern Kurdistan from Ottoman Kurdistan. Initially, Wilson considered the Kurdish question as only relevant to Northern Kurdistan. Insofar as Southern Kurdistan was concerned, Wilson advocated its incorporation into British-administrated Mesopotamia, hoping that Britain would present the incorporation arrangement to the peace conference as a *fait accompli*. Wilson argued the case for Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into British-administrated Mesopotamia in the following terms:

*For economic and for strategic reasons, and in order to secure to Iraq[s] state the advantage of a mountain tract, well wooded and capable of great development, it is desirable to include Sulaimaniya, Rania and Keuisenjaq within [the] limits of Mesopotamia[s] administration.<sup>2</sup>*

Wilson asserted, when doubts were raised about the impracticability of direct control, that while indirect control could serve British interests with much less military and financial commitment, the re-imposition of indirect control in Southern Kurdistan would endanger the British position throughout Mesopotamia:

*The abandonment of Mosul, Erbil and Sulaimaniya divisions would so unfavourably affect our position in [the] Baghdad and Basra Wilayets as to render our position before long untenable without considerable reinforcement. These three Wilayets form an indivisible whole. The Mosul Wilayet has no natural economic connection with Turkey or Syria.. and distrust and objections arising from our abandonment of Sulaimaniya, Erbil and Mosul divisions and inevitable anarchy resulting from removal of external control in these, would have the gravest effect throughout the rest of Mesopotamia.<sup>3</sup>*

In other words, Wilson considered Southern Kurdistan's future as politically irrelevant to the remainder of Kurdistan. His viewpoint enjoyed the warmest support of the military authorities in Mesopotamia,<sup>4</sup> where he spent the period 1918-1920 urging London to accept his implemented political and administrative measures in Southern Kurdistan as a permanent British policy, rather than a temporary one.

The centrality of Mesopotamia thus formed the cornerstone of Wilson's approach to the political future of the Kurdish people. Whatever formula was adopted, Britain would parti-

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<sup>1</sup>\* Liora Lukitz, *Iraq, the Research for National Identity*, (London: Frank Cass, 1995), p.21.

<sup>2</sup>\* Political, Baghdad, Secret No.6666, 13 June 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

<sup>3</sup>\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 13 February 1920, FO371/5070, PRO.

<sup>4</sup>\* Ibid.



tion the Kurdish *Wilayets* of the Ottoman Empire, while keeping Eastern Kurdistan, as before, within the Qajar Kingdom. Wilson's argument rested on the premise that, though the Kurds formed a nationality with strong nationalist feelings and separate identity, they were incapable of ruling themselves owing to their lack of "*leaders*", and their being "*widely scattered*" and divided into a "*hundred warring tribes*". Given the Northern Kurds' opposition to Turkish rule and their respect for and trust of Britain, Wilson argued that the introduction of some form of British rule in Northern Kurdistan offered "*the best chance of a settled and prosperous country in the future*". Under the scheme, the Northern Kurds would have an "*autonomous state*" under close British protection and supervision. This solution was both "*feasible and in accordance with justice and the aspirations of the people*".<sup>5</sup> Wilson's scheme would have required Britain to either accept a separate British mandate for Northern Kurdistan or to territorially extend its Mesopotamian mandate. The structure of the proposed Kurdish state would be a confederation, consisting of several tiny entities under different nominal local rulers. These entities would be under a central administration, which might have a "*Kurdish figurehead*".

The boundaries of this state would run as follows:

*a little north of Jezirah-ibn-Omar, north of Nisibin, south of Mardin, north of Ras-al-Ain, along latitude 37 to Birdjik, thence north up the Euphrates and finally bending eastward and following the boundaries of the Wilayets of Kharput (Mamuer-ul-Aziz) Bitlis and Van, thus excluding Erzinjan and Erzeraum, to the Persian frontier.*<sup>6</sup>

In reality, Wilson's scheme excluded vast Kurdish areas from the would-be Kurdish state, apart from Southern Kurdistan, which would be annexed by British-administrated Mesopotamia. Wilson, as Arnold Toynbee of the Foreign Office remarked, advocated from the very beginning the idea of partitioning Ottoman Kurdistan between "*a Kurdish federation and Iraq*",<sup>7</sup> and that the former should also come under some form of British control.<sup>8</sup> One of the principal reasons behind Wilson's scheme for carving up Ottoman Kurdistan was strategic, i.e. turning Northern Kurdistan into a strong buffer to consolidate the security of Mesopotamia. The India Office and the Foreign Office did not support Wilson's scheme because of the enormous military, financial and political commitments it required. The partition of Kurdistan, however, remained an alternative proposal, especially if it was implemented in a way that strengthened the security of British position in Mesopotamia.

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<sup>5</sup>\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit., p.18.

<sup>6</sup>\* *Ibid*, p.19.

<sup>7</sup>\* Toynbee, Foreign Office Minute No.207981, 21 December 1918, FO371/3386, PRO.

<sup>8</sup>\* J.E. Shuckburgh, Note on Kurdistan, India Office, 14 December 1918, FO371/3386, PRO.

## ***ii- Wilson's Conduct Of Kurdish Affairs Outside British-controlled Kurdistan***

An examination of Wilson's actual steps in Kurdish areas outside British control reveals that he endeavoured to transform his views into reality, especially after taking charge of Kurdish affairs in June 1919. The absence of a defined British policy towards Kurdistan, which could be attributed to disagreement between Britain and France on many aspects of the Turkish peace settlement, and more importantly, the concentration of their diplomacy on much more vital European problems, made it possible for British officials on the ground to play a greater part in influencing the course of events in Kurdistan than they could under ordinary conditions. Wilson's initiatives aimed at expanding British political influence in the western and central parts of Kurdistan, especially Jezirah-ibn-Omar and Rowanduz and its neighbouring areas, all of which were situated to the north of British-controlled Southern Kurdistan.<sup>9</sup> These initiatives were characterised by the non-existence of prior consultation with the British High Commission in Constantinople, as London had asked him to do. The foregoing Kurdish areas proved militarily difficult for the British to control directly, while simultaneously taking on growing strategic and political importance because they linked British-controlled Kurdistan with Northern and Eastern Kurdistan,<sup>10</sup> where Kemalists and Bolshevik threats were looming on the horizon. Moreover, Eastern Kurdistan was a continuing source of anxiety to the British authorities in Baghdad because of the ongoing bloody Kurdish revolt there led by Simko. This state of affairs, the British authorities in Mesopotamia feared, would help to increase political instability in Sulaimaniya and in Kurdish areas as far as Amadia.<sup>11</sup> Wilson was anxious about the effects of the situation in Eastern Kurdistan on Southern Kurdistan and *vice versa*, if Britain was involved in the affairs of the former. When Noel sent his personal assistant to Eastern Kurdistan on a fact-finding mission, Wilson criticised this initiative as "*an ill-advised adventure*", and ordered its conclusion.<sup>12</sup> However, Wilson was advised by Soane that he should exploit contacts with Said Taha, Simko's ally, so as to consolidate the security of the northern frontier of the British sphere in Southern Kurdistan. As a result, the aim of the discussion with Said Taha became not so much the stabilisation of the political situation in Eastern Kurdistan as extending British political control deeper into Ottoman Kurdistan. Having received the consent of

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<sup>9</sup>\* Simultaneously, his Political Officer, Leachman, sought to transfer the Jezirah District from the Diabekir to the Mosul Wilayet. Diary of Maj. Noel On Special Duty, Nisibin, 17 April 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

<sup>10</sup>\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit., p.14.

<sup>11</sup>\* Cox, Tehran, 26 August 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

<sup>12</sup>\* Memorandum From the Office of Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, to CGS, 18 April, AIR20/512, PRO.

Percy Cox, the temporary British Minister at Tehran, Wilson began to negotiate with Said Taha in the summer of 1919, with a view to countering what he called “*Turkish propaganda*”. Said Taha, who commanded notable influence, was asked to undertake, on behalf of the British Government, the administration of a region that included Rowanduz, Shamsdinan and other areas to the north.<sup>13</sup>

Creating a Kurdish state deep into Kurdistan clearly suggests that Wilson intended to use this would-be Kurdish state as a vehicle to expand British control at the expense of the Ottoman authorities. He urged the British High Commission in Constantinople to press the Ottoman Government to evacuate its garrison from Bashkala, Dize and Neri in July 1919.<sup>14</sup> This was a preliminary step towards demanding that the Turkish authorities should recognise these areas as under British control. Capt. C.T. Beale, the Assistant Political Officer for Rowanduz, had no doubt that this Kurdish state would be extended northwards to include such Kurdish area as Orman and Julamark.<sup>15</sup> Wilson’s failure to consult British officials in Constantinople about his initiative in Kurdish areas outside British control was anxiously commented on by the Acting High Commissioner in Constantinople:

*My inability to understand how far HMG have really got, is increased by discovery that authorities in Mesopotamia were in June [1919] within ace of conducting formal agreement with Sheikh Taha, [the] effect of which would have been to carve out of what is still Turkish territory small state ruled by that chieftain under British protection.<sup>16</sup>*

Eventually, the whole Said Taha affair came to nothing as Wilson wanted him to be no more than a figurehead, with all powers resting with his British advisers.

On another level, Wilson sought to exploit the vagueness of the term ‘Mesopotamia’ to push the northern boundary of British-administrated Mesopotamia deeper into Kurdistan. In response to the Secretary of State’s inquiry about the issue of defining the northern frontier of Mesopotamia, Wilson advocated the adoption of the “*watershed*” of the Tigris and the Euphrates in Kurdistan as far as possible. This would grant Mesopotamia “*natural frontiers*”, which were politically “*impossible to dispute*” and practically “*easy to delimit*”.<sup>17</sup> Here, Wilson took another independent initiative to turn his suggested northern frontier into a *fait accompli*. The opportunity presented itself when Col. Khurshid Bey, a former Kurdish commander of a

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13\* G.L.Bell, Northern Kurdistan, 8 March 1920, AIR20/512, PRO.

14\* Political, Baghdad, to Political Rowanduz , 3 July 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

15\* Political, Rowanduz, to Political, Baghdad, 3 July 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

16\* Acting High Commissioner, Constantinople, to Prodrum, London, 8 September 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

17\* Political, Baghdad, 8 December 1918, FO371/3386, PRO.

Hamidiah force and a Hakari chief, requested official British recognition of his acceptance of British instead of Turkish suzerainty.<sup>18</sup> Wilson promptly sent his approval, which included the following declaration:

*Khurshid Bey has accepted the British Government in place of the former Turkish Government.. If other Kurdish Chiefs and tribes living in the mountains of Kurdistan, the waters of which drain towards the Tigris and its tributaries, the Khabour and the two Zabs, wish to do likewise they should inform the political officer nearest to them. They may rest assured that their request will be favourably considered and transmitted to government. By this means, if God wills, the Kurds will be united under a just and benevolent government.<sup>19</sup>*

Wilson's justification for granting British protection to all local Kurdish chiefs and tribes was based both on geopolitical necessity and the desire of the local people. The Said Taha and Khurshid Bey affairs were a true expression of Wilson's early desire for bringing new Kurdish areas under British control, and his determination to work independently of other concerned authorities to put into effect his views.

### ***iii- Wilson's Scheme For Kurdistan's Future Within The Framework Of The Turkish Peace Settlement***

Given London's decision to minimise its military, financial and political commitments as much as possible, and its desire not to precipitate French counter-measures in the form of creating their own political zone in Kurdistan, Wilson's initiatives for expanding British influence in Kurdistan were doomed to failure. In the face of the existing military and financial restrictions, which underlined the outdated nature of his approach to the Kurdish situation, Wilson abandoned the idea of forming tiny Kurdish entities under British supervision in favour of another scheme, the essence of which was to partition Ottoman Kurdistan. The southern parts would be attached to Mesopotamia, whereas the northern parts would remain, as before, under Turkish rule. The re-establishment of Turkish rule, Wilson hoped, would turn his original aim of partitioning Ottoman Kurdistan into a permanent reality. By contrast, the establishment of an independent state in Kurdistan, without close British supervision, would encourage the Southern Kurds to either join the new Kurdish state or to demand the establishment of their own state. In either case, British strategic and political positions would be undermined, not only in Arab Mesopotamia, but also in northern Persia, where the British-backed Persian Government encountered serious Bolshevik and local nationalist threats. All of this, in Wilson's

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18\* Poldist, Keu, to Political, Baghdad, Priority, 1 February 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

19\* Political, Baghdad, to Civil Commissioner on tour at Mosul, Priority, 1 February 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

eyes, would result in huge increases in British military and financial commitments. Against this background, Wilson recommended in April 1919 that Britain should recognise the continuation of Turkish rule in the six Kurdish-Armenian *Wilayets*.<sup>20</sup> In June, he stated that, if the Northern Kurdish state was not formed under British auspices, he would prefer the Armenians or Turks to be in control of the four Kurdish *Wilayets*, i.e. Diyarbekir, Bitlis, Van and Kharput.<sup>21</sup> In November, when replying to Curzon's five recommendations for the British position on the future of the Kurdish question, Wilson disagreed with recommendation number five, which called for preventing the Turks from returning to Northern Kurdistan. He pointed out that the British were unable to drive the Turks out and that Noel's opposition to the partitioning of Ottoman Kurdistan contradicted various British interests in Mesopotamia and Persia. He even went so far as to question Noel's belief that the Kurds would remain loyal to Britain in the future.<sup>22</sup>

Wilson's criticism of Noel's perceptions of, and recommendations for, Kurdish affairs culminated in his opposition to the suggestion of the Foreign Office's nomination of Noel as a member to one of the two proposed international commissions at the Paris peace conference, which would deal with the nationality questions, including the Kurdish one:

*I regard Noel as being too deeply committed to individual Kurds [and] generally to a particular line of policy, to be entirely satisfactory representative of British interest in [the] proposed commission.. I consider British representative on International Commission should, if possible, be foremost of wider experience and more judicial temperament. Lieut. Col. Cunliffe Own, at present Director of Repatriation in Mesopotamia and formerly Military attache at Constantinople, who has acquired recently a close practical knowledge of questions concerned with Assyrians, Chaldean and Armenian communities, would I venture to suggest, be a suitable British representative. He would have my entire confidence.*<sup>23</sup>

It is self-evident from Wilson's words that he feared Noel's influence on the British position on the future of the Kurdish question at the peace conference. In spite of Wilson's opposition to Noel's appointment, and the request of the Viceroy of India to send Noel to Shiraz in Persia, neither Curzon,<sup>24</sup> nor his subordinates at the Foreign Office such as Herbert Young and Robert Vansittart,<sup>25</sup> were willing to dispense with the services of Noel because he was considered to be the only British official who had deep knowledge of Kurdish affairs. In evaluating Noel's importance, Young admitted that he was "*badly misjudged*", and had he remained in

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20\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 22 October 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

21\* Political, Baghdad, 13 June 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

22\* Political, Baghdad, 27 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

23\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 19 May 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

24\* Curzon, Foreign Office, 27 May 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

25\* Young, Foreign Office Minute No.4123, 26 May 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

Southern Kurdistan in 1919, the Mahmud rising would not have happened in Southern Kurdistan. In spite of this and other failures, and because of his responsibility for Kurdish affairs on the ground during a very sensitive period insofar as Kurdistan's future was concerned, Wilson remained an important factor. He left behind a profound political and administrative legacy, which both directly and indirectly affected the future of the Kurdish question in the medium and long-run. His strategic argument about Southern Kurdistan's importance to Mesopotamia played some part in influencing the British decision to partition Ottoman Kurdistan. His measures on the ground eliminated all traces of Kurdish autonomy, while paving the way for bringing Southern Kurdistan under the British mandate over Mesopotamia. This development practically separated the fate of the Southern Kurds from that of the Northern and Eastern Kurds.

## **Major Noel's Approach To The Kurdish Question, 1918-1920**

### ***I- The Genesis Of Noel's Thinking***

Despite being a sufficiently remote country, Kurdistan was still able, in Busch's words, to "attract those imperial servants who always managed to appear on a troubled frontier to play an independent and important role".<sup>26</sup> One such outstanding British official was Noel, whose approach and views on the Kurdish question were the exact antithesis to Wilson's. In contrast to Wilson's imperialist thinking and practices, Noel believed that the ideal method to safeguard British interests was to work with the rising Kurdish nationalist movement. In his view, Kurdistan was important for Britain *per se* and not just a secondary concern subordinated to the security issue of Mesopotamia. Instead of separate solutions for each part of Kurdistan, Noel advocated an all-embracing British policy. In other words, the Kurdish question was, in Noel's view, indivisible, and that Britain should not adopt contradictory solutions for each part of Kurdistan, but a comprehensive solution (see map eleven). As soon as he took charge of Kurdish affairs in early November 1918, Noel put forward his first comprehensive scheme for the formation of a separate and an autonomous Kurdistan. Under the scheme, a Kurdish confederacy would be established, consisting of three Kurdish entities under British supervision and protection. Sulaimaniya would be the administrative centre of Southern Kurdistan, whereas Mosul and Diyarbekir would be the administrative centres of Western and Central Kurdistan respectively. Influential local Kurdish leaders, such as Sheikh Mahmud and Said Taha, would

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<sup>26</sup>\* Busch, *Mudros to Lausanne*, p. 183.

Map Eleven, Major Noel's Map Of Ottoman And Qajar Kurdistan

-  Predominately Kurdish Areas Claimed By The Armenians
-  Kurdish Areas So Far Niether Claimed By Mesopotamia Nor By Armenia
-  Kurdish Districts At Present Included In Mesopotamia
-  Ottoman-Persian Frontier



Source: FO371/4192

be expected to have political roles within the confederated Kurdish entities.<sup>27</sup>

Britain, Noel emphasised, could not be indifferent to the fate of Kurdistan because of its effects on British strategic and political interests in the former Ottoman *Wilayets* as well as Persia. The return of Turkish rule, or the formation of a greater Armenian state at the expense of the Kurds, was bound to create an unstable Kurdistan that it would undermine the post-war territorial and political rearrangements of Ottoman Asia. While that was the case, Britain had an unprecedented opportunity to expand its political influence and maintain its strategic interests through encouraging the rising Kurdish nationalist movement to achieve its legitimate political aspirations. Noel emphatically stated that:

*[Kurdish] national movement is so virile that I do not foresee much difficulty in creating a Kurdish state under our protection and with control by political officers over general policy, provided we take prompt and vigorous action now. [The Kurdish] movement is so strong (at all events here at Sulaimaniya) that I strongly advise immediate dispatch of qualified officers to assume direct charge of principal administrative services.<sup>28</sup>*

The establishment of a confederated Kurdistan under British supervision was, in Noel's eyes, an ideal solution in the wake of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Apart from establish-

<sup>27</sup>\* Mesopotamia: Future Constitution, Enclosure No.8, Political Officer, Sulaimaniya, Note on the Political Status of Kurdistan, November 1918, FO371/4147, PRO.

<sup>28</sup>\* Political, Baghdad, to S/S for India, 17 November 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

ing the sought-after political stability in a very volatile Kurdistan, the establishment of a Kurdish state would keep other rival powers at bay, as well as facilitating the formation of a united Armenia. Noel's novel approach required an active British role without entailing heavy military and financial commitments. His views on Kurdish affairs contain a tangible moral dimension. To realise Britain's vital strategic and political interests in the former Ottoman *Wilayets*, Noel advocated methods that would mean Britain not abandoning its moral duties before the new nationalities, such as the Kurds:

*It should... be possible to find some formula which would assure the economic and strategic interests of Mesopotamia in these areas, without, however, irrevocably shutting the door on the legitimate Kurdish aspirations.*<sup>29</sup>

Apart from his idealism and probable personal ambition to play a distinctive role matching that of T.E. Lawrence of Arabia during the war, Noel's approach to the Kurdish question was mainly based on impersonal considerations. Firstly, following the war, Britain found itself incapable of committing itself militarily and financially in the newly-conquered areas, especially in the Middle East, due to the long duration of the war. The war had been costly for Britain in men and money, and led to popular opposition to new territorial annexations and colonial adventures. Secondly, Noel's approach was a true reflection of profound changes on the international scene, resulting from the outbreak of the October Revolution and the declaration of Wilson's Fourteen Points in 1918, both of which had a direct impact on the political aspirations of the non-Turkish nationalities. Lastly, Noel relied on his experience as a British representative to the Government of the North-West Province, which operated as a buffer state to British India. Kurdistan could play a similar strategic role towards British Mesopotamia. Noel also built on his experiences in Persia and the Caucasus, where he witnessed how local nationalism was rapidly emerging as an important factor, influencing the shape of the region. It must be remembered that Noel's views also took shape against the background of a successful British experiment with the Sharifian Arabs during the war.

Noel, like Wilson, not only preached his views on the Kurdish question, but also attempted to put them into practice when he was in charge of Kurdish affairs on the ground between November 1918 and June 1919. In spite of the reservations of Wilson, who preferred Kurdistan to be a "*British protectorate*",<sup>30</sup> Noel, as soon as he became an adviser to Mahmud, fully backed and facilitated the application of indirect rule in the form of Kurdish auto-

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<sup>29</sup>\* E.W.C. Noel, Note on the Kurdish Situation, July 1919, FO371/4192, PRO, p.19.

<sup>30</sup>\* Political, Baghdad, to Political, Sulaimaniya, 26 November 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.



onomy under close British supervision. This formula, while satisfying Kurdish aspirations, would also consolidate British influence. Accordingly, Noel embarked on expanding the control of the Mahmud Government in Southern Kurdistan, and started with such remote Kurdish areas as Rowanduz and its surroundings.<sup>31</sup> Noel justified his actions by the argument that the Kurds would achieve their independence anyway. Thus, Britain and the Powers would face Kurdish independence as "*a fait accompli*" which would be "*very difficult to reverse*".<sup>32</sup> Noel probably exaggerated the intensity of Kurdish nationalist feelings, so as to persuade London to commit itself quickly to the Kurdish question. Prompt British action would prevent other Powers from exploiting Kurdish aspirations for their own ends, while Britain could guide the formation of a separate Kurdistan according to its interests.

Noel, while endeavouring to gather official support for his ideas, played some part in stimulating Kurdish nationalist feelings and encouraging Kurdish leaders to take political initiatives. He hoped to draw British attention to the Kurdish problem. For instance, he encouraged the Southern Kurds, led by Mahmud, to sign a declaration, the provisions of which he helped to formulate. The declaration requested the British Government to act as an "*intermediary*" on behalf of the Kurds in order to obtain a seat for a Kurdish representative at the forthcoming peace conference.<sup>33</sup> Noel thought of Cherif Pasha as a suitable Kurdish candidate to represent the Kurds at the peace conference. He described him as "*very well spoken of in Southern Kurdistan*".<sup>34</sup> Mahmud accepted Cherif Pasha as the Kurdish representative at the peace conference. To this end, he prepared, in Noel's presence, a petition signed by Kurdish notables authorising him to speak to the Allies on behalf of the Southern Kurds.<sup>35</sup> This Kurdistan-wide co-ordination, which Noel helped to initiate, came to an abrupt end, when Wilson carried out his reversal of Kurdish policy by terminating the experiment of Kurdish autonomy. London itself was suspicious of Kurdish intellectuals, especially those who lived in exile. Instead, it preferred to deal with local Kurdish leaders, probably because they had limited political ambitions, and could closely monitor their movements on the ground. Moreover, on the idea of giving a seat to a Kurdish representative, Toynbee commented, that it would "*create a sharp precedent for Armenians, Zionists and other nationalities*".<sup>36</sup>

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31\* Political, Baghdad, to S/S for India, 17 November 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

32\* Political, Baghdad, to S/S for India, 28 November 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

33\* Political, Baghdad, 7 December 1918, FO371/3386, PRO.

34\* Political, Baghdad, 12 November 4 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

35\* Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol.I, pp.65-66.

36\* Toynbee, Foreign Office Minute No.204299, 14 December 1918, FO371/3386, PRO.

As Noel viewed Kurdistan's future as an indivisible question, he paid special attention to the deteriorating situation in Eastern Kurdistan, considering it as symptomatic of a general Kurdish problem. He hoped to initiate, as Wilson suspected, another movement in Eastern Kurdistan similar to that of Southern Kurdistan. The prospect of a "*radical solution*" for the Kurdish question, to which Noel made emphatic reference, was intended to illustrate how London's long-held principle of preserving Persian territorial integrity had become outdated. Political developments in Eastern Kurdistan at the end of the First World War illustrated that Kurdish notables were influenced by the Allied wartime propaganda in regard to liberating the oppressed nationalities. The Mukri Kurds of Saujbulaq placed before the British Consul at Kermanshah the idea of an "*independent Kurdistan under British auspices*".<sup>37</sup> In May 1918, Said Taha, who started to politically mobilise the Kurds living on both sides of the Ottoman-Qajar frontier, visited Wilson in Baghdad, where he pressed for British sponsorship of a united Kurdistan, including its Eastern part.<sup>38</sup>

The subsequent establishment of the Mahmud Government in Southern Kurdistan immediately after the end of the war created a strong impression among the Eastern Kurds that Britain sponsored Kurdish nationalist aspirations. Indeed, a number of Southern Kurds left Sulaimaniya for Eastern Kurdistan to propagate the idea of a united Kurdistan.<sup>39</sup> Delegates from Mariwan, Saqiz and Banah arrived at Sulaimaniya, where Noel waged an "*active campaign for an independent Kurdistan*",<sup>40</sup> to express their wish to bring Eastern Kurdistan under both Kurdish rule and British protection. Against this background, Noel advised that:

*it should be possible to get all [Eastern] Kurdish tribes to throw in their lot with us. From religious, racial and geographical standpoints, this would offer a radical solution of general problem in this area, and it would be much better to seize [the] bull by the horns now, when everything is in a state of flux, than to leave it simmering for future settlement.*<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, Noel asserted that any British attempt to bolster up the authority of the Persian Government would have harmful effects on British relations with Southern Kurdistan.<sup>42</sup>

Noel took an unprecedented initiative by sending his assistant, Sher Jang, to Urmia, on a mission to Said Taha,<sup>43</sup> hoping to initiate political arrangements similar to those he had made in Southern Kurdistan. In other words, Noel sought an active British role in Eastern Kur-

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37\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit., p.7.

38\* E.W.C. Noel, Note on the Kurdish Situation, July 1919, FO371/4192, PRO, p.18.

39\* *Ibid.*

40\* Political, Baghdad, to Political, Mosul, 20 November 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

41\* Political, Baghdad, 12 December 1918, FO371/3386, PRO.

42\* E.W.C. Noel, Note on the Kurdish Situation, July 1919, FO371/4192, PRO, p.18.

43\* Noel, Rowanduz, to Political, Baghdad, 21 February 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

distan and along the Ottoman-Qajar frontiers, outside British-controlled Southern Kurdistan. In his report on Urmia, Sher Jang spoke of the existence of “*terrible famine and disorder*” and stated that any British or American intervention would be welcomed as the only solution for re-establishing order and peace. He revealed that pro-British feelings were generally strong.<sup>44</sup> Other British reports confirmed that the Kurdish rebellion in Urmia threatened to turn into “*a general rising*”, embracing the rest of Eastern Kurdistan.<sup>45</sup> Simko, the leader of the Kurdish revolt, sought to re-establish close relations with the British authorities in Baghdad.<sup>46</sup> In early July, Simko and Said Taha expressed their desire to co-operate with the British regarding the protection and the repatriation of the Christians in north west Persia in return for British political support.<sup>47</sup> Largely because of the opposition of Wilson and British officials in Persia to any fostering of Eastern Kurds’ aspirations, their attempts to reach an understanding with Britain bore no fruit. Fearing anti-British reactions by the Persian authorities, neither London nor British officials in Persia were willing to even contemplate the establishment of direct contacts with Simko.

Maj. M.J. Ross, a Political Officer, expressed similar views to those of Noel on the situation in Eastern Kurdistan. Ross investigated on the spot the existing instability in Urmia and its surroundings. He concluded that the frontier, which separated Eastern from Northern Kurdistan, was of an “*arbitrary*” nature and it did not reflect the existing economic, ethnic and geographical realities. Like Noel, he supported the idea of self-determination, not only because Britain should morally respect this principle, but because

*any attempt to coerce the Kurd to remain under the Persian Government, from which he is trying to free himself, will shake the core of our influence throughout those parts of Kurdistan, where we are not prepared to support our authority with troops.*<sup>48</sup>

Unlike all other British officials in Persia and Mesopotamia, Ross argued that Britain should refrain from intervening against the efforts of the Eastern Kurds to join a united Kurdish state, a position which he did not consider as a breach of British pledges to Persia’s territorial unity. The following comment by Toynbee sheds light on the Persian dimension in Britain’s Kurdish policy:

*This is a very serious problem. The Persian Kurds are inaccessible and beyond the control either of [British officials at] Tehran or Baghdad. We may prevent them from joining formally*

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44\* General Headquarter, Mes.Ex. Force, to Political, Baghdad, 16 April 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

45\* Assistant Political Officer, Sennah, to Political, Baghdad, 16 April 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

46\* Political, Baghdad, to Prodrum, Tehran, 25 May 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

47\* Political, Baghdad, Addressed to Constantinople, 3 July 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

48\* Maj. M.J. Ross, Note on Kurdish Claims to the Urmia District of Persia 8/9 July 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

*the Ottoman-Kurdish confederation, but we cannot prevent them from seizing this occasion [i.e. formation of Kurdish autonomy] to throw off their allegiance to Persia. If they carry out their present intentions, we shall be placed in a very awkward position in regard to Persian integrity. We have virtually undertaken to respect it; yet action by us on the Turkish side of the frontier will have led to the breaking away from Persia of a considerable province.<sup>49</sup>*

Ross's above argument, apart from being opposed by the British officials in Mesopotamia and Persia, was treated cautiously in London, where the prevailing orthodox approach was based on preserving Persian territorial integrity from both internal and external threats.

### ***ii- Noel's New Solution For The Kurdish Question Within The Framework Of The Turkish Peace Settlement***

Several developments affected Britain's positive image among the Kurds. The delays of the peace conference, of which the Kurds had high hopes, left a negative impact on Kurdish political inclinations.<sup>50</sup> British policy on the ground particularly raised Kurdish fears. Kurdish nationalists seemed to be confused by Britain's real intentions in Kurdistan. On the one hand, British officials told Kurdish nationalist circles that Britain would not overlook Kurdish interests at the peace conference and should await its results. On the other hand, the implemented British policy on the ground enormously undermined the Kurdish nationalist movement by replacing Kurdish autonomy with direct British control in Southern Kurdistan and adopting heavy-handed measures against those local Kurds who wanted autonomy. Signs of change in local Kurdish attitudes towards Britain were expressed in British officials' telegrams. In Eastern Kurdistan, the link between Kurdish nationalists and the anti-Christian movement in north-west Persia became closer than ever before.<sup>51</sup> Percy Cox attributed the change in Kurdish attitudes from pro-British to anti-British to the Eastern Kurds' disappointment with the reversal of British policy in Southern Kurdistan, and the subsequent Mahmud revolt.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the British Consul at Urmia noted that the Mahmud revolt, and its subsequent suppression by the British, began to orientate the Eastern Kurds towards the Turks for support, rather than the British.<sup>53</sup> Noel himself repeatedly drew attention to the occurrence of developments, which were independent of -and not inspired by British officials. He had earlier warned that the

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49\* Foreign Office Minute No.206918, 21 December 1918, FO371/3386, PRO.

50\* Political Department, India Office, Mesopotamia: British Relations with Kurdistan, 27 August 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

51\* Political, Baghdad, 6 January 1919, FO371/4147, PRO.

52\* Cox, Tehran, 26 August 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

53\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, to S/S for India, 25 August 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

establishment of direct British control in Southern Kurdistan could alienate the Northern Kurds, who viewed it "as a prelude to British penetration at their expense".<sup>54</sup> He also attributed the emergence of anti-Christian and anti-British movements to the British policy of favouring Christians on the ground.<sup>55</sup>

The speedy deterioration of the political situation in the Kurdish areas outside British control in spring and summer of 1919 was largely due to growing Kurdish fears of the imposing of Armenian rule in Northern Kurdistan. The Turkish propaganda machine played some part in agitating the Kurds against the Europeans, who were thought to be conspiring against the Muslims. It was against this background that Noel was charged with an official mission to parts of Northern Kurdistan to prepare a final report on "*the political situation as between Kurds and Turks*" and regarding "*the economic conditions*".<sup>56</sup> But he was not charged with the task of establishing "*a North Kurdish state*", similar to the one he had set up in British-controlled Southern Kurdistan, as Olson suggests.<sup>57</sup> It was hoped that in light of Noel's conclusions, important official circles, notably the Foreign Office and the India Office, would define their position on Kurdistan's political future. The combined efforts of the Turkish Government, which was informed about Noel's mission,<sup>58</sup> and Turkish nationalists led by Kemal, forced Noel to end his mission prematurely. The Noel mission was also affected by negative attitudes from British officials in Turkey, who refused to provide it with necessary political backing. Adm. John De Robeck, Gough-Calthorpe's successor as the High Commissioner, feared that the Noel mission, which included two Kurds who represented Kurdish nationalist circles in Constantinople, might give the Ottoman Government and the Kemalists "*serious reasons to suspect that HMG were encouraging Kurds to act against the Turks*".<sup>59</sup> A British Political Officer in the Northern Area reported that Noel was "*conducting a dangerous form of pro-Kurdish and anti-Turkish propaganda*".<sup>60</sup>

In a memorandum, Noel defended himself against accusations that his activities stimu-

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54\* Political, Baghdad, to Egyptian Force, Cairo, 28 April 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

55\* Noel, Aleppo, to Political, Baghdad, 2 August 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

56\* Political, Baghdad, to Egypt Force, 11 March 1919, AIR20/714, PRO. Noel made a short preliminary tour and then started on a more extended tour in such areas as Diyarbekir and Nisibin. He was accompanied, with Foreign Office's approval, by two Kurdish representatives to facilitate his task. IDCM, Secretary's Note, 6 September 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

57\* Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, p.53.

58\* De Robeck to Curzon, confidential, 20 December 1919, Enclosure No. 1, Mr. Ryan, Memorandum, FO371/4193, PRO.

59\* High Commissioner, Constantinople, to General, Baghdad, 18 September 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

60\* General Headquarter, Egypt, 27 September 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

lated the anti-British propaganda of Turkish nationalists. He argued that the anti-British attitudes of the Turks already existed when he started his mission and attributed them to several reasons. Firstly, the establishment of Kurdish autonomy immediately after the war must have alarmed the Turks. Secondly, the British had recognised the Kurdish language and encouraged the tribal system in the British-controlled Kurdistan. Finally, there were frequent statements made by the British Government to the Kurds, which emphasised that Britain would not lose sight of Kurdish interests at the peace conference. Noel mentioned, as concrete evidence, the proclamation published by the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, which referred to the "*Armenian and Kurdish interests as the two main factors in the country known as Kurdistan and Armenia*".<sup>61</sup> Evidence shows that the Turks were greatly alarmed by the Noel mission to Northern Kurdistan. Mustafa Kemal, the leader of the Turkish insurgents, considered the sending and subsequent failure of the mission as "*a very important incident*" in the Turkish national struggle, when he defeated all British intrigues "*under the cover of the independence of the Kurds*".<sup>62</sup>

For fear of invoking undesirable Turkish animosity, the Foreign Office ordered Noel to end his tour. However, Noel was able to put forward his conclusions regarding the political situation in Kurdistan. They emphasised the existence of "*a very lively sense of Kurdish nationality, antipathy to Turks, [and] great hatred of Government*" in every area the mission visited. Noel dismissed the existence of any "*anti-British or pan-Islamic movement*" among the Kurds east of Diyarbakir. Being a British representative, Noel was met with "*most cordial friendliness*".<sup>63</sup> Having failed to win London's support for the establishment of a separate Kurdish confederacy, Noel seized the opportunity, which his mission gave him, to directly present the Foreign Office his new scheme for Kurdistan's future within the framework of the Turkish peace settlement. His scheme brought to their attention the hidden interconnection between the affairs of Armenia and Kurdistan. Accordingly, it endeavoured to reconcile Kurdish and Armenian nationalist aspirations (see map twelve):

*The collection of six Eastern Wilayets under one mandatory power and their sub-division into provinces or zones, of which the southern would be exclusively Kurdish, the northern exclusively Armenian and the central zone mixed. Each zone would have its own local administration and self-government, which would be subject to some independent centre, either outside the six Wilayets or in the central zone.*<sup>64</sup>

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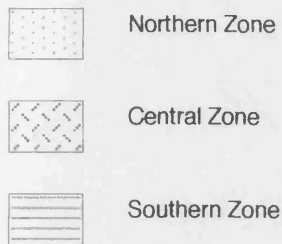
61\* Maj. Noel, Memorandum, December 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

62\* Mustafa Kemal, *A Speech Delivered by G. Mustafa Kemal, President of the Turkish Republic, October 1927* (Leipzig: K.F. Koehler Publisher, 1929), pp.101-120 & 220.

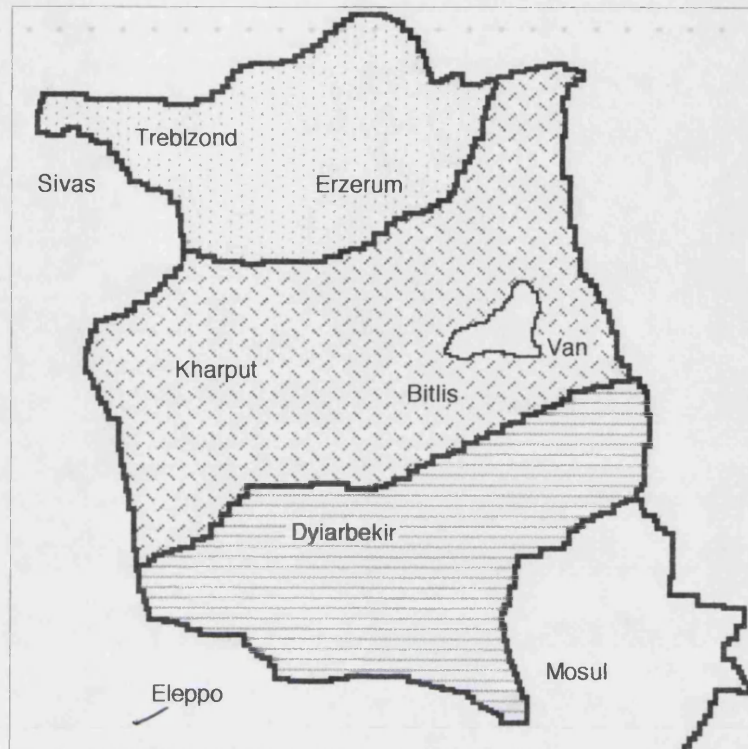
63\* Political, Baghdad, 26 September 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

64\* IDCM, Secretary's Note, 6 September 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

Map Twelve: Noel's Scheme  
For The Non-Turkish Wilayets



Source: FO371/4192 &  
FO371/7149



Noel's scheme provided a uniform system of administration for the three zones, which would be liable for modification in accordance with the national characteristics of each nation. Kurdish and Armenian would be the official language of government in the southern and northern zones respectively and would be taught in schools. Both Kurds and Armenians would be recruited for the gendarmerie and civil service in the central zone. Noel hoped that, after applying this scheme for twenty to thirty years, it would be possible to take a decision on "*the future political status of the various nationalities*". He did, however, emphasise the need for "*a single mandatory, backed by an army of occupation*".<sup>65</sup> In other words, Noel's scheme required Britain to be directly and effectively involved in its implementation.

In the meantime, Noel advised London to take into consideration three essential conditions, when framing its final position on the Kurdish question. Firstly, Kurdistan should be free from Turkish rule. Secondly, Kurdistan should undergo no partition and finally, the southern frontiers of Kurdistan "*should follow, as nearly as possible, the ethnological line between Kurds and Arabs*".<sup>66</sup> Noel's last point was the exact antithesis of Wilson's, who wanted the strategic and economic interests of his administration in Mesopotamia to be the only criterion

<sup>65</sup>\* E.W.C. Noel, Note on the Kurdish Situation, July 1919, FO371/4192, PRO, p.18.

<sup>66</sup>\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 22 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

for defining what territory belonged to Kurdistan and what territory belonged to Mesopotamia. To overcome London's fears about unwanted military and financial commitments and the occurrence of anti-British political developments in Kurdistan, Noel sought to show that the Kurds were strongly pro-British and that, even without British assistance and encouragement, they could keep Turkish rule out of Kurdistan. He, however, warned that:

*the partitioning of the country by [the] attachment of the richest part of it, viz., Southern Kurdistan to Mesopotamia, would afford an opportunity for anti-British nationalist agitation, which would result in [the] revival of Turkish influence and consequent insecurity on our borders, possibly reacting on the Persian road.*<sup>67</sup>

To contain Kemalist propaganda and thwart their attempts to win over the Kurds, Noel suggested the adoption of urgent steps, consisting of installing one of the Bedirkhans as governor of Diarbekir, General Hamdi Pasha as General Officer Commanding the Tenth Corps and another Kurdish nationalist as *Mutessarif* (head of a division) of Mardin.<sup>68</sup> Although failing to directly involve Britain in the affairs of Northern Kurdistan, Noel was able to highlight the important point that the Kurds formed a nationality *per se* -as much as the Armenians did- and that in pursuing its own interests, Britain could not totally ignore the Kurds as a political factor in any Turkish peace settlement. Indeed, he demonstrated that the establishment of a united Armenian state would be very difficult to achieve, unless Britain satisfied Kurdish nationalist aspirations. In retrospective, Noel's views and efforts played some part in internationalising the Kurdish question, as it was embodied in the terms of the 1920 Sèvres Treaty.

## **The Reactions Of British Authorities In The Middle East To The Views Of Wilson And Noel On The Future Of Kurdistan**

### ***i-The British High Commission In Cairo And Kurdish Affairs***

As a consequence of its growing realisation that the Kurdish question could no longer be ignored, London needed to define British interests in Kurdistan and devise a means of securing them within the general framework of the Turkish peace settlement. For these reasons, the contradictory views of Wilson and Noel on Kurdistan's future became the focal point of a serious debate among British officials in the Middle East, notably the British High Commissions in Cairo and Constantinople. British civilian and military authorities in Cairo became involved in the debate on the Kurdish question due to the occupation of some areas in Western Kurdistan by the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. These Kurdish areas were far smaller than

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<sup>67</sup>\* Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>\* Political, Baghdad, 29 September 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.



those which came under the control of the British Indian Army in Mesopotamia. Two centres emerged to conduct British military and administrative affairs in occupied Kurdistan: one in Baghdad and the other in Cairo. As a consequence, competition between the two centres to influence British policy towards the political future of Kurdistan surfaced. Even when Wilson was finally charged with the task of running Kurdish affairs on the ground in consultation with British officials at Constantinople, British officials in Cairo continued to oppose Wilson's views on Kurdish affairs. It must be remembered that the gap between Cairo and Baghdad already existed before the issue of Kurdistan's future was under consideration. The High Commission in Cairo represented the so-called *Native School*, which advocated the policy of indirect British control through establishing a native administration under close British supervision. British authorities in Baghdad represented the so-called *Imperial School*,<sup>69</sup> which firmly believed in direct British control as the ideal way to consolidate British position in Mesopotamia. Under these conditions, it was natural that the differences between Cairo and Baghdad extended to the issue of Kurdistan's future.

The withdrawal of the Egyptian Expeditionary Forces from western Kurdish areas - a step aimed to bring these areas under French control- did not stop British officials in Cairo from their attempts to have some say insofar as Kurdistan's future was concerned. Thus, the differences between Cairo and Baghdad over Kurdish affairs continued as before. Edmund Allenby, the British High Commissioner for Egypt, and his subordinates objected to Wilson's plans for the partition of Kurdistan between British Mesopotamia and Turkey. Instead, they supported Noel's scheme for ethnically defining clear-cut frontiers for a future Kurdistan. Noel's views on Kurdish affairs were compatible with those of the High Commission in Cairo, which stated that the Kurds should have self-determination and Kurdistan should undergo no partition. In his telegram to the War Office, Allenby warned that Wilson's idea of ignoring the ethnic boundaries between Kurdistan and Mesopotamia might precipitate some kind of trouble:

*The inclusion of Southern Kurdistan... in Mesopotamia would... mean friction with Kurds and might create a frontier country, which would necessitate permanent military expense. I, therefore, recommend that they be included in a Kurdish-Armenian provisional state as envisaged by Noel. I consider... that recognition of Kurdish nationality should be urged and that Kurds should be freed from fear of Armenian domination. They might be driven by this fear into the arms of GUP [i.e. Turkish nationalists], whereas they might prove strong bulwark against Jihad, if they are satisfied. If they combine with Armenians, they will strengthen Armenian position.<sup>70</sup>*

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69\* These terms were used by the Interdepartmental Conference of Middle Eastern Affairs (IDCM). IDCM, minute 37, 13 April 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

70\* Commander-in-Chief, Egypt, to War Office, 12 September 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

Col. Arthur French, at the General Headquarter of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, held a similar view, namely that British Kurdish policy at the peace conference should focus on the recognition of Kurdish nationality in line with the idea of self-determination, and that Turkish rule should not be re-established in the Kurdish and Armenian *Wilayets*. French thus indirectly opposed Wilson's scheme for the partitioning of Ottoman Kurdistan and Southern Kurdistan's inclusion into Mesopotamia. He concluded that:

*the more homogeneous the population of the future Mesopotamia, the simpler and more satisfactory will be the task of mandatory. Although the inclusion of these Kurdish districts [i.e. Southern Kurdistan] might add to the revenue, they would prove a source of weakness in every other way.*<sup>71</sup>

In Persia, British officials held contradictory views to those of Cairo insofar as Eastern Kurdistan was concerned. They were opposed to any step that would undermine Persian territorial unity. Their reports on Eastern Kurdistan's affairs contained explicit opposition to the aims of Kurdish nationalists and tangible suspicion of the ongoing Kurdish revolt, especially its leader, Simko, whom they accused of murdering Mar Sham'un, the leader of the Assyrians in the Urmia region. Simko's attempts to establish direct contacts with the British authorities in Mesopotamia met with opposition by these officials, who not only advised against negotiations with him, but also called for British support for the Persian military efforts to establish peace and order by suppressing his revolt. The British consul in Tabriz, for instance, advised Cox not to respond to Simko's attempts to establish contacts with Britain, warning that he was an opportunist, and that any British arrangement with the murderer of the religious leader of the Assyrians, Mar Sham'un would be morally "wrong".<sup>72</sup> In April 1919, when the Persian governor of Senna asked for British aeroplanes to defend the town against the attacks of the Kurdish rebels,<sup>73</sup> the British were not in a position to provide such help, as their aeroplanes were already occupied in north-west Persia.<sup>74</sup> However, by February 1920, Britain and Persia were simultaneously conducting co-ordinated air and ground operations against the Kurdish revolt, with a view to forestalling "a recrudescence of grave disorder" in Eastern Kurdistan.<sup>75</sup> British and Persian co-operation was extended to include the suppression of those Kurds

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71\* Col. French, Cairo, Directory of Military Intelligence, 2 October 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

72\* Tabriz to Tehran, April 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

73\* Assistant Political Officer, Sennah, to Political, Baghdad, 16 April 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

74\* General Headquarter, Mes.Ex.Force, to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 20 April 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

75\* Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, February 1920, FO371/5070, PRO.

who continued their resistance to British rule in Southern Kurdistan.<sup>76</sup> The importance of the views of these officials serving in Persia lay in their converging with, and reinforcement of, the long-held imperial belief that British strategic interests could be best served by preserving the territorial unity of a British orientated Persia. Therefore, it was necessary that the terms of the Turkish peace treaty on the Kurdish question should avoid any clause that might indirectly affect Eastern Kurdistan's existing relations with Persia.

## ***ii- The British High Commission In Constantinople***

The views of the British High Commission in Constantinople varied from one official to another and also from one period to another. However, there was a general realisation among British officials that Britain could not afford to ignore the Kurdish question when negotiating the Turkish peace treaty. Adm. Somerset Gough-Calthorpe, the British High Commissioner until September 1919, agreed with Noel that Kurdish national aspirations did not contradict the British strategic interests of securing proper frontiers in Mesopotamia.<sup>77</sup> He, like Noel, preferred a swift British response to Northern Kurdistan's political developments. Gough-Calthorpe informed the Foreign Office about the sincerity of the Kurdish nationalists' desire for the suzerainty of the British, emphasising that this:

*matter is one which has a very large political importance...[and] must be faced... It is most essential that the circumstances should be turned to the best advantage possible, and I cannot imagine any possible solution by which Mesopotamia will not be confided to a British mandate, while it is essential for the general prosperity and peace of Mesopotamia to have good relations with the Kurds.*<sup>78</sup>

Gough-Calthorpe, while considering the re-establishment of Turkish suzerainty over Kurdistan as an "impracticable" solution, advised against British support for Armenian demands at the expense of the Kurds.<sup>79</sup> Although wanting Mesopotamia to have strategically important mountains in Kurdistan, he made it clear that Kurdish national aspirations should not be disregarded if Britain sought to consolidate both its strategic position and permanent political stability along its Mesopotamian frontier. Thus, the Kurds could be valued in terms of being the factor that would thwart any future Turkish intrigues against Mesopotamia.<sup>80</sup> Rear-Adm. Richard

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<sup>76</sup>\* For example, two Kurdish nationalists were arrested by the Persian authorities and handed over to British authorities in Baghdad. Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 11 April 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

<sup>77</sup>\* Young, Foreign Office Minute No.101503, 14 July 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

<sup>78</sup>\* High Commissioner, Constantinople, to Foreign Office, Repeated to Political, Baghdad, 10 July 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

<sup>79</sup>\* IDCM, 6 September 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

<sup>80</sup>\* High Commissioner, Constantinople, to Political, Baghdad, 3 & 13 April 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

Webb, Gough-Calthorpe's Assistant, went so far as to express unreserved endorsement of Noel's scheme for the future of Kurdistan and Armenia, while rejecting Wilson's stance. The observation of Capt. C.C. Woolley, a British officer on the ground, also confirmed Noel's conclusions that Kurdish nationalism, which expressed itself in the form of a desire for separation from Turkish rule and for a British mandate, could not be easily ignored as a political factor.<sup>81</sup>

Adm. John De Robeck and his subordinates at the High Commission held different views from the British High Commission in Cairo. They all agreed that Britain should not identify itself with Kurdish national aspirations. While not wanting to lose Kurdish nationalist leaders as a political card in case of emergency, they hoped to prevent the alienation of the Turkish Government in Constantinople and further deterioration in British relations with the Kemal-ist forces. De Robeck, though acknowledging the depth and sincerity of the Kurdish national-ist movement,<sup>82</sup> did not consider the establishment of an independent Kurdistan as having any advantage to Britain. Therefore, he, while wishing to see no British interference, sug- gested that "*it should be left to the Kurds themselves to work out their own salvation and to disentangle themselves from the Turks*".<sup>83</sup> Similarly, Thomas Hohler, a Political Officer who cri- ticised Adm. Webb for preferring Noel's scheme for the future of Kurdistan and Armenia to Wilson's, opposed any British interference in Turkish internal affairs in support of the Kurds and Armenians for humanitarian or other reasons. Britain, according to him, "*must deal with the Kurdish question almost exclusively from the Mesopotamian frontier*" point of view.<sup>84</sup> Hoh- ler hoped that his approach would serve to put an end to the anti-British stance of the Kemal- ists, and enable Britain to have the Kurdish mountains as "*a sound defensible frontier*" for Mesopotamia.<sup>85</sup> Hohler's views were appreciated by Lord Curzon,<sup>86</sup> who did not want British policy to drive the Kemalists towards the Bolshevik side. Andrew Ryan, another Political Offi- cer, offered a compromise scheme based on the establishment of a large Turkey in which Northern Kurdistan would enjoy autonomous status. The implementation of his scheme depended on bringing moderate Turks and Kurds together.<sup>87</sup>

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81\* Capt. Woolley, Note on Kurdish National Movement -in- Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 29 July 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

82\* De Robeck to Curzon, Confidential, 9 December 1919, FO371/93, PRO.

83\* High Commissioner, Constantinople, 12 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

84\* Hohler, Constantinople, to Clerk Kerr, 27 August 1919, DBFP, p.742.

85\* An Account of a Conversation between Hohler and Brigadier-General McCoy, 14 October 1919, DBFP, pp.821-23: .

86\* Ibid, Footnote 3, p.823.

87\* De Robeck to Curzon, Confidential, 2 March 1920, FO371/5067, PRO.

## Conclusion

The Bolshevik Revolution and the entry of the United States into the First World War against Germany made it necessary to considerably modify the Sykes-Picot agreement, if it were to serve as the basis for the post-war territorial and political re-arrangements of Ottoman Asia. Consequently, London began to search for a new territorial and political settlement which would have to take into consideration new developments, such as the threat of Bolshevism and the rise of various nationalist movements in Turkey and Persia. Delay and indecision characterised the way Britain identified its objectives in Kurdistan, and was largely due to its unpreparedness to deal with new issues, such as that of the Kurds. Furthermore, Kurdish affairs were mysterious to the British Government, as there were very little contacts with the Kurds before and during the First World War. When the war ended, Britain found itself unexpectedly in control of large Kurdish areas, whose importance for Mesopotamia's security were steadily increasing. The contradictory views of Wilson and Noel on whether the Kurdish factor was politically important or not, initially caused a noticeable hesitation inside the Foreign Office and India Office. A Foreign Office minute, which was written a few weeks before the Allied negotiation of the Turkish peace settlement, illustrates the continuing confusion about Kurdish affairs:

*I am not sure about Major Noel, for, after he had come and talked to us at length about Kurdistan, his views and proposals were contradicted in every respect by Colonel Wilson (Baghdad), who said he was wrong all round.<sup>88</sup>*

Neither Noel nor Wilson were able to persuade London to adopt their schemes for a defined policy towards Kurdistan ahead of the Paris peace conference's discussion of the Turkish settlement. Having said that, the contradictory views of Wilson and Noel, and the various comments and reactions they provoked among British officials in London and the Middle East, helped London to formulate a general line, according to which the British delegation in Paris was to negotiate Kurdistan's future within the Turkish peace treaty. The general line itself reflected an amalgamation of the different views advocated by British officials in the Middle East, as the following points illustrate. Firstly, to protect its interests, Britain would not resort to force beyond its existing frontiers in Southern Kurdistan and Mesopotamia. These frontiers would be "*as short as possible*". This meant that, apart from Southern Kurdistan, Britain would not commit itself militarily to implementing the terms of the Turkish peace treaty

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<sup>88</sup>\* Foreign Office Minute, Bolshevik Propaganda in the East, 7 January 1920, Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, Part One, From the Mid Nineteenth Century to the First World War, DBFP, p.20.

regarding Northern Kurdistan and Armenia. Thus Northern Kurdistan, which was outside British political control, would be left to its own devices. Secondly, apart from Southern Kurdistan -which would be under the Mesopotamian mandate- Britain would not accept a Kurdistan-wide mandate for itself or for its Allies. This practically meant that Britain decided both to partition Ottoman Kurdistan as a means of protecting its strategic and economic interests, and to confine the relevancy of the Kurdish question to Northern Kurdistan. Thirdly, the restoration of Turkish sovereignty over Kurdistan would not be allowed.<sup>89</sup>

Points One and Two met the wishes of British civilian and military authorities in Baghdad, in that Southern Kurdistan should be kept under British control and mandate on strategic and economic grounds. The principle of non-interference in Turkish internal affairs through Northern Kurdistan, as the British High Commission in Constantinople advocated, was taken into account, especially when it converged with the views of Lord Curzon and Winston Churchill, the Secretary of State for War. The limited recognition of the Kurdish people as a nationality *per se*, and of limited Kurdish political aspirations, as implied in Point Three, reflected, to some degree, the views of Noel and the British authorities in Cairo. The most important principle emphasised by the general line was that of subordinating the solution of the Kurdish question to the requirements of British interests in Mesopotamia, Turkey and Persia. The foregoing analysis showed that British officials on the ground influenced not only the direction of political developments in the Kurdish areas, but also the course of debate on Kurdistan's future among British decision-makers. The role of British officials on the ground, insofar as they affected Kurdish affairs, became even more evident and decisive in the period 1921-1923, when Percy Cox, the new High Commissioner for Mesopotamia, thwarted all attempts to establish a separate Southern Kurdistan in favour of incorporating it into the Iraqi state.

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<sup>89</sup>\* S/S to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 22 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

## Chapter Four

### Regional Dimensions Of Britain's Kurdish Policy, 1918-1920

The secret agreements for the partition of Ottoman Asia, which Britain and the Allies concluded during the First World War, completely ignored the interests of the non-Turkish nationalities such as the Kurds and the Armenians. However, the sensational publication of the terms of these secret agreements by the Bolsheviks in 1917, and President Wilson's announcement of his Fourteen Points, which made a direct reference to the principle of self-determination for the non-Turkish nationalities, compelled Britain to re-consider its position on the future of the non-Turkish *Wilayets*. As Britain discovered after the war, deciding the political future of the new nationalities was a complicated issue. One of the main reasons for this was that Armenian, Arab and Kurdish nationalists laid conflicting claims to the same *Wilayets* as part of their future national states. For instance, Kurdish and Arab nationalists laid the same claims to the Mosul *Wilayet*, whereas Kurdish and Armenian nationalists laid equal claims to the Van, Bitlis and Diyarbekir *Wilayets*. These conflicting claims particularly came to light when the Allies began to discuss the future of Kurdistan, Armenia and Mesopotamia. Moreover, Britain needed to settle the question of the new nationalities in such a way that it could consolidate its strategic and economic interests in the (new) Middle East. This chapter examines how the search for a solution to the Armenian question, and the issue of fulfilling its wartime promises to the Sharifian Arabs, made Britain realise the extent to which the political and territorial settlement of the future of the non-Turkish territories in Kurdistan, Armenia and Mesopotamia were interconnected. This chapter assesses the conflicting political and territorial aspirations of the Kurds, Armenians and Arabs insofar as they affected British policy on the Kurdish question.

### **Kurdish Nationalists, Britain And The Turkish Peace Settlement, 1919-1920**

When the First World War ended there was no Kurdistan-wide nationalist organisation that could represent all the Kurds of Turkey and Persia. The pre-war political contacts, which were initiated by some Kurdish nationalists, such as Sheikh Salam of Barzan, the Bedirkhans, Sheikh Abdul Qadir (the son of Ubeidullah), Cherif Pasha and Sheikh Mahmud,<sup>1</sup> were interrupted by the outbreak of the war. The absence of a united Kurdish front after the war weakened the political efforts of Kurdish nationalists to effectively present the Kurdish cause at

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<sup>1</sup>\* Ahmad, *Kurdistan During The First World War*, pp.63 & 67.

the forthcoming peace conference. Having said that, the majority of Kurdish nationalist leaders were united on the issue of securing Britain's support for their political cause. Kurdish expectations of a positive British role in determining Kurdistan's post-war future reflected two factors. Firstly, apart from having the strongest military presence in the Middle East close to Kurdistan, Britain, as a great power, had strategic, political and economic interests in the political settlement of the non-Turkish territories. Accordingly, Kurdish nationalists sought to persuade Britain that their nationalist aspirations did not contradict its interests. In his early contacts with British officials, Cherif Pasha sought to demonstrate that, if an autonomous Kurdistan was established under British protection, it would perform "*the same function towards Mesopotamia as the North-West Frontier Province performed towards India*".<sup>2</sup> Qadir told the British that an independent Kurdistan, under their protection, could be a formidable buffer against both the Kemalists and the Bolsheviks.<sup>3</sup> In Cairo, other exiled Kurdish nationalists led by Surreya Bedirkhan, presented British authorities in Egypt with similar views. Secondly, British political propaganda during and after the war regarding the right to self-determination and the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish entity under British supervision in Southern Kurdistan roused high expectations among Kurdish political elites, and were interpreted as evidence of Britain's willingness to support the political aspirations of the subjected nationalities, including the Kurds.

These factors explain why Kurdish nationalists focused their political efforts in the period 1919-1920 on securing British support for the immediate establishment of an independent Kurdish state under its protection. Their objective was to go to the peace conference with a *fait accompli*, rather than awaiting its final decision. The origin of such thinking among Kurdish nationalists went back to the war period when Cherif Pasha held talks with Percy Cox, the temporary British Minister in Tehran. The former urged the British to take the initiative in turning Southern Kurdistan into a working autonomous administration under their protection as well as announcing their intended policy towards the Kurdish question.<sup>4</sup> Soon Cherif Pasha broadened his proposal to include the whole of Ottoman Kurdistan.<sup>5</sup> Other Kurdish leaders and political organisations, such as the Kurdish Committee in Cairo and Uplifting Kurdistan, held more or less similar views. They, while welcoming any development that indicated

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2\* A.J. Toynbee, Foreign Office Minute No.174037, 22 November 1918, FO 371/3407, PRO.

3\* De Robeck to Curzon, 2 March 1920, Enclosure No.1, A. Ryan, Memorandum, 24 February 1920, FO371/5067, PRO.

4\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit., p.8.

5\* Toynbee, Foreign Office Minute No.174037, 22 November 1918, FO 371/3407, PRO.



British support for the Kurdish cause, persistently urged Britain to adopt a defined policy towards the Kurdish question before the peace conference could take its final decision.<sup>6</sup>

On a number of separate occasions and through various initiatives, Kurdish leaders sought to test out the real attitudes of the British towards the Kurdish question. Asking for British sponsorship of the Kurdish-Armenian agreement in December 1919 was one such initiative (as will be examined later). Qadir, in his conversation with T.B. Hohler, expressed his apprehension that in the absence of a defined British policy, certain Turkish political groupings might try to win over the Kurds through promising an autonomous Kurdistan under Turkish protection. The price that the Kurds were expected to pay was to fight the Kemalists. Qadir, while showing his mistrust of the Turks and their promises, sought, in Hohler's word, to

*form his course absolutely in accord with Allies, but especially with England, for he considered that the fate of Kurdistan was intimately linked with the policy of Great Britain, much more so than with that of any other of the Allies, and he was anxious to do nothing which not have [sic] our entire assent and approval.<sup>7</sup>*

Cherif Pasha informed Britain that he was elected as the "head of the future Kurdish state"<sup>8</sup> and asked for the dispatch of a mixed commission to Kurdistan to confirm his claims.<sup>9</sup> During the peace conference, he asked for British approval of his initiative in submitting a memorandum on the Kurdish question, in which he asked for a British mandate for Kurdistan (see map thirteen).<sup>10</sup>

On all of these occasions, the British continually avoided any reaction that might lead to deep involvement in Kurdish affairs. It was not until late 1919 that Britain began to formulate several principles guiding its approach to the Kurdish question, such as rejecting any British or foreign mandate for Kurdistan and separating Eastern Kurdistan from Persia. On more direct issues concerning Kurdistan's future, Britain waited on the course of debate at the peace conference before adopting its final position. It sought a Kurdish policy that took into consideration the new political developments in the region, such as the rise of Kemalism and the aims of its former allies in the Turkish peace settlement. France, Britain's strongest imperial

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6\* Policy, Cairo, to General, 6 August 1919, AIR 20/714 & the letter by the Kurdish Democratic Party to British High Commissioner, 31 August 1919, FO 371/4192 & Letters by the Kurdish Communities at Constantinople and the Association for Uplifting Kurdistan to Lloyd George, March 1920, FO 371/5068, PRO.


7\* De Robeck to Curzon, Confidential, 9 December 1919, Enclosure No.1, T.B. Hohler, Memorandum, 8 December 1919, FO 371/4193, PRO.

8\* IDCM, Secretary's Note, 6 September 1919, FO 371/4193, PRO.

9\* Hubert Young, Foreign Office Minute No.111245, 4 August 1919, FO 371/4192, PRO.

10\* British Delegation, Paris, 12 October 1919, FO 371/93, PRO.

Map Thirteen: Kurdish Nationalists' Definition Of Kurdistan's Frontiers In 1919

 Kurdistan's Frontier

 Ottoman-Persian Frontier

 Access To The Sea



Source: FO371/5968

rival, demanded territorial and economic compensations in Kurdistan for the loss of Mosul, whereas America was particularly interested in the Armenian mandate.

On the issue of establishing close political relations with Kurdish nationalists, British officials in Constantinople and Baghdad expressed strong reservations. They particularly opposed any British encouragement of Kurdish political efforts or a British recognition of a united Kurdistan. Satisfying Kurdish nationalist aspirations, they believed, was of no use to Britain's strategic interests, as Kurdish nationalists were a minor political force. In their reports to the Foreign Office and the India Office, these officials increasingly criticised the Kurdish nationalist movement and its principal exponents, underscoring their disunity, lack of influence and legitimacy, as well as suggesting they were out of touch with the reality in Kurdistan. Some of their reports described Kurdish nationalists as opportunists<sup>11</sup> and the Kurdish nationalist movement as no more than tribal agitations, motivated by Kurdish chiefs' fear of European retaliation for the alleged war-time massacres against Christians. Ryan and Hohler of the British High Commission in Constantinople repeatedly made it clear to the Kurdish nationalists that Britain opposed any attempt to politically mobilise the Kurds, however peaceful

11\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit., p.17.

and lawful the methods. Taking independent political initiatives in Kurdistan, in British eyes, was bound to have dangerous effects on British interests, as the Mahmud affair in Southern Kurdistan had demonstrated earlier. A politically flammable Kurdistan could also draw the attention of hostile Powers to the Kurdish situation, especially Bolshevik Russia. Against this background, the British High Commission in Constantinople explicitly warned Kurdish leaders that political instability in Kurdistan would negatively influence Britain's position on the Kurdish question at the peace conference. Thus, Kurdish leaders faced a dilemma. On the one hand, they felt that Britain questioned their political influence in Kurdistan and the strength of Kurdish nationalist sentiment. On the other, when endeavouring to demonstrate the extent of their influence and the magnitude of the Kurdish nationalist movement, they were warned by British officials of dire consequences "*if they were found preparing a movement against Turks or any thing of that kind*". In other words, Kurdish nationalists should not arouse Turkish suspicions through their political activities in Kurdistan. They should await the results of the peace conference.<sup>12</sup>

While that was the British position, the Turkish authorities, over whom Britain had firm control, began suppressive campaigns against Kurdish nationalists by dissolving their organisations and committees, arresting Kurdish activists and breaking up their political meetings in Constantinople and throughout Kurdistan. The difference in the initial British position on Kurdish and Armenian affairs reflected three important factors: humane, strategic and political. Firstly, the Armenian question had a clear humane dimension, stemming from the Armenian massacres at the hands of the Ottoman authorities before and during the First World War. The massacres caused such public moral reaction in Europe and America that it was not possible to ignore Armenian nationalist aspirations. It was perceived that the creation of an independent state was the only guarantee for the long-term safety of the Armenians. In this respect, the Armenian question was almost identical to the Jewish one. Here, the same moral considerations stood behind Western support for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Secondly, because of the geopolitical position of Armenia between the old Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian question was of more strategic importance to Britain than the Kurdish one. In other words, Britain considered useful the creation of an independent Armenian state as a strategic buffer against Bolshevik Russia. Lastly, there was no Kurdish lobby to back or explain Kurdish political aspirations either in Europe or in America, as in

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<sup>12</sup>\* High Commission, Constantinople, 21 July 1919, FO 371/4192, PRO.

the case of the Jews and the Armenians.

The last factor was an important one, given the unfamiliarity of the British Government with the complexity of the Kurdish question. Indeed, when the British Government asked for information about a suitable nationalist leader to talk to regarding Kurdish aspirations at the peace conference, British officials in Constantinople and Baghdad dismissed the existence of any acceptable Kurdish leader. They emphasised that there was neither a Kurdish question nor a Kurdish nationalist movement, and that the influence of those who claimed to represent the Kurdish cause was minimal among the Kurds. The reality of the Kurdish nationalist movement was remarkably different from what was portrayed by these British officials. Apart from Simko, whose influence was mainly restricted to his own tribal confederation, the influence of such nationalist leaders as Qadir, the Bedirkhans and Mahmud, cut across many Kurdish regions. It was by no means confined to one tribe or confederation of tribes. These leaders, therefore, cannot be considered as tribal chiefs. Moreover, the Kurdish nationalist movement contained senior military and civilian figures as well as students, intellectuals and artisans. The main Kurdish nationalist organisation, the Kurdish Committee, which waged a political propaganda campaign and mobilised Kurdish public opinion for a separate Kurdistan, had branches all over Northern and Western Kurdistan, such as those at Diyarbekir, Sairt, Saur, Mardin, Jezirah and Botan. It attracted to its ranks Kurdish civil servants, artisans and officers from the Ottoman army and the police.<sup>13</sup>

The continuation of what seemed to the Kurds as undefined British policy towards Kurdistan's future, especially after December 1919, was interpreted by Kurdish nationalists as a negative omen. They suspected a large scale re-partition of Kurdistan through secret arrangements. C.C. Garbett of the India Office, following his conversation with Kurdish leaders, stated that:

*they understand not only that neither Great Britain nor France will accept the responsibility [for the mandate over Kurdistan], but that these Allies are contemplating such a partition of Kurdish territory as will destroy the possibility of a united Kurdistan.*<sup>14</sup>

These nationalists, according to Garbett, had no option but to turn to the Young Turks because they preferred the prospect of "a united Kurdistan" under the protection of a weak Turkey to a "permanent division", with which they believed themselves threatened.<sup>15</sup> The two

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13\* Nasser Effendi, Notes on the Present Kurdish Situation, Mes.Ex.Force, 5 August 1919, AIR20/513, PRO.

14\* C. Garbett, Memorandum on Kurdistan, 29 January 1920, FO 371/4193, PRO.

15\* Ibid.

prospects of incurring anti-Kurdish reaction in London and the re-partitioning of Kurdistan were new factors which helped to divide Kurdish nationalists in Northern Kurdistan. Indeed, Cherif Pasha's report of the rumours of the peace conference's decision to divide Kurdistan between Britain and France caused, according to De Robeck, a political polarisation among Kurdish nationalist circles. On the one side, there were those Kurds who believed in the capability of the Kurdish nationalist movement to expel the Turks from Kurdistan and then make the peace conference recognise the liberated Kurdistan as a *fait accompli*. On the other side, Cherif Pasha, who did not believe that Kurdish nationalists were sufficiently strong, sought to forestall the imminent partition by reaching an agreement with the Ottoman authorities that would grant "*autonomy for the whole of Kurdistan under Turkish sovereignty*".<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Qadir, while expressing his fears of French plans to partition Kurdistan, made it clear that he wanted a united Ottoman Kurdistan, even if this would entail the restriction of Kurdish political ambitions to local autonomy within Turkey.<sup>17</sup>

The sudden moderation in the political aims of Qadir, Cherif Pasha and some other Kurds expressed, firstly, their loss of faith in the peace conference as a means of achieving Kurdish nationalist aspirations,<sup>18</sup> and secondly, their opposition to re-partition of Kurdistan, which meant that the Kurds would emerge empty handed from the Turkish peace settlement. They, therefore, judged it necessary to reach -in advance- political arrangements with the Turkish authorities, before the peace conference could reach its decision on Kurdistan's future. This would, at least, secure an autonomous and united Kurdistan within Turkey. In other words, it was the fear of the dismemberment of Kurdistan that was the reason for the moderate attitudes of certain Kurdish nationalists, rather than any religious loyalty to the Ottoman *Sultan*, as British officials in Constantinople argued. After meeting a deputation from the nationalist Kurdish Club, Admiral Webb reported that the apparent manifestations of Kurdish "*loyalty to the Turks were either fictitious or the result of direct pressure or, in some case, of uncertainty as to what support the Kurds could count on in their struggle to escape from the Turkish yoke*".<sup>19</sup>

Both British measures on the ground and the uncertainty about London's real inten-

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16\* De Robeck, Constantinople, 27 February 1920, FO371/5067, PRO.

17\* De Robeck to Curzon, 2 March 1920, Enclosure No.1, A. Ryan, Memorandum, 24 February 1920, FO371/5067, PRO.

18\* De Robeck to Curzon, Confidential, 9 December 1919, Enclosure No.1, T. B. Hohler, Memorandum, 8 December 1919, FO 371/4193, PRO.

19\* Commission, Constantinople, 3 February 1920, FO371/5067, PRO.

tion in Kurdistan in the period 1919-1920 had a negative impact on the political efforts of Kurdish nationalists. They exacerbated divisions and disunity inside the Kurdish nationalist movement. Gradually, pessimism replaced optimism, as the British stopped the process of the emergence of an autonomous Southern Kurdistan and prevented a direct political connection between Eastern and Southern Kurdistan. While warning Kurdish nationalists in Northern Kurdistan against unwarranted political activities, they tolerated the Ottoman authorities' anti-Kurdish measures, such as the closing down of Kurdish newspapers and political organisations, as well as arresting their members.

Having said that, Britain could not completely ignore the Kurdish question owing to three factors. Firstly, the existence of the Kurdish nationalist movement could not be overlooked as an important factor when settling the future of non-Turkish territories such as Armenia, Mesopotamia and Syria. Secondly, by occupying the southern parts of Ottoman Kurdistan, Britain faced the issue of how to deal with Kurdish nationalists. In other words, Britain had no choice but to be involved in the future of the Kurdish question within the framework of the Turkish peace settlement. Thirdly, the upsurge of Kurdish nationalism coincided with the growing threat posed by both the Kemalists and the Bolsheviks to British imperial interests in India, Persia and Mesopotamia. These anti-British forces would very likely make the most of the Kurdish situation if Britain ignored the Kurds. Britain, therefore, had to find a formula that while realising its own main objectives in Kurdistan, would not go beyond satisfying limited political aspirations in the form of granting local autonomy to part of Kurdistan.

## **The Development Of Britain's Kurdish Policy In The Light Of The Political Aspirations Of The Armenians And Other Christians, 1918-1920**

### ***i- Early British Attitudes***

Ever since the Nineteenth Century, the Great Powers had influenced the shaping of Kurdish-Armenian relations through their interference in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire. On the one side, Russia used the Ottomans' maltreatment of their Armenian subjects as an excuse to interfere in the affairs of the eastern *Wilayets*, whereas Muslim Kurds were considered an obstacle in the way of expanding Russian influence. It was in Russia's interest that Armenian-Kurdish confrontation continued, as this would give it an opportunity to directly intervene in the matter. On the other side, the Ottomans sought, through the policy of divide and rule, and through stirring pan-Islamic sentiments in the eastern *Wilayets*, to turn the Kurds

against the Armenians. This was the ideal way to stifle the growing Kurdish and Armenian nationalist movements simultaneously. In a sense, the Kurds and the Armenians fought each other on behalf of the Turks and the Russians. In the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century, Britain began to intervene directly in the affairs of the eastern *Wilayets* on moral and political grounds, through the protection of Christian Armenians against Muslim Kurds. This was done by pressuring the Turks to implement administrative reforms, and via the containment of Russian interference in Ottoman internal affairs through the Armenian question.

As the Kurdish revolt of 1880-1881 demonstrated, Kurdish nationalists became aware of the need to avoid the trap of fighting the Armenian Christians in the interest of the Muslim Turks, and of identifying Turkish rule as the real enemy of the Kurds. Although a similar realisation emerged among Armenian nationalists, they failed in their efforts to ally with Kurdish nationalists largely because of strong Russian opposition. The failure of the Kurds and Armenians to bury their differences had considerable negative effects on the development of Kurdish and Armenian nationalist movements until 1919. When the First World War broke out, both Turkey and Russia were able to mobilise many Kurds and Christians respectively, causing atrocities throughout Ottoman Kurdistan, Ottoman Armenia and Eastern Kurdistan, where the main battlefields were situated. As a direct result of the war, tens of thousands of Kurds and Armenians died. In Southern Kurdistan, according to Amin Zaki, 300,000 Kurds lost their lives.<sup>20</sup> According to W.R. Hay, only 20% of the original population of Rowanduz survived after the war.<sup>21</sup> Robert Olson estimates total Kurdish deaths to be around 1,000,000.<sup>22</sup> Given that, according to British estimations during the war, there were around 3,000,000 Kurds,<sup>23</sup> Kurdistan must have lost 20% of its population.

The Allied victory and British occupation of large Kurdish areas caused considerable alarm in several Kurdish areas, lest the Allies adopt a retribution policy against the Kurds. From the Kurdish viewpoint, the Allies were, after all, Christians, and bound to help their co-religionists, as they had done in the past. The post-war public support of Europe and America for the Armenian cause was also interpreted by the Kurds as a prelude to the incorporation of

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20\* Muhammad Amin Zaki, *Tarikh Al Kord We Kordstan Min Aqdam Al Osur Hatta Alan*, (Cairo: Al Saateh Press, 1939), pp.274-275.

21\* Hay, *Two Years In Kurdistan*, p.192.

22\* Olson, *The Emergence Of Kurdish Nationalism*, p.21.

23\* British Desiderate in Turkey, op. cit., Appendix VI, Note by the Secretary, Political and Secret Department, India Office: "The Future Settlement of Eastern Turkey in Asia and Arabia", 14 March 1915, p.83.

Map Fourteen: Armenians' Claims to Kurdish Areas According To Their Proposed Map Of Armenia At The Paris Peace Conference In 1919



Ottoman-Persian Frontier



Armenian Territorial Claims In Kurdistan



Ottoman Kurdistan into a Greater Armenian state. What intensified Kurdish fears even more was the propaganda campaign waged by some Armenian nationalists, claiming that the Christian Allies would bring the Kurds to justice for their wartime crimes against the Armenians. This anti-Kurdish propaganda campaign, which was supported by some Western missionaries -such as Reverent W.A. Wigram,<sup>24</sup> an Anglican British priest who lived in Urmia before and during the war- succeeded in portraying the Kurds in Europe and America as murderers. The major motive behind the Armenians' attempts to incriminate the Kurds as a whole was to persuade the Allies to incorporate Northern Kurdistan into the would-be Greater Armenian state (see map fourteen). Noel warned against any British involvement in "*hostilities in Asia Minor*", which he attributed to "*the fear cleverly fostered by the Armenians that the Allies are intent on supporting the domination of one Armenian over Muslims*".<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the project of creating a Greater Armenia was initially supported by the Allies, including Britain and America, between 1914 and 1919.

Towards the end of the First World War, certain Kurds took the initiative and tried to

24\* Reverent Wigram, Notes Regarding Kurds, Baghdad, 20 February 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

25\* Dairy of Maj. Noel, On Special Duty in Kurdistan, from June 14th to September 21st 1919, FO371/5068, PRO.



improve Kurdish-Christian relations, while also inviting British officials to intervene in the matter. The Mukri Kurds, for instance, offered the British Consul at Kermanshah their solution for the Kurdish-Christian problem in Urmia, where the Kurds, on the one hand, and the Armenians and Assyrians, on the other, bitterly fought each other. It involved two elements: a separate Eastern Kurdistan and direct British intervention to restore stability.<sup>26</sup> Just before the end of the war, Cherif Pasha drew British attention to Turkish sponsorship of the hatred between Armenians and Kurds, arguing that:

*the task now was to reconcile the two races, the Mohammedans in a large majority and the Armenians in a strong minority, both having an equal right to inhabit the same country. For establishing a basis of reconciliation, he considered a committee should be set up in London, and he suggested its immediate formation under the auspices of the British Government, first in Mesopotamia and, afterwards, in Kurdistan.*<sup>27</sup>

Other Kurdish nationalists, such as Said Taha, asked for a British guarantee that Kurdistan would not come under Armenian or Assyrian rule.<sup>28</sup> Taha and Simko kept the British informed of their willingness to co-operate regarding the Christian problem, if they would intervene politically to reconcile the views of all parties.

Initially, British officials on the ground paid no serious attention to either Kurdish fears or Kurdish factors in the settlement of the Armenian and Assyrian problems. In this respect, Wilson expressed his doubts about Cherif Pasha, whom he considered to be in no position to play any part in the Kurdish-Armenian question.<sup>29</sup> The pro-Christian measures adopted by certain British officials, such as Col. Leachman, were motivated by political as well as moral considerations. It was calculated that the cheapest way to consolidate British rule in some difficult Kurdish areas was to use the Christians as an instrument to control local Kurds. This policy was counterproductive. Instead of stability, it caused anti-British feelings and eventually led to the outbreak of local Kurdish revolts in the Mosul area and beyond, such as in Amadia, Jezirah and Nisibin. To suppress these revolts, British aeroplanes carried out bombing raids on a large scale against Kurdish villages, inflicting heavy casualties.<sup>30</sup> All these developments helped to increase Kurdish suspicion of British intentions in Kurdistan. Noel criticised the pro-Christian orientation among some British officials: *“our allowing ourselves to be used as a tool of Armenian religious fanaticism and vindictiveness is greatly responsible for the anti-Christian and*

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26\* *Precis of Affairs...*, op. cit., pp.7-8.

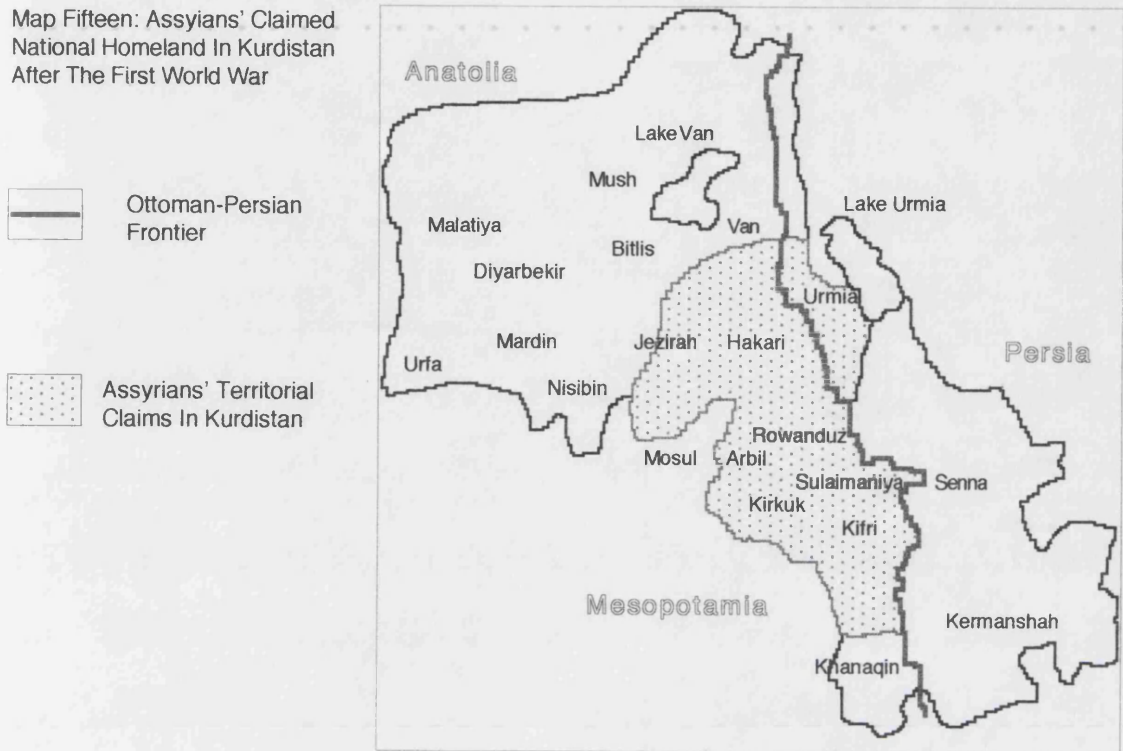
27\* *Ibid*, p.8.

28\* War Office, No.0152/5146, 11 August 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

29\* Political, Baghdad, to S/S for India, 30 October 1918, AIR20/512, PRO.

30\* *Precis of Affairs...*,op. cit., p.14.

Map Fifteen: Assyrians' Claimed National Homeland In Kurdistan After The First World War



*Anti-British movement in Kurdistan*".<sup>31</sup> Earlier, he warned that the adoption of a retaliatory policy against Kurdish civilians would lead to the formation of an anti-British front among the Muslims, which would involve London in "serious military responsibilities".<sup>32</sup> The political ambitions of the Assyrians posed another danger to the Kurds because, like the Armenians, the Assyrians wanted the British to support and protect the unification of their nation and homeland, i.e. the region Mosul-Jezirah-Bashkala-Urmia (see map fifteen).<sup>33</sup>

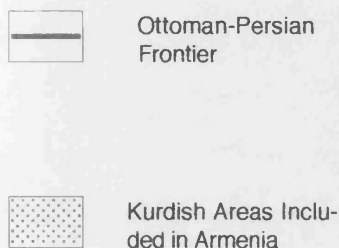

The unsympathetic attitudes of British officials on the ground were in harmony with early British schemes for the future of the Armenians and the Assyrians. Examination of these schemes shows that the existing Kurdish fears were justifiable and well-founded. According to Toynbee, Mark Sykes was thinking of establishing an entity similar to Lebanon in Hakari in Northern Kurdistan for the Ottoman Assyrians, who could forge a political and territorial union with their brothers in Urmia in Eastern Kurdistan. As for the Armenians, Sykes proposed to establish one independent Armenian state in Cilicia and another one in the eastern *Wilayets*. The latter would be based on equal status for all nationalities. The two states would eventually

31\* Noel, Aleppo, to Political, Baghdad, 2 August 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

32\* Political, Baghdad, to Egyptian, Cairo, 24 April 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

33\* Headquarter Jelus Refugee Camp, to Political, Baghdad, 21 February 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

Map Sixteen: Kurdish Areas Included In The British Proposed Boundaries Of Armenia In 1919


  
 — Ottoman-Persian Frontier
   
 Kurdish Areas Included in Armenia



be amalgamated into one entity, including Northern Kurdistan. In his comment on Sykes' scheme, Toynbee said that it would "give the Armenians immediate national self-government.. but this might be unfortunate for the very large Turkish and Kurdish element in the population there".<sup>34</sup> The origin of this scheme goes back to 1915 when Sykes suggested the creation of "Armenian buffer states" as well as an Assyrian entity in Asia Minor.<sup>35</sup> Sykes' scheme was circulated as a Foreign Office memorandum and was studied by the Eastern Committee of the British War Cabinet.<sup>36</sup> Up until 1919, Britain, like America, was strongly inclined towards the establishment of a Greater Armenian state,<sup>37</sup> considering it -apart from being a moral duty- as a means of containing Pan-Tauranism, and as a barrier against Bolshevik aggression in the Middle East<sup>38</sup> (see map sixteen). America wanted a large Armenian state largely on moral grounds, that is to protect Armenians from future massacre.<sup>39</sup> It accepted, in principle, a

34\* A.J. Toynbee, Foreign Office Minute No.174037, 25 November 1918, FO371/3407, PRO.

35\* British Desiderata in Turkey in Asia, Appendix XV, Armenian Buffer States, Note by Lieut. Col. Mark Sykes, 15 March 1915, CAB27/1, PRO, pp.114-115.

36\* Eastern Committee, No.2525, November 1918, Cab 27/37, PRO.

37\* Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia: From Versailles to London, 1919-1920*, Vol.II, (London & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 265-266.

38\* Eastern Committee, 40th & 43d Minutes (Annex), December 1918, Cab 27/24, PRO.

39\* Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia: From Versailles to London, 1919-1920*, Vol.II, pp.261-264.

Map Seventeen: Kurdish Areas Included In The American Proposed Boundaries Of Armenia In 1919

— Ottoman- Persian Frontier

••••• Kurdish Areas Included In Armenia



mandate for Armenia, and was directly involved in the delimitation of the future Armenian state<sup>40</sup> (see map seventeen). This British and American thinking converged with that of the Armenian nationalists, who advocated the establishment of a Greater Armenia from the Caucasus to the Mediterranean<sup>41</sup> by incorporating most of Ottoman Kurdistan.

On another level, the Foreign Office and the India Office were thinking of making the most of Assyrian political aspirations through the formation of an Assyrian entity, as suggested earlier by Sykes, and based on uniting the Bashkala district in Northern Kurdistan with the Urmia district in Eastern Kurdistan.<sup>42</sup> This would benefit Britain in several ways. As Southern Kurdistan proved to be an unsuitable place to resettle the Assyrian refugees because of firm Kurdish resistance, Montagu found the solution in repatriating them to the Urmia district. Apart from removing a heavy financial burden, which these refugees created for the Mesopotamian administration, he hoped that:

*the Persian Government might welcome a strong Christian settlement in this area as a bulwark against Kurdish aggression and that [it] might be prepared to grant a measure of local self-government to the Assyrians in return for some guarantee of military service.<sup>43</sup>*

40\* Sachar, *The Emergence of the Middle East, 1914-1924*, pp.265, 353-356, 362.

41\* Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia: From Versailles to London, 1919-1920*, Vol.II, pp.261-264.

42\* Foreign Office Comment on Telegram No.1939, 18 October 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

43\* Hirtzel, India Office, 20 December 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

Montagu's proposal received the support of Hubert Young of the Foreign Office.<sup>44</sup> Having said that, there was a totally different approach to Montagu's, presented by Maj. Ross, a Political Officer. His views on the Kurdish-Assyrian problem were almost identical to those of Noel on the Kurdish-Armenian one, and the two officials deviated from the mainstream of official thinking. To Ross, the ideal approach to the Assyrian-Kurdish problem was to be based on the existing realities on the ground, rather than religious considerations. He therefore advocated the unification of the Kurdish districts of Bashkala and Urmia under Kurdish rule on demographic, economic, political and geographical grounds. To him, the Christians formed a minority in these districts, whereas satisfying the aspirations of the Kurdish majority would restore political stability, as Britain desired.<sup>45</sup> But, as preserving Persian territorial integrity was vital to British strategic interests in India, such unorthodox views found no support among British official either in Persia and Mesopotamia or in London. Instead, Britain sought through the treaty of Sèvres to unite the above mentioned districts in order to establish an autonomous Christian entity under Persian sovereignty.

#### ***ii- The Resolution of The Armenian Question And The New British Position On Kurdistan's Future***

It did not take long for Britain to come face to face with the realities on the ground. Firstly, the Kurds formed the majority of the population in many areas claimed by the Christians. Secondly and most importantly, the establishment of a Greater Armenian state was not a politically viable option and was even a dangerous one due to the instability it would inevitably cause in Kurdistan. To overcome the Kurdish obstacle, the Allies would either have to intervene militarily in order to establish the proposed Armenian state or satisfy some Kurdish political aspirations. Richard Hovannisian, an Armenian historian, argues that "*the so-called Kurdish question*" was invented by the Ottomans in order to prevent the solution of the Armenian question, and soon was sponsored by Britain in order to retreat from its promises to the Armenians.<sup>46</sup> By contrast, evidence shows that Britain became increasingly interested in the Kurdish situation because it wanted to facilitate the formation of an Armenian national state. Indeed, Britain,

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<sup>44</sup>\* Young, Memorandum No.16443, 10 January 1920, FO371/4193, PRO.

<sup>45</sup>\* Maj. Ross, Note on Kurdish Claims to the Urmia District of Persia, Kurdish Bureau, 8/9 July 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

<sup>46</sup>\* Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia: From Versailles to London, 1919-1920*, Vol.II, pp.442-447 & *The Republic of Armenia: From London to Sèvres, February-August 1920*, Vol.III, op. cit., pp. 61-71.

while being unwilling to commit itself militarily to a Greater Armenia, observed with some apprehension continuing Turkish attempts to win the Kurds over by exploiting their growing fears of Allied-backed Armenian domination.<sup>47</sup> The prospect of a united Turkish-Kurdish front would place the Turks in a strong position to obstruct the implementation of the forthcoming Turkish peace settlement. To a certain degree, the Turks succeeded in playing on Kurdish fears of Armenian domination and this was due not to their encouragement of Kurdish nationalistic feelings, as Hovannisian argues, but to their appeal to the Islamic sentiment of all non-Turkish Muslims in the wake of the Greek occupation of Smyrna.

The change in British approach to the Kurdish situation was influenced by those British officials who provided first-hand information. They highlighted the real state of affairs in Ottoman Kurdistan and the implicit interconnections between the Armenian and Kurdish questions in any political scheme for the eastern *Wilayets*. In his tour of some Kurdish areas, Capt. C. Woolley of the British Military Intelligence reported how the local Kurds were extremely apprehensive about the prospect of facing Armenian domination and Allied retribution.<sup>48</sup> Nasir Effendi, a British intelligence agent and himself Christian, warned that the formation of any Armenian state at the expense of the Kurds would result in an immediate Kurdish uprising.<sup>49</sup> Most importantly, Noel brought to London's attention the fact that Kurds formed an overwhelming majority in many areas claimed by Armenian nationalists. In his opinion:

*The chief difficulty of the [Kurdish-Armenian] problem lies in the fact that Armenian claims have gained such a hearing and hold on public opinion in Europe and more especially in England and America, that it is now exceedingly difficult to reconcile the practical recognition of these claims with inexorable logic of facts. In other words, the alternative to facing the indignation of Lord Bryce and the Cocoa Press is to attempt to govern 10 Kurds with one Armenian.<sup>50</sup>*

The signs of change in British attitudes towards the Kurds manifested itself in British-controlled Kurdish areas. It became vital to adopt conciliatory measures on the ground to contain the alarming anti-British propaganda activities of the Kemalists and the Ottoman authorities among the Kurds.<sup>51</sup> In accordance with Noel's recommendations, which received London's approval, Wilson issued a general amnesty to those Kurds who feared retribution for alleged wartime crimes. In addition, some Kurdish leaders were encouraged to visit the volatile

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47\* Calthorpe, Constantinople, to Curzon, 30 July 1919, DBFP, pp.704-705.

48\* Woolley, the Kurdish National Movement, FO371/4192, PRO, pp.5-6.

49\* Nasir Effendi, Notes on the Present Kurdish Situation, 5 August 1919, AIR20/513, PRO.

50\* Noel, Note on the Kurdish Situation, July 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

51\* Political, Baghdad, to S/S for India, London (No.5353) 12 May 1919, AIR20/714 & S/S to CCr, Baghdad, Priority, 5 June 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

Kurdish areas in order to reassure their population of British good intentions.<sup>52</sup>

In his recommendations, Noel went further than adopting short term measures. He urged that to “undo the effects of the recent Turkish pan-Islamic propaganda”, Britain should give assurances to Kurdish leaders that areas where the Kurdish element was predominant would not come under Armenian domination.<sup>53</sup> The essence of Noel’s report from Northern Kurdistan, which he highlighted to official circles in London and the Middle East, was the inter-connection between the solution of the Kurdish and the Armenian questions. In other words, meeting the national aspirations of the Kurds was essential for the successful realisation of the Allies’ principal aim of creating a national Armenian state. In June 1919, Noel reported from Diyarbakir that:

*here and in the adjacent parts of Kurdistan, Kurdish leaders are feeling very keenly the full publicity, which is being given in Europe to Armenian national claims while their case is comparatively a closed book. A restlessness also possesses them because decisions are being arrived at in Paris which vitally affect their future, while they themselves are idly sitting here. This all tends to create a natural desire to cause local demonstrations with a view of bringing the Kurdistan question into the limelight and confronting the peace conference with a fait accompli.*<sup>54</sup>

By late 1919, the settlement of the Armenian question thus looked increasingly more complicated to the British Government than it had earlier anticipated.

As Britain was interested in devising a solution for the Armenian question, the views of Noel in particular prompted a new political debate among various departments within the Government and British officials in the Middle East, as a result of which Britain began to pay far more attention to the Kurdish question. Arthur Hirtzel of the India Office recognised that European support for the creation of an independent Armenian state contradicted -as actual facts showed- the very principle of national self-determination on which it based its argument. Ignoring the Kurdish right to self-determination for the sake of Armenia, in his eyes, would justify any Kurdish resistance to future Armenian domination.<sup>55</sup> Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, acknowledged that “the ultimate solution of the Kurdish problem must depend on a variety of factors, some of which” [such as the question of the extent and character of the proposed Armenian state] “are still indeterminate”.<sup>56</sup> Hirtzel further elaborated the position of the India Office on the Kurdish-Armenian problem. He did not, however, consider the formation of

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52\* Calthorpe, Constantinople, to Political, Baghdad, 1 May 1919 & Political, Baghdad, to S/S for India, (No.5353) 12 May 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

53\* Noel, Constantinople, to Political, Baghdad, 10 July 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

54\* Fivecav, Cairo, to Political. Baghdad , 14 June 1919, AIR20/512, PRO.

55\* Hirtzel, Note, 7 August 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

56\* Shuckburgh, India Office, 1 August 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

Kurdish and Armenian states to be an ideal option and, instead, advocated a solution based on the British experience in India, i.e. adopting the lines of the Morley-Minto treatment of Indian Muslims. In other words, the Armenians would receive, like the Indian Muslims, a measure of political influence that was greater than that their number.<sup>57</sup>

Compared with Hirtzel's, Noel's solution of the Kurdish and Armenian questions was based on equal British acknowledgement of both Kurdish and Armenian nationalist aspirations. As it was very problematic to define the limits of Kurdistan and Armenia, owing to "*the dispersion of the populations*" and "*the ravaged state of the country*", the geographical relationship between the two countries should be determined by the two sides after restoring normality.<sup>58</sup> Noel's views received support from several British officials in the Middle East. Rear-Adm. Richard Webb -who rejected Wilson's scheme for re-establishing Turkish authority over the non-Turkish *Wilayets* under some European supervision- backed Noel's solution, viewing it as "*the only way out of difficulty*".<sup>59</sup> Col. French of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, also endorsed Noel's scheme for reflecting the ethnographical and political realities on the ground. Accordingly, he asked London to recognise Kurdish nationality and to do its utmost to avert a decision at the peace conference that would give Armenians unrestricted domination over areas where Kurds were predominant.<sup>60</sup>

### ***iii- The Terms Of The Sèvres Treaty On The Future Of Kurdistan And Armenia***

Examination of British attitudes at the peace conference leading up to the formulation of the Sèvres terms reveals that they were characterised by unequal support for Kurdish and Armenian nationalist aspirations. In terms of freedom from Turkish control, Kurdish interests were inferior to Armenian ones. This can partly be attributed to the sympathetic reaction of the Christian Powers to what they perceived to be the Armenian genocide under Ottoman rule, and to the fact that the Armenians fought on the Allied side against Turkey. The Armenians would enjoy the establishment of their independent state straight off, whereas the Northern Kurds would enjoy an ambiguous local autonomy, pending the proposed Allied commission's final decision one year later. Moreover, in terms of the geographical size of their future entities, the Armenian state would include almost half of Northern Kurdistan, whereas the Kurdish

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57\* Hirtzel, Note, 7 August 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

58\* Noel, Note on the Kurdish Question, 18 July 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

59\* Webb, Constantinople, Very Urgent, 19 August 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

60\* French, Egy.Ex.Force, Cairo, 2 October, FO371/4192, PRO.



areas amounted to less than 20% of Ottoman Kurdistan's actual size.

The need for positive British attitudes towards Kurdish nationalist aspirations can also be attributed to independent developments, most notably the Kurdish-Armenian agreement of December 1919. The agreement was the culmination of Kurdish leaders' efforts to improve Kurdish-Christian relations. They hoped to erase the long-held negative image of the Kurds in the Christian world and obtain more sympathetic European attitudes towards Kurdish national aspirations. Most importantly, they sought to prevent Turkish nationalists from using religion as an instrument of mobilising the Kurds against the Allies and local Christians. From Constantinople, Noel reported that the heads of the Christian communities of Diyarbekir acknowledged Kurdish leaders' statements that they sought friendly relations with them. Kurdish nationalist circles in Constantinople also sought to get in touch with Said Taha and Simko, with a view to establishing the same friendly Kurdish-Christian relations in Eastern Kurdistan, especially in Urmia.<sup>61</sup> In Cairo, the Kurdish Committee expressed the desire of the Kurds to live in harmony with those Armenians who might live in an independent Kurdistan, and also their willingness to give them a share in the future government in proportion to their numbers.<sup>62</sup> As for the complicated issue of Kurdish and Armenian atrocities during the war, Kurdish nationalists welcomed a proposal at the peace conference to investigate both Kurdish and Armenian claims. Once Turkish rule was removed, Kurdish nationalists believed, peaceful coexistence could be easily achieved between the Kurds and Armenians. To cement such coexistence, they suggested the idea of a government according to the wishes of the majority in the non-Turkish *Wilayets*.<sup>63</sup>

The most important development in bilateral Kurdish-Armenian relations was the attempts of Kurdish nationalists to reach a political agreement with their Armenian counterparts on their conflicting territorial claims. They hoped to demonstrate to the Allies that the two nationalities could help solve their common problems and that they were not an impediment to re-shaping the future of the non-Turkish *Wilayets*. In December 1919, Kurdish and Armenian nationalists presented a memorandum to the peace conference, signed by Boghos Nubar for Ottoman Armenia, Ohandjanian for the Armenian Republic and Cherif Pasha for the Kurds. While emphasising the "*identical interests and aspirations*" of Kurdish and Armenian nations, the two parties demanded freedom from Turkey and asked the Allies for united and

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61\* Noel, Constantinople, to Political, Baghdad, 10 July 1919, FO371/4192, PRO.

62\* Policy, Cairo, to General, Baghdad, 6 August 1919, AIR20/714, PRO.

63\* Woolley, the Kurdish National Movement, FO371/4192, PRO, p.6.

independent states for Armenia and Kurdistan under one mandatory power. Both sides agreed that they would respect the conference's decision on the delimitation of the Kurdish-Armenian frontier, while respecting the rights of minorities within the would-be states.<sup>64</sup> The wording of the agreement suggests that there was a mutual Kurdish-Armenian desire to prevent Turkish nationalists from using religious differences as an instrument of hindering the implementation of a new Turkish peace settlement, and also of securing strong Allied support for Kurdish and Armenian political aspirations.

#### ***iv- British Reaction To The Kurdish-Armenian Agreement***

The most important aspect of the Kurdish-Armenian agreement was the Allies' reaction, especially that of Britain. Unlike France, Britain was initially in favour of any improvement in Kurdish-Armenian relations in the non-Turkish *Wilayets*. Indeed, Lord Curzon had earlier instructed British officials on the ground to encourage Kurdish-Armenian *rapprochement*.<sup>65</sup> This would make it much easier for Britain to settle the future of the non-Turkish *Wilayets*. Having said that, Britain was not in favour of a Kurdish-Armenian agreement that had political and territorial dimensions. In other words, Britain did not want to lose its control over the re-shaping process of the new political map of the region. Indeed, the Kurdish-Armenian agreement had far-reaching implications for British political and strategic interests, not only in Armenia and Kurdistan but also in the Middle East as a whole. Firstly, the implementation of the agreement would have meant that the representatives of the new nations, not the Powers, determined the political geography of an independent Kurdistan and Armenia according to the principle of ethnic distribution and, most importantly, self-determination. By contrast, Britain sought to establish strong strategic buffer states in Armenia and the remainder of Turkey against Bolshevik Russia. In addition, the implementation of the agreement would encourage Eastern Kurdistan to join an independent Kurdistan. This prospect meant the weakening of Persian territorial unity, which was the cornerstone of the British policy to pre-empt any expansion of Bolshevik influence southwards towards the Indian frontier, Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf. Secondly, the application of the agreement would probably put an end to British control over Southern Kurdistan as a result of its re-unification with the remainder of Kurdistan. The growing strategic and economic value of this part of Kurdistan to British influence in Mesopo-

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<sup>64</sup>\* Political, to De Robeck, Constantinople, 10 December 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

<sup>65</sup>\* Ibid.

tamia made it necessary that Britain should keep the area under its control. Thirdly, the agreement would set an example for other new nationalities, who might demand a similar treatment from the Allies. Indeed, to pressurise the Allies, the Sharifians organised a Fertile Crescent-wide political campaign to mobilise the local Arabs in Syria, Palestine, Trans-Jordan and Arab Mesopotamia for the establishment of a united Arab state under Sharif Hussein. Finally, France would oppose any territorial re-arrangements of the Ottoman Empire that overlooked its political and economic interests. France particularly demanded territorial and economic compensations for the loss of its share in the Mosul *Wilayet* and was in no way willing to emerge empty-handed from the Turkish peace settlement.

For all the foregoing reasons, Britain did not support the Kurdish-Armenian agreement. As soon as its terms became known, the Foreign Office and other British authorities shed doubts on the importance of the agreement, arguing that Cherif Pasha was “a *self-appointed representative*” with no authority to voice Kurdish opinion.<sup>66</sup> In addition to Wilson, De Robeck -who had earlier voiced appreciation of the agreement as having a potentially great value-<sup>67</sup> told Curzon that the agreement did not bring together the interests of the population of the eastern *Wilayets*.<sup>68</sup> For him, Cherif Pasha represented no one but himself.<sup>69</sup> Before the Armenians, Britain made the issue of Cherif Pasha’s legitimacy as the spokesman of the Kurds the reason why it did not support the terms of the Kurdish-Armenian agreement. Ironically, British records show that all principal Kurdish nationalist circles recognised both Cherif Pasha as their representative and the agreement he made with the Armenians. Qadir, who supported the agreement, told De Robeck that Cherif Pasha was the only representative for the Kurds.<sup>70</sup> The deputation of the Kurdish Club told Admiral Webb, who himself questioned Cherif Pasha’s representative capacity, that he had been representing “*the Kurds in Paris for nine or ten months and that no attempt had been made to disavow him by any section of the Kurdish nation at home*”.<sup>71</sup>

Winning the support of the powers, especially Britain, was vital to the successful application of the agreement. Hubert Young acknowledged that the application of the agreement terms required foreign interference in order to get the Turks out of Kurdish and Armenian

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66\* Ibid.

67\* De Robeck to Curzon, Confidential, 9 December 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

68\* High Commissioner, Constantinople, to Curzon, 8 January 1920, FO371/4193, PRO.

69. High Commissioner, Constantinople, 15 March 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

70\* De Robeck, Constantinople, 11 December 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

71\* De Robeck, Constantinople, 3 February 1920, FO371/5067, PRO.

areas, and that financial support from the Allies was also required to realise its terms.<sup>72</sup> Britain's rejection of the agreement, despite Kurdish appeals for effective British intervention in the matter, meant that it became merely a scrap of paper. But, it can be argued that had Britain supported the implementation of the Kurdish-Armenian agreement, and made it a basis for the settlement of the non-Turkish *Wilayets* at the peace conference, the Armenians and the Kurds would have established their own national state and relied on a united front to defeat any potential attack by the Kemalists. Unfortunately for both the Kurds and the Armenians, Britain and the Allies did not have the slightest intention of applying the idea of self-determination, as their strategic and economic interests conflicted with Kurdish and Armenian nationalist aspirations.

### **The Sharifian-Mesopotamian Factor And The British Policy Towards Southern Kurdistan, 1918-1920**

#### ***i- British Occupation And The Issue Of Defining Southern Kurdistan-Mesopotamia Relations***

As in the Armenian case, the issues of geographically defining Ottoman Kurdistan and politically determining its future were interconnected with that of Mesopotamia. The awareness of British officials in London and the Middle East of the interconnection between Mesopotamia's future and the Kurdish question was a result of continuous Sharifian claims to significant parts of Kurdistan as part of a future Arab state. The Sharifians justified their territorial demands by arguing that the claimed Kurdish areas were geographically, administratively and historically part of Mesopotamia, and therefore, demanded Britain recognised them as being Arab. By contrast, Kurdish nationalists, while rejecting any political or cultural association between Kurdistan and Arab lands, paid no serious attention to the Sharifians, probably because they thought the latter were an insignificant factor. Perhaps the best way to understand whether the Sharifian claims were legitimate is through examining the economic, cultural and political characteristics of the three *Wilayets*: Mosul, Baghdad and Basra.

As an ancient Greek term, 'Mesopotamia' literally means the land between the Rivers Euphrates and the Tigris, and was arbitrarily used by European orientalist, travellers and diplomats, when referring to Baghdad, Basra and Mosul. Administratively speaking, the Ottomans did not use the term Mesopotamia -or any other term- to collectively describe these three *Wilayets*. Indeed, while considering Mosul and Southern Kurdistan as a province within

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<sup>72</sup>\* Young, Foreign Office Minute No.156272, 29 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

"*Turkey proper*", the Turks viewed Baghdad and Basra as mere provinces of their Empire.<sup>73</sup> In 1915, the India Office excluded Ottoman Kurdistan from the term 'Mesopotamia' because it possessed special ethnic and geographical characteristics, and defined the Hamrin mountains and Jabal Sinjar as its southern and western boundaries respectively.<sup>74</sup> Having said that, after their occupation of these three Ottoman *Wilayets*, the British found the term 'Mesopotamia' to be, in practice, too ambiguous. They found it particularly difficult to agree on identifying Mesopotamia's geographical limits, especially in the north and the north-west, as well as its political and cultural identity. For instance, the Naval Staff Intelligence Department produced a handbook on Mesopotamia's geopolitical, economic, cultural and administrative characteristics. It gave a very broad definition of the term 'Mesopotamia', which included the central, western and southern parts of Ottoman Kurdistan.<sup>75</sup> It also defined the term 'Iraq' as including the Baghdad and Basra *Wilayets*.<sup>76</sup> Arthur Balfour defined Mesopotamia as "*essentially the region watered by the Tigris and the Euphrates*".<sup>77</sup> Such a definition, placing most of Ottoman Kurdistan within Mesopotamia, was not adopted by Britain because it entailed extra military and political commitments far beyond its capabilities. Eventually, the sole criterion -according to which the British defined Mesopotamia- was the limits of British strategic and economic interests. In other words, to justify Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Arab Iraq in 1923, the British extended the geographical and political limits of Mesopotamia in an arbitrary manner and contrary to the existing economic, political and social realities in these *Wilayets*. The Americans, who initially sought to put forward their recommendations regarding the future of the non-Turkish *Wilayets*, excluded all Kurdish areas from the term

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73\* Garbett of the India Office drew the attention to the fact that distinction between the three *Wilayets* existed in the Ottoman law relating to land tenure. IDCM, Minute No.37, Secret, 13 April 1920, FO 371/5068, PRO.

74\* British Desiderata in Turkey in Asia, Appendix VI, the Future of Settlement of Eastern Turkey in Asia and in Arabia, Note by the Secretary, Political and Secret Department, 14 March 1915, CAB27/1, PRO, pp.83 & 86.

75\* Naval Staff Intelligence Department, *A Handbook of Mesopotamia*, No.1, London, November 1918, pp.9-30.

76\* *Ibid*, pp.87-100.

77\* Memorandum on Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia: Reflections of Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour, DBFP, vol.I, pp.340-349.

'Mesopotamia'.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, to the Ottomans<sup>79</sup> and the Kurds the term 'Iraq' or 'Arab Iraq' meant Mesopotamia, where the Arabs lived. Following its formation in 1920-1921, the Arab Government and British officials on the ground extended the new political term 'Iraq' to include Southern Kurdistan.<sup>80</sup> It is worth noting that the final physical shape of the new Iraqi state, as it is at present, remained undecided until 1926, when Iraq and Turkey signed a boundary agreement that finally placed Southern Kurdistan within Iraq by defining its northern borders.

Examination of the issue of political and geographical definition of Mesopotamia or the relations between the Baghdad, Basra and Mosul *Wilayets* is relevant to any understanding of the evolution of the British position on Southern Kurdistan's future. Under the Ottomans, the three *Wilayets* of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, were distinct in terms of their ethnic and religious composition as well as their political, economic and cultural orientations. From the economic viewpoint, Southern Kurdistan had close relations with the heartland of the Ottoman Empire, Syria, Eastern Kurdistan and even Persian Azerbaijan.<sup>81</sup> According to the *Handbook of Mesopotamia*, Mosul was "the chief collecting and distributing centre for the commerce with central Kurdistan" where raw goods were imported.<sup>82</sup> Baghdad and the Shi'i holy towns of Karbala and Najaf had close economic relations with Persia. In contrast to the above areas, Basra had strong commercial relations, not with the neighbouring areas, but with India and overseas. The economic diversity of the three *Wilayets* was further accentuated by the use of Turkish, Persian and Indian coinage concurrently. Moreover, the Mosul *Wilayet* had a different valuation of Turkish currency from either Baghdad or Basra. The weights and measures standards varied from one *Wilayet* to another.<sup>83</sup> From the sectarian viewpoint, the population of the Mosul *Wilayet* were Sunni Muslims<sup>84</sup> and that of Basra were mostly Shi'i. The

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78\* See for example (1) the recommendations of the American delegation at the peace conference, D.H. Miller *My Diary at the Paris Peace Conference, 1918-1919*, Vol.III, (New York: 1928) & (2) the King-Crane Commission's report on Mesopotamia, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States: Paris Peace Conference, 1919*, Vol.IV, (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1948), pp.800-802. Having said that, the American wanted the surrounding Kurdish areas to be part of the British mandate over Mesopotamia on the grounds of irrigation and agriculture.

79\* See for instance the Ottoman memorandum to the supreme council of the Paris peace conference, D.H. Miller, 16:479-84, op. cit.

80\* Iraq replaced Mesopotamia as a term in the official British correspondence in the period 1921-1922.

81\* Naval Staff Intelligence Department, *A Handbook of Mesopotamia*. . op. cit. p.93.

82\* Ibid.

83\* Ibid, p.143.

84\* Sunni Kurds were different from their Arab counterparts in terms of their religious practices and Sufist rituals.

Baghdad *Wilayet* had a mixed population in which the Shi'is formed the majority. In terms of cultural orientation, the Sunni population was under Turkish influence, whereas the Shi'i population was influenced by Persian values and traditions. By contrast, the distinctive geographical features of the Kurdish areas made the Kurds less susceptible to Turkish or Persian culture. In terms of administrative arrangements, Constantinople conducted the affairs of these *Wilayets* separately through *Walīs* [Governors], who were appointed by the *Sultan* as his political representatives.

Perhaps the political inclinations of the local elites are the most important criterion in attempting to unfold the real relations between the three *Wilayets*. The Kurdish nationalist movement never had any link with its Arab counterpart and, historically, it emerged both independently and earlier. The Southern Kurds had totally different political aspirations from those of the Arabs in that they desired Kurdish independence. Among the Arabs, the Sunnis had different political aspirations from the Shi'is. The former began to embrace Arab nationalism during the war, whereas the latter remained far more inclined towards religion. This may explain why many Shi'is refused to become Ottoman subjects and, later, Iraqi subjects after the establishment of the Iraqi state in 1920-1921. The tiny Turkoman minority, which was also divided into Sunni and Shi'i sections, linked its interests with Turkish rule, under which they formed a privileged grouping. The Christian and Jewish communities were in favour of a form of European protection to end Ottoman-Muslim maltreatment. In other words, Mesopotamia lacked a united political, cultural and economic centre which could form a basis for a Mesopotamia-wide nationalist movement, let alone a national state.

The issue of defining various relations between the areas where the Kurds lived and the areas where the Arabs lived is politically significant as British records of the period 1916-1923 show. In the period 1916-1920, for instance, official circles in London generally used the term Mesopotamia to mean the areas where the Arabs lived, from which Southern Kurdistan was excluded. This definition had a clear political implication, in that the future of Southern Kurdistan was considered to be unconnected with that of Arab Mesopotamia, and therefore, would be determined independently. Meanwhile, by resorting to various economic, strategic and political arguments, British officials on the ground such as Wilson and Cox, kept seeking London's approval for extending the term 'Mesopotamia-Iraq' to include Southern Kurdistan. At the 1921 Cairo conference, for example, Cox insisted that Southern Kurdistan

was an integral part of Iraq.<sup>85</sup> The political implication of this was also clear, namely that the future of Southern Kurdistan was inseparable from that of Mesopotamia. After the imposition of the British mandate, especially in the period 1920-1923, British officials on the ground were able to impose their definition of Mesopotamia by extending it to include Southern Kurdistan. The main reason for this was the occupation policies of the British authorities that focused on making the three *Wilayets* politically and economically as homogeneous as possible.

### ***ii- Post-war Sharifians' Attempts To Translate Their Claims Into Reality***

To legitimise their claim to Southern Kurdistan and other Kurdish areas in the period 1914-1920, the Sharifians argued that the *Wilayets* of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra were, and should remain, part of one political and historical unit. Apart from the revival of Kurdish nationalism in Kurdistan itself, the continuing Sharifian claims to Southern Kurdistan helped to highlight its fate, especially in relation to the future of Mesopotamia. Moreover, the Sharifian movement for a greater Arab state was one of the factors that steadily influenced the shaping of British policy from 1918. Immediately after the end of the war, Allenby, the commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, allowed Faisal, Sharif Hussein's son, to set up a provisional Arab government in Damascus, while awaiting the peace conference's final decision on the future of non-Turkish *Wilayets*. Whereas the objective of the British in initiating this step was -apart from being in line with British promises to Sharif Hussein- to preempt French attempts to establish their own sphere of influence, Faisal sought to expand Sharifian rule as much as possible in the direction of Arab and non-Arab areas, the Fertile Crescent and Western and Southern Kurdistan. Despite the continuing efforts of Faisal and Sharif Hussein, neither London nor the British authorities in Baghdad wanted any Sharifian interference in Kurdish affairs, especially those of Southern Kurdistan. Sharif Hussein, who was accordingly informed of the British decision, promised in his statement to Mark Sykes not to concern himself with British plans for Southern Kurdistan's future.<sup>86</sup>

Despite his undertaking, Sharif Hussein and his followers were determined to realise their claims on many Kurdish areas. For this purpose they continually worked to influence the Allies' views on Kurdistan's future both inside and outside of the Paris peace conference. In

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<sup>85</sup>\* Report on Middle East Conference Held in Cairo and Jerusalem, 12-30 March 1921, FO371/6343, PRO.

<sup>86</sup>\* Toynbee, Foreign Office Minute No.174037, 22 November 1918, FO 371/3407, PRO.



January 1919, Amir Faisal stated in his appeal to the Allies that the northern limits of the Arab country was the Alexandretta-Persia line, in accordance with the content of his father's war-time correspondence with the British.<sup>87</sup> This meant that the proposed Arab state would include both Southern and Western Kurdistan. Immediately after being installed as ruler of Syria, Feisal asked the peace conference for the inclusion of the same Kurdish area into his country. At the same time as appealing to the peace conference, the Sharifians employed different tactics, such as reaching a bilateral arrangement with Britain, which would include Southern and Western Kurdistan in a British-sponsored Arab state. Between 1918 and early 1919, Feisal, who was then the ruler of Syria, constantly attempted to persuade Britain to conclude a bilateral agreement, with a view to settling the political future of the three *Wilayets* of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul before the peace conference could make its decision. In other words, while using the peace conference as a means of obtaining Allied support for Arab territorial claims, Feisal also sought to achieve them through a bilateral agreement with Britain, and present this to the conference as a *fait accompli*. In his efforts to establish as large an Arab state as possible, Feisal went so far as to play off Britain against France and *vice versa*. In April 1921, the French told the British that Feisal sought their assistance to drive them out of the Mosul *Wilayet*,<sup>88</sup> at the same time as he incited the British to contain French influence in the region.

The other method the Sharifians used to achieve their territorial objectives in Ottoman Kurdistan was to engage in secret activities among the Kurds. Their intention was to create an unbridgeable gap between the Kurds and British officials on the ground. By this, they hoped to forestall the emergence of an independent Kurdish state under British protection. The establishment of the first Kurdish Government in Sulaimaniya seemed to be the catalyst for Sharifian activities in Kurdistan. As soon as the First World War ended, Sharif Hussein sent his emissaries to different parts of Kurdistan, hoping to turn the Kurds against Britain by playing on their religious sentiments. His secret activities in Kurdistan were confirmed by Leachman, who referred to Sharif Hussein's growing interest in Kurdish matters under his jurisdiction<sup>89</sup> and by Noel, who informed Baghdad of the activities of Sharifian agents among the Northern Kurds, with a view to turning them against Britain.<sup>90</sup> The interferences of Sharif Hussein and

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87\* Amir Faisal's Memorandum to the Supreme Council at the Paris Peace Conference, 1 January. Miller, *My Diary*, Vol. IV, 297-9.

88\* Lawrence to Colonial Office, 13 April 1921, CO730/18, PRO.

89\* Memorandum from SSO, Mosul, to GHQ, 26 April 1919, AIR 20/512, PRO.

90\* Political, Baghdad, to Egypt Force, Cairo, 29 April 1919, AIR 20/512, PRO.

Feisal in Kurdish affairs extended to Eastern Kurdistan, where the British Consul in Urmia reported the arrival of “*emissaries from Damascus*” in the Urmia district, with a view to stirring up local Kurds against Britain. The secret activities of Hussein and Feisal culminated in the establishment of covert contacts with the Young Turks, their former bitter enemy.

Sharif Hussein and Feisal were also behind the political programme of a Sunni Mesopotamian clique, who advocated the establishment of Sharifian rule in Mesopotamia. Through the Syrian Congress and the Aleppo Committee, these Sunnis put forwards demands for the establishment of an Arab state in Mesopotamia, which would include not only Southern Kurdistan but also the Kurdish *Wilayet* of Diyarbekir.<sup>91</sup> They were also engaged in concerted political and propaganda activities aiming at convincing both the British and the Southern Kurds of the viability of the Sharifian solution. In his conversation with Hubert Young, Nuri al-Sa'id, a Sunni figure and a future Prime Minister of Iraq, tried to convince his counterpart that:

*not only the people of Mosul and Baghdad, but also the Kurds of Southern Kurdistan were anxious for Abdullah [Hussein's eldest son] to be their Amir, provided that the British did not withdraw their advice and assistance.*

In return for bringing Southern Kurdistan under Arab rule, he expressed the willingness of the “*Baghdadis*” in Damascus, who were Sunni followers of Feisal, to keep the Basra *Wilayet* under “*a special administration and special British occupation*”.<sup>92</sup> In other words, Nuri al-Said was willing to leave an overwhelmingly Arab *Wilayet* under direct British control in exchange for placing Southern Kurdistan under Arab rule. While in London, Nuri al-Sa'id became quite aware of Britain's growing dilemma of maintaining its influence without making any additional military and financial commitments. He seized the opportunity to put forward his own solution before the Inter-Departmental Conference of Middle Eastern Affairs (IDCM). It included Southern Kurdistan's inclusion into Mesopotamia under a Sharifian ruler as a means of ending all British “*troubles*”. He tried to convince those present that the Southern Kurds would be “*quite willing*” to come under the rule of Sharif Abdullah, Feisal's older brother, if Britain installed him as the head of an Arab government in Baghdad.<sup>93</sup> The Sharifians enjoyed the support of two British officials: Gertrude Bell and T.E. Lawrence, who were two strong advocates of a Sharifian solution for Mesopotamia. The only noticeable difference between the

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91\* The American Section of the International Commission on Mandates in Turkey, the King-Crane Report, *Papers Relating to Foreign Relations of the United States*, pp.780 & 782.

92\* Young, Foreign Office Minute No. E2571, 3 April 1920, FO 371/5068, PRO. Curzon read the Minute and approved of its inclusion in the agenda of IDCM.

93\* IDCM, Minute 37, 13 April 1920, FO 371/5068, PRO.

two officials was that Lawrence recognised the distinction between the Mosul *Wilayet*, which was mainly Kurdish, and the Baghdad and Basra *Wilayets*, which were mainly Arab. He, unlike Bell, who advocated a united Mesopotamia under a Sharifian ruler,<sup>94</sup> called for the formation of two separate Sharifian states in Mesopotamia, one of which would be a mixed Arab-Kurdish state.<sup>95</sup>

On another level, the Sunni Mesopotamians, who must have been alarmed by the prospect of the establishment of a Kurdish state by the forthcoming peace conference, attempted to dissuade the Southern Kurdish delegation of Sulaimaniya from going to Paris. Ja'afar Pasha and Najji Bey, the advocates of a united Mesopotamia under Sharifian rule, told the Kurdish delegation that:

*Kurdish independence would not go down at all in Paris and that in view of the proximity of Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk to Baghdad and Mosul, the Kurds had far better throw in their lot with the Mesopotamian Arabs, who would certainly gain their independence very shortly.*<sup>96</sup>

Having failed to persuade Britain to establish a united Syrian-Mesopotamian state under Feisal, these Sunni officers declared Abdullah as king of Mesopotamia in March 1920, hoping to agitate the Arab Mesopotamians against the British administration. Generally speaking, the political and propaganda efforts of the Sharifians and their Sunni followers in Baghdad failed to convert London to the Sharifian solution for the *Wilayets* of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul within the framework of the Turkish peace settlement. This could be attributed to three important factors. Firstly, the India Office and the Foreign Office believed that Southern Kurdistan was too important both in strategic and economic terms to the British presence in Mesopotamia and Persia to be abandoned either to the French or the Sharifians. Secondly, Col. Wilson, who was responsible for the Mesopotamian policy on the ground, firmly opposed any plan for Arab or Kurdish self-government. Thirdly, there was no popular support for the Sharifian cause among the Mesopotamian Arabs, let alone the Southern Kurds. But, the 1920 rising in Mesopotamia -which costed Britain huge losses in men and money- proved that direct British rule was a failure. One of its direct consequences was to bring the Sharifian solution to the fore as an ideal option to end existing British political, financial and military troubles in Mesopotamia. Britain's decision to establish an Arab government in Baghdad and its search for another kingdom for Feisal, whom the French expelled from Syria, enabled the Sharifians to become an increasingly important factor in influencing British policy towards Southern Kurdi-

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94\* Policy in Arabia, 20 November 1918, L.O.L/P. S/18/B297.

95\* India Office, Political Department, Note on Kurdistan, 14 December 1918, FO 371/3386, PRO.

96\* GSI, Mesopotamia, GHQ, 17 May 1919, AIR 20/512, PRO.

stan in the following years. As soon as the British installed him king of Arab Iraq in 1921, Feisal and his Sunni entourage resolutely resumed their campaign for a united Iraq including Southern Kurdistan.

## Conclusion

Three main conclusions can be derived from examining British Kurdish policy in light of the development of the Kurdish nationalist movement, the Armenian question and the Sharifian-Mesopotamian factor. Firstly, despite the unquestioned supremacy of its own strategic, economic and political interests, Britain's Kurdish policy at the peace conference was to some extent conditioned by its attitudes towards the nationalist aspirations of the Kurds, Armenians and Sharifians. In other words, one cannot separate the evolution of British policy towards Kurdistan from its regional context. The search for a viable solution for the Armenian question, the impossibility of overlooking Kurdish nationalism as a sizable political force and the Sharifians' territorial aspirations all put Kurdistan's political future into the limelight. All these factors played an important part in elevating the Kurdish question to an international level, by releasing it from its old local and narrow framework and then building it into the Turkish peace settlement. Secondly, Britain unequally evaluated the territorial claims and political aspirations of these new nationalities according to its own strategic, economic and political calculations and, to some degree, its religious-moral concerns. Indeed, when the First World War ended, Britain was only thinking of solving the Armenian question, which received enormous public support in reaction to the Armenian massacres at the hands of the Ottoman authorities. In comparison with the Armenian question, the Kurdish one received no British attention either officially or unofficially.

The course of subsequent events in Kurdistan raised British policy makers' awareness that the solution of the new nationality question within the former Ottoman Empire was far more complicated than they had anticipated before-hand in terms of the strength of local nationalist movements, the existence of conflicting territorial claims and political aspirations as well as the demographic distribution of different ethnic communities. Thus, it became clear that the solution of one question could not be achieved in isolation of the other. For instance, Britain's Armenian policy affected its policy towards Northern Kurdistan and *vice versa*, whereas Britain's Sharifian-Mesopotamian policy particularly affected British attitudes towards

Southern Kurdistan. The terms of the 1920 Sèrvres treaty reflected all these interconnected issues, as will be examined in the next chapter. Finally, unlike the Sharifian-Mesopotamia factor, which had limited effects on British policy towards Southern Kurdistan in the period 1918-1920, the Armenian factor had considerable influence on British Kurdish policy at the peace conference, and thus, indirectly helped elevate the Kurdish question to a unprecedented international level. However, in the following period, 1921-1923, the effects of the Armenian question on British Kurdish policy evaporated, whereas the Sharifian-Mesopotamian factor became increasingly important in this period, which witnessed the establishment of the Iraqi state and then the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into it.

## Chapter Five

### British Policy Towards Kurdistan's Future At The San Remo Conference: The Terms Of The Sèvres Treaty (August 1920)

When the final session of the Paris peace conference ended on 21 January 1920, the future of the Ottoman Empire still remained unresolved because the Allies concentrated their diplomatic efforts largely on the European settlement and disagreed with each other over the new Middle Eastern order. The Allies only agreed to the imposition of the mandate system as the political means by which they would achieve their strategic and economic interests in the Middle East. However they could not settle important aspects of the mandate system such as the designation of the actual mandatories and the delimitation of the boundaries for the mandated territories.<sup>1</sup> This chapter discusses the strategic and economic factors that influenced the delimitation of Britain's direct and indirect interests in Kurdistan in relation to the boundaries of its Mesopotamian mandate, as well as the position of the Foreign, India and War Offices on the settlement of the Kurdish question as a whole.

The contradiction in British and French interests during the Allied discussion of various European and Middle Eastern issues in Paris produced acrimony rather than accord. In the meantime, the Allies consigned the entire question of the Middle East's future to further consultation between the interested parties. Accordingly, the San Remo conference of April 1920 was held amidst disagreement over such issues as the future of Constantinople, the Straits, Kurdistan, Greater Syria and Armenia. This chapter places its focus on the effects of the imperial rivalry between Britain and France on the Kurdish question that resulted in the partition of Kurdistan. It also interprets the terms of the Sèvres treaty (August 1920) from a regional perspective, by shedding light on new factors that came into play in the post-war Middle East, such as the threat of Bolshevism and the rise of nationalism in Turkey and Persia.

### **Kurdistan's Geopolitical And Economic Value And The Limits Of British Direct And Indirect Interest**

Being a mountainous region, situated between the Ottoman Empire, Czarist Russia and Qajar Persia, Kurdistan enjoyed distinct geopolitical importance. In other words, Kurdish areas could be used both as natural strategic buffers to defend the heartland of Turkey and Persia and as bridges through which they could extend their territorial control to other areas. The

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<sup>1</sup>\* Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, p.2.

Turkish-Persian conflicts in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries illustrate how holding Kurdistan was crucial to the maintenance of the security of the Ottoman Empire and the Persian Kingdom. The apparently tolerant attitudes by Constantinople and Tehran towards the existence of autonomous Kurdish *Emirates* within their respective parts of Kurdistan largely reflected their desire to consolidate the security of their frontiers, and simultaneously, extend their rule to other Kurdish areas outside their control. To Russia, as the India Office observed in March 1915, Kurdistan was "*the only pass*" through which it could reach the Mediterranean Sea. To any Power that was in control of the Mesopotamian plains, Kurdistan would be "*a standing menace*" if it came under the influence of another hostile Power.<sup>2</sup> Kurdistan's strategic importance was accentuated by the unstable political conditions resulting from the First World War: the rise of local nationalism, the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the decay of the Qajar Kingdom, British-French rivalry for direct and indirect spheres of influence and the growing threat of Bolshevism. As soon the war ended, various attempts were made by the French, Arabs, Turks, Armenians and Persians to acquire as much strategic Kurdish territory as possible. The British did not lose sight of the fact that the peculiarity of Kurdistan lay in its geopolitical position:

*The Kurdish question was of great interest to HMG and was the object of close study. We were interested in it, in the present, because the Kurds were an important element on both sides of our military frontier north of Baghdad, and one of the most important, if not the most important, just beyond the territories occupied by us.. We should have a permanent interest in the Kurds in the future also because whatever else happened, we had a future in Mesopotamia.*<sup>3</sup>

Britain became particularly interested in the fate of Southern Kurdistan, perceiving it as being as strategically important to Mesopotamia as the North-West Frontier Province was to the Indian Empire. In addition, Southern Kurdistan contained potential oil sources vital for the British navy. Following its capture of Mosul, Britain focused its early diplomatic efforts on modifying the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement by transforming the ensuing *de facto* British control over the region into a permanent one. By virtue of its military control over the Mosul *Wilayet*, and France's need for its support against Germany in Europe, Britain was in a very strong position to press France to agree to a boundary revision of the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement. On 1 December 1918, Lloyd George persuaded George Clemenceau, the

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2\* British Desiderata in Turkey in Asia, Appendix VI, The Future of Settlement of Eastern Turkey in Asia and Arabia, Note by the Secretary, Political and Secret Department, India Office, 14 March, CAB27/1, PRO, p.86.

3\* De Robeck to Curzon, Confidential, 20 December 1919, Enclosure No.1, Ryan, Memorandum, 27 November 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

French Premier, to give up France's territorial share in the Mosul *Wilayet* in exchange for oil. This oral agreement was built into the 1919 Long-Bérenger agreement that gave France 50% share in the TPC. However, Lloyd George annulled this agreement because of his disagreement with the French over the size of Syria. Now he wanted -as Lord Curzon had advocated from the start- the territorial delimitation of French and British spheres by the peace conference and the placing of the Mosul *Wilayet* under a British mandate, before discussing oil matters. Eventually, the Long-Bérenger agreement was modified and, consequently, France obtained a 25% share in TPC.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from its strategic importance and the potential oil and other mineral wealth, Kurdistan had the water-heads of two important rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. These rivers were vital for the revival of agriculture in Mesopotamia. Realising such a project was one of the main reasons why the India Office and the Government of India supported the idea of colonizing the country during the war. The importance of water also partly explains why Balfour was anxious about defining the geographical limits of Britain's Mesopotamian mandate in such a way that London could avoid unnecessary political complications over water issues; otherwise, it might be forced to reluctantly interfere in areas outside its existing spheres of control. Thus, soon after the British occupation of Mesopotamia and Southern Kurdistan, two early British considerations in Kurdistan took shape: the need to avoid making any river a political frontier for British spheres of control and to prevent rival Powers from extending their control to the water sources:

*[In the conquered areas] fertility is in proportion to irrigation. If, therefore, for other reasons a river is anywhere taken as frontier, elaborate provisions will have to be made by treaty for dividing the water between the cultivators on its two banks who (by supposition) are under different mandates.<sup>5</sup>*

By extending its control to the whole of the Mosul *Wilayet*, Britain partly achieved its aim of not turning rivers into political frontiers. Instead, it sought to use the old Ottoman provincial boundaries of the Mosul *Wilayet* to define its sphere of control. The attainment of the second aim of securing the water sources was out of Britain's reach due to military and financial restrictions imposed by the First World War. Britain thus confined its control to the strategically and economically vital part of Kurdistan: Southern Kurdistan.

Having identified the boundaries of its sphere of control, Britain now proceeded to

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4\* Joshua C. Baylson, *Territorial Allocations by Imperial Rivalry: The Humane Legacy in the Near East*, [University of Chicago, Department of Geography, Research Paper No. 22, 1987], p.93.

5\* Memorandum on Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia: Reflections of Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour, 11 August 1919, DBFP, Vol.I, pp.340-349.



define, firstly, its position on the political future of the remainder of the Kurdish areas outside its control, i.e. Northern and Eastern Kurdistan. Secondly, Britain needed to define its strategic, political and economic interests in Kurdistan in light of both the territorial and political aspirations of the Armenians, Persians and Arabs and the growing threat of Bolshevism and French rivalry in the Middle East. In other words, Britain sought to incorporate its objectives in Kurdistan into its broader Middle Eastern policy. Initially, Britain had two options, either to impose its own political arrangements for Kurdistan and then to go to the peace conference with a *fait accompli* or await the peace conference's debates on the issue. Having said that, the absence of a well-defined Kurdish policy during and after the Paris peace conference did not prevent British officials on the ground from adopting a number of political and administrative measures in British-controlled Southern Kurdistan. Although these were carried out on an initially temporary basis, they were built into both the Sèvres terms on Kurdistan's future and into the provisions of the British Mesopotamian mandate.

### **The Crystallisation Of British Objectives In Kurdistan**

British policy on the future of the Middle East was worked out at the meeting of the Eastern Committee, which concluded its works in December 1918. Lloyd George, who headed a coalition Government of Liberals and Conservatives, dominated the early British-French negotiations on the Middle East and was in a broad agreement with the Eastern Committee and the Foreign Office.<sup>6</sup> This resulted in Britain's acquisition of the French share of the Mosul *Wilayet*. From 1919 onwards, the meetings of the IDCM -chaired by Lord Curzon- extensively discussed the future of Kurdistan and Mesopotamia. At these meetings representatives from the Foreign, India and War Offices, and the Air Ministry, the Treasury and the Board of Trade were present. From time to time, British officials who served in the Middle East, such as Col. Wilson, Gen. Allenby and Maj. Noel, also attended the IDCM meetings, offering their views and recommendations.

When the war between the Allies and Turkey ended in October 1918, neither the Foreign Office nor the India Office paid any attention to the Kurds. However, the rise of the Kurdish nationalist movement and the reports of certain British officials, notably Maj. Noel and Capt. Woolley, shed light on the existence of the Kurdish question and underlined the need

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<sup>6</sup>\* Christopher M. Andrew, 'France, Britain and the Peace Settlement: A Reconsideration', -in- *The Great Powers in the Middle east, 1919-1939*, (Ed) Uriel Dann, (London & New York: Holmes & Meir, 1988), pp.158-159.

to settle it within the framework of the Turkish peace settlement. Thus, it was necessary, from the British Government's viewpoint, to formulate a clear policy towards the future of Kurdistan. The Foreign Office and India Office, which were directly involved in Kurdish affairs, studied all the views and the proposals that came from British official circles in the Middle East, such as the British High Commissions in Constantinople and Cairo, the Civil Commission in Baghdad and the British Embassy in Tehran, so as to define Britain's ultimate position on the Kurdish question.

Apart from being united on the issue of keeping Eastern Kurdistan within Persia, the striking point about the attitudes of the Foreign and India Offices towards the Kurdish question was their changeability. As the records of the meetings of the IDCM reveal, these attitudes were altered by the passage of time and in accordance with new developments in Turkey, Persia and the Caucasus. Curzon highlighted the difficulty of reaching a definite British position on the Kurdish question at the meetings of the IDCM. He pointed out that the IDCM arrived at "*diametrically opposite conclusions*" at each of its meetings: the establishment of autonomous Kurdish states around the borders of the Mosul *Wilayet*, the division of Ottoman Kurdistan between Britain and France, and the leaving of the Kurds to their own devices.<sup>7</sup> In terms of motivations, the India Office was primarily concerned with the security of India, which required the protection of Persian territorial integrity and the consolidation of the British position in Mesopotamia. The Foreign Office viewed Kurdistan's future from a wider perspective, including its concern for the political future of Armenia, the growing Bolshevik menace, French territorial ambitions and the rise of nationalist movements in Persia and Turkey. The existence of these diverse concerns among British official circles and the state of flux in the political situation in the Middle East were partly responsible for London's hesitation in defining the objectives of its Kurdish policy until April 1920.

In terms of defining the limits of British influence, the India Office initially confined its concerns primarily to Southern Kurdistan, which was considered to be of strategic, economic and political importance for the viability of the Mesopotamian administration:

*The importance to Great Britain of Kurdistan lay in the fact that the power paramount in this country will command the strategic approaches to Mesopotamia and control the water supply of the eastern affluent of the Tigris, on which the irrigation of Mesopotamia largely depends. Moreover, a settled and friendly Kurdistan is essential to the peace of upper Mesopotamia, while the country will be a valuable recruiting ground for military purposes. The low-lying regions bordering on Mesopotamia contain oil-fields and other natural resources. The districts of Sulaimaniya and Halabjah are reported to be susceptible of great development; their products include petroleum, coal and tobacco. Oil is also found in the neighbourhood of Tuz Khurmatu on the road between Kifri and Kirkuk and at Chia Surkh in the extreme south-east corner*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

of the area.<sup>8</sup>

During the existence of the first Kurdish Government under Mahmud, the India Office desired an autonomous Southern Kurdistan in the form of several small states under British direction,<sup>9</sup> as an ideal arrangement, if Britain was unable -for financial reasons- to commit itself militarily. Arthur Hirtzel, the India Office Under-Secretary, who suggested the establishment of an "independent Southern Kurdistan" with its own separate administration and revenue, feared that the return of Turkish rule to the remainder of Kurdistan would make it an "unpleasant neighbour" to both the new Iraqi state and the Armenian Kingdom.<sup>10</sup> This probably explains why the India Office showed some interest in the idea of extending British mandatory control to those Kurdish areas which were situated to the south of Armenia,<sup>11</sup> if the latter came under the American mandate.

America's refusal to take the Armenian mandate forced British policy makers to reconsider their attitudes towards all aspects of the Turkish peace settlement. Now, Montagu supported, with some reservations, Wilson's proposals for the partition of Ottoman Kurdistan between Turkey and Mesopotamia. Montagu also called for the establishment of a tiny Kurdish state in Botan (Jezirah) under British protection, with a view to strengthening Mosul's strategic defences.<sup>12</sup> He opposed any British withdrawal from strategically and economically important areas in Southern Kurdistan, such as Khaniqin, Kirkuk and Zakho.<sup>13</sup> However, at the meeting of the IDCM in April 1920, Montagu returned to the idea of transforming Southern Kurdistan into an independent frontier region on the lines of the North-West Province of India.<sup>14</sup> He even accepted the idea of allowing Southern Kurdistan to join Northern Kurdistan at some time in the future, if the Kurds so wanted.

Like the India Office, the Foreign Office initially evaluated Kurdistan's future from the angle of consolidating Britain's strategic and economic position in Mesopotamia. It also contemplated the establishment of a separate Southern Kurdistan. But unlike the India Office, the Foreign Office desired very little British involvement in the Kurdish areas, from which British forces should be evacuated. The separate Southern Kurdistan would include all areas to

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8\* Political Department, India Office, Note on Kurdistan, 14 December 1918, FO371/3386, PRO.

9\* Briton Cooper Busch, *Mudros to Lausanne: Britain's Frontier in West Asia, 1918-1923*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1976), p.370.

10\* Shuckburgh, 1 August 1919, FO371/4192.

11\* British Delegation, Paris, 12 October 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

12\* A. Hirtzel, India Office Recommendations on Kurdistan, 8 April 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

13\* Ibid.

14\* IDCM, Minute No.37 13 April 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

the east of the Tigris, whereas other areas to the west of the Tigris, which formed the smallest part of the Mosul *Wilayet*, would be incorporated into a future Arab state.<sup>15</sup> In the light of the desires of the Foreign Office and the India Office, the British authorities in Baghdad were instructed to treat Southern Kurdistan as an autonomous and a separate country from Mesopotamia. The idea of an autonomous Southern Kurdistan with loose British control reflected the anxiety of the Foreign Office about stretching Britain's military and financial commitments. Hubert Young of the Foreign Office even suggested restricting British interference to the establishment of a line of posts in certain Kurdish areas to protect the strategic land route to northern Persia, i.e. a line of communications between Baghdad and Hamadan across Southern and Eastern Kurdistan. His suggestion included the appointment of political liaison officers responsible to the British authorities in Baghdad.<sup>16</sup> Young's scheme represented a middle course between total British withdrawal and undertaking a political responsibility for Southern Kurdistan. It would enable Britain to both assist Persia and protect the northern frontier of Mesopotamia from any potential Bolshevik threat.

In late 1919, however the Foreign Office under the new Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, moved in the opposite direction from the idea of establishing an autonomous Southern Kurdistan before the peace conference took its final decision. Curzon now considered retaining British control over Southern Kurdistan (through incorporating it into the Mesopotamian mandate) to be necessary on both strategic and economic grounds. Indeed, by the late 1919, a general consensus emerged among British circles in London and the Middle East that Southern Kurdistan should be under British control. Britain's first major step in that direction was taken when France agreed in principle to transfer its territorial share of the Mosul *Wilayet* to Britain. This step, and subsequent French acquisition of Jezirah-ibn-Omar and the basin of the River Khabour one year later, practically marked the first post-war partition of Ottoman Kurdistan. This partition was built into the formula of the mandate system to administer the former Ottoman *Wilayets* in the Middle East. The League of Nations placed the southern parts of Kurdistan under Britain's Mesopotamian mandate and the western parts of Kurdistan under France's Syrian mandate. In other words, a *de facto* partition of Kurdistan took place long before becoming the cornerstone of the Sèvres terms on Kurdistan's future. Having said that, it was not yet decided what would be the nature of the political relations between Southern

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15\* Toynbee, Foreign Office Minute No.174037, 22 November 1918, FO371/3407 & No.146, 7 January 1919, FO371/4147, PRO.

16\* Young, Foreign Office Memorandum No. 164430, 10 January 1920, FO371/4193, PRO.

Kurdistan and Mesopotamia in the long run. Britain could not decide whether the establishment of a separate Southern Kurdistan was the best solution, and thus, preferred to wait and see.

As to the remainder of Ottoman Kurdistan, the Foreign Office initially contemplated the idea of forming a Kurdish state or confederation of Kurdish states. Against the background of acute financial problems and strong domestic opposition to new military involvements, the IDCM decided in November 1919 that Britain would not accept a mandate for Kurdistan or carry out military activities beyond the frontier of the British sphere in Mesopotamia and Southern Kurdistan. The imperative of not turning Northern Kurdistan into a British political responsibility became stronger in the wake of America's refusal to be directly involved in the Turkish peace settlement through the acceptance of an Armenian mandate. The principle of no British political or military commitments in Northern Kurdistan considerably influenced the British position on the Kurdish question at the San Remo conference. Having said that, the Foreign Office did not agree that Britain should leave Northern Kurdistan to its own devices, as Robeck suggested.<sup>17</sup> George J. Kidston of the Foreign Office highlighted Britain's need for the friendship of the Kurds in light of the growing Bolshevik threat.<sup>18</sup> To win the Kurds over, he and Eyre Crowe advocated the recognition of Kurdish nationality and independence.<sup>19</sup> Britain, although agreeing in principle that the Northern Kurds should work out their own salvation, could not afford to see instability in Northern Kurdistan, which posed a constant threat to its position in Mesopotamia, given the growing Kemalist and Bolshevik menace from the north. Therefore, it became desirable to influence the Kurdish situation in the immediate future by satisfying some Kurdish aspirations for autonomy.

When the San Remo conference started, Britain still had no clear cut position on Northern Kurdistan's future, apart from reaching the conclusion that the acceptance of a mandate for Kurdistan was inconceivable. Between February and April 1920, a series of extraordinary changes took place in the British position on Northern Kurdistan's future. On 20 February 1920, Curzon, who headed the British delegation at the conference, stated that both France and Britain agreed that Northern Kurdistan would be independent, either as a single state or as a federation of autonomous states. He even rejected "*a provisional statement to*

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17\* Busch, *Mudros to Lausanne*, p.371.

18\* Letter From Kidston to Crowe, Paris, 28 November 1919, DBFP, Vol. IV, P.909.

19\* Letter From Crowe, Paris, to Kidston, 1 December 1919, DBFP, Vol.IV, p.913.

*the effect that Kurdistan should remain under the sovereignty of Turkey*'.<sup>20</sup> On 26 February, Lloyd George referred to Northern Kurdistan as part of those non-Turkish regions which would be separated from the Ottoman Empire. He described this as one of the principles which guided the negotiations inside the Allied Council. On 6 March, Curzon informed De Robeck that it was contemplated that Northern Kurdistan should be severed from the Ottoman Empire and secure its independence. However, he highlighted the need for full examination of the means of achieving this aim.<sup>21</sup> Twenty days later, Curzon again talked of a separate autonomous Kurdistan:

*The policy at which we are aiming in the [Turkish] peace treaty.. with regard to Kurdistan, is neither a single protectorate for England or France, nor a divided protectorate, nor a group of states under European protection, but an autonomous Kurdistan severed from Turkey and not even under Turkish suzerainty.*<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, Britain eventually decided not to grant Northern Kurdistan its immediate independence, but temporary local autonomy within Turkey.

The sudden change of heart among British policy makers in the short period March-April 1920 must have reflected Britain's fear of unwanted military and political involvement in Northern Kurdistan, or even the loosening of control over Southern Kurdistan. Moreover, as Curzon remarked, leaving the Northern Kurds under Turkish protection was an ideal option, given the British desire to forestall French attempts to extend their political control to Northern Kurdistan.<sup>23</sup> Young quickly noticed the change in the British position and how the Turkish peace treaty confined itself to the severance of "*liberated areas*", which were occupied by Britain and France, and the treatment of what was left as part of Turkey.<sup>24</sup> At the meeting of the IDCM on 13 April, the last meeting before the conclusion of Sèvres,<sup>25</sup> Curzon pointed out that the conference had swung round to the idea of leaving the Northern Kurds under Turkish rule. On 19 April 1920, he stated that it was no longer desirable, as had been thought before, to detach the remainder of Kurdistan from Turkey, but rather it should be made autonomous

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20\* British Secretary's Note Of Allied conference, London, 20 February 1920, DBFP, Vol. VII, p.159.

21\* Foreign Office Telegram to De Robeck, Constantinople, Very Urgent, 6 March 1920, FO371/5067, PRO.

22\* Curzon to de Robeck, Constantinople, Confidential, 26 March 1920, FO371/5067, PRO.

23\* British Secretary's Note Of Allied Conference, San Remo, 19 April 1920, DBFP, Vol. VIII, p.43.

24\* Young, Foreign Office Minute No.2432, 30 March 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

25\* This meeting was perhaps the most important one in defining the final British position on the Kurdish question at the peace conference. The meeting was chaired by Curzon, the Foreign Secretary. In addition to Montagu, the State Secretary for India, high-level representatives of all concerned British circles, such as the Foreign, India, War Offices, the Treasury and the Air ministry, attended the meeting. IDCM, Minute No.37 13 April 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

on a local basis. He attributed this change to the disunity of the Kurds and their inability to maintain what they would obtain from the peace conference in the absence of the backing of a Great Power. Such was the position of the British Government when the Sèvres terms on the Kurdish question were formulated in April 1920. In light of this, one should distinguish - when interpreting the Sèvres terms on Kurdistan- the intention of the Allies, notably Britain, from the wording of these terms, as the following pages will illustrate.

### **The Implications Of The Sèvres Terms In Light Of British Objectives**

A few aspects of the Sèvres treaty, such as those regarding Armenia and Kurdistan, were not implemented because of the growing strength of Turkish nationalists led by Mustafa Kemal, a former army Commander. Nevertheless, two principal conclusions can be derived from the Sèvres terms on the Kurdish question. Firstly, these terms were formulated by the British and largely expressed their short and long-term objectives in Kurdistan. The French efforts were confined to extracting as many economic and territorial concessions as possible. Secondly, the Sèvres treaty contained articles neither the British nor the French were willing to implement, notably Articles 62 and 64. These articles granted autonomy to those Kurds who lived in the Diyarbekir *Wilayet* and in part of the Bitlis and Van *Wilayets*. This local autonomy would be elevated to independence one year later, if an Allied commission agreed that the Kurds were qualified to have their own state. These articles also referred to possible partial reunification of Ottoman Kurdistan, i.e. British-controlled Southern Kurdistan and the would-be autonomous Kurdistan. The course of discussion at various interdepartmental meetings in London and the bilateral negotiations between British and French policy-makers illustrates that the British Government did not ever really believe that Articles 62 or 64 were feasible. Montagu questioned Britain's ability to create a Kurdish zone free of Turkish rule to the north of British-controlled Southern Kurdistan, in view of its unwillingness to commit itself militarily to the maintenance of Mesopotamia's security.<sup>26</sup> Curzon doubted the viability of creating an autonomous Kurdistan, given Britain's decision not to intervene or to take direct responsibility for the implementation of the Sèvres terms on Kurdistan. He told the French that the Kurds themselves felt "*they could not maintain their existence without the backing of a Great Power*", and that in the absence of British and French protection, they preferred the idea of leaving themselves "*under the protection of the Turks*".<sup>27</sup> Olson holds that by 1920, it was

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<sup>26</sup>\* IDCM , Minute No.37 13 April 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

<sup>27</sup>\* British Secretary Note..., San Remo, 19 April 1920, DBFP, Vol. VIII, p.43.

highly unlikely that Britain would push for the implementation of Article 62, given the growing strength of Kemalist forces.<sup>28</sup> In other words, Britain did not expect to see the emergence of a Kurdish state in Northern Kurdistan. It was not accidental that Britain opposed any League of Nations' role in Kurdish affairs and made sure that no Kurdish representative could speak on behalf of the Kurds at the San Remo conference, unlike other nationalities such as the Armenians.

It is true that the last paragraph of Article 64 provided for a possible reunification of the would-be Kurdish state and Southern Kurdistan. However, the evidence clearly shows that the British were not really willing to let Southern Kurdistan join a future Kurdish state. During the Allied negotiations, Curzon was emphatic in his views that the Southern Kurds did not want to be removed from the Mosul *Wilayet*<sup>29</sup> and, by implication, from the British Mesopotamian mandate. As Ghassemlou asserts, Britain sought through Sèvres to turn Southern Kurdistan into a special British domain.<sup>30</sup> Southern Kurdistan increasingly became strategically too important to the British position in Mesopotamia to be allowed to go its own way. Otherwise, Britain would not have resorted to diplomatic efforts and the making of territorial and economic bargains, so that it could persuade France to accept the inclusion of Southern Kurdistan in its Mesopotamian mandate some time before the determination of the Kurdish question. Indeed, the inclusion of Southern Kurdistan in the British Mesopotamian mandate was later built into Sections I and VII of the Sèvres Treaty. The question is why did the British insert this paragraph into Article 64, if they had no intention of implementing it? The likely explanation is that the British sought to give the impression that their control over Southern Kurdistan was of a temporary nature and thus there would be no need to adopt a Kurdistan-wide territorial, economic and political partition, as the French persistently demanded. The minute of one of the IDCM's meetings illustrates how Curzon

*had been doing his best to fend Mr. Berthelot [the French representative] off this area [i.e. Western Kurdistan], and the argument he had employed was that we were ourselves [the British] proposing to clear out of Southern Kurdistan. He feared that we would awaken opposition, if we now went to San Remo and said that we had abandoned this intention.*<sup>31</sup>

In other words, by arguing that Southern Kurdistan had the right to join a future Kurdish state, Britain endeavoured to contain the expansion of French political influence deeper into Kurdistan, i.e. Kurdish areas situated between Armenia, Syria, Persia and British-controlled South-

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28\* Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, p.54.

29\* British Secretary's Note., San Remo, 19 & 23 April 1920, DBFP, Vol. VIII, pp.44 & 133.

30\* Ghassemlou, *Kurdistan and the Kurds*, p.48.

31\* IDCM, Minute No.37 13 April 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.



ern Kurdistan. In his analysis of British-French imperial rivalry, Christopher M. Andrew highlights how Britain disguised its imperial ambition in the Middle East beneath what he calls "*the newly fashionable cloak of self-determination*".<sup>32</sup> Indeed, in one post-war memorandum, Balfour stated that the Sykes-Picot agreement disregarded "*the modern notions of nationality*" and how to deal with the new nationalities such as the Kurds, the Arabs and the Jews.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, Britain hoped to avoid the alienation of Kurdish nationalists in Northern Kurdistan at a time when the political situation seemed in a state of flux. The rise of Turkish and Persian nationalist movements, coupled with the steady Bolshevik advance towards the Caucasus and north Persia, formed a serious threat to British strategic positions from India to the Mediterranean Sea. Under such conditions, Britain did not want to face political instability in Southern Kurdistan, especially when the Kemalists were determined to recover as much Ottoman territory as possible, particularly in Kurdistan and Armenia. Therefore, Britain made sure that the Southern Kurds understood that bringing Southern Kurdistan under the Mesopotamian mandate would not contradict their interests. Examination of the terms of the Mesopotamian mandate and post-Sèvres British policy illustrates that Britain still had not decided on the long-term future of Southern Kurdistan, that is to say, whether it would be established as an autonomous Kurdish state (or a states) or as a permanent part of British Mesopotamia. Nevertheless, what can be safely deduced is that it was not in the British plan to allow Southern Kurdistan to join a Kurdish state.

Close examination of Articles 62 and 64 also reveals further striking implications. The Kurdistan that the Sèvres treaty referred to formed no more than 20% of the actual size of Ottoman Kurdistan, and less than 15% if Eastern Kurdistan was taken into consideration (see see map eighteen). In other words, these articles, which were concerned with Kurdish autonomy and independence, did not affect the majority of the Kurdish areas. The Sèvres treaty symbolised, in practice, the pre-war partition and the post-war partition of Kurdistan between Anatolia, French Syria, British Mesopotamia, Persia and the proposed Armenian state. It is little wonder that the content of the Sèvres treaty on the Kurdish question, which was made public in August 1920, was unwelcome in Kurdish nationalist circles both in Kurdistan and in exile. Pessimistic rather than optimistic feelings spread among nationalists as the Kurdish

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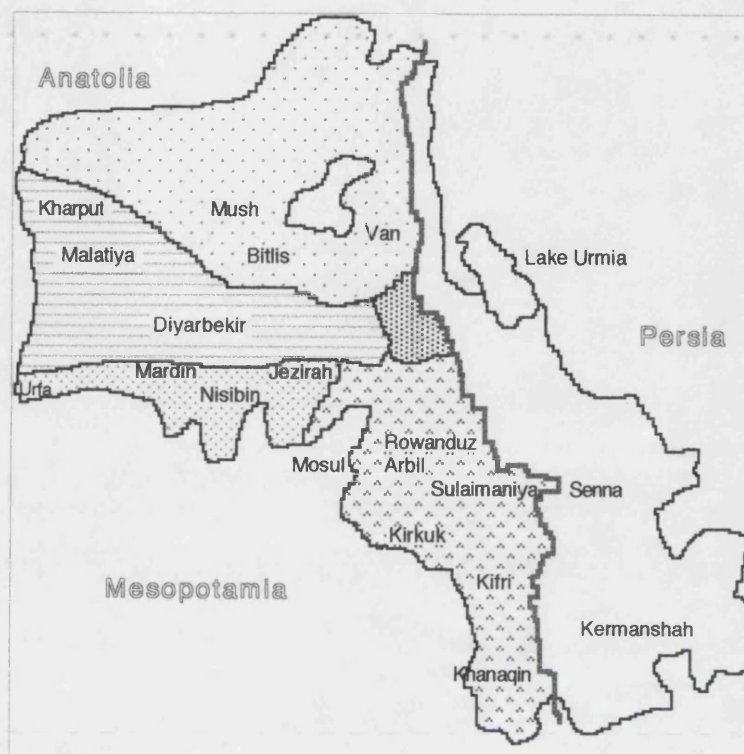
<sup>32</sup>\* Andrew, 'France, Britain and the Peace Settlement', p.159.

<sup>33</sup>\* Memorandum On Syria, Palestine And Mesopotamia: Reflections Of Foreign Secretary A. J. Balfour, 11 August 1919, DBFP, Vol.IV, pp.340-349.

Map Eighteen: The Partition Of Ottoman Kurdistan Under The 1920 Sèvres Treaty

-  Kurdish Areas Included in President Wilson's Proposed Armenia
-  The Autonomous Kurdish Areas, (Recognised As Part Of French Special Interests)
-  Kurdish Areas Under France's Syrian Mandate
-  Kurdish Areas Under Britain's Mesopotamian Mandate
-  Kurdish Areas Expected To Be Part Of Persia

Source: Treaty Of Peace With Turkey, No.s 11 & 12, 10 August 1920, Treaty Series, Cmd 963 & 964 (HMSO)



question became more complicated because of the new large-scale partition.

It seems that the British Government preferred the existence of a tiny autonomous Kurdish entity within a British-orientated Turkey, an alternative which Busch considered to be based on interdepartmental consideration.<sup>34</sup> Such a Turkey, along with an independent Armenia, could serve as buffer states against Bolshevik Russia following British military withdrawal from the Caucasus. On the eve of the San Remo conference, De Robeck warned against a Bolshevik advance in northern Persia and the Caucasus as well as the prospect of an anti-British alliance between the Bolsheviks and the Kemalists.<sup>35</sup> Churchill himself shared such apprehensions and therefore opposed the adoption of any harsh Turkish peace settlement by the peace conference.<sup>36</sup> He and Curzon recommended no severance of non-Turkish Wilayets of the Ottoman Empire, other than the Arab ones. They also drew attention to the fact that other Powers, especially France and America would benefit both politically and economically from any Turkish resistance to the imposition of a harsh peace settlement. Montagu opposed harsh treatment of the defeated Turks, fearing its likely negative effects on the atti-

34\* Busch, *Mudros to Lausanne*, p.371.

35\* J. De Robeck to the Secretary of State of Admiralty, 18 March 1920, FO371/5046, PRO.

36\* Kent, *Moguls and Mandarins*, p.101.

tudes of Indian Muslims towards Britain.<sup>37</sup> He, therefore, recommended the soft treatment of Turkey by adopting a peace settlement similar to the Bulgarian one.

### **French Imperial Interests And Britain's Kurdish Policy**

It was with France that Britain largely conducted the first phase of its post-war diplomacy on the future of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>38</sup> According to Andrew, France's initial strategy under Georges Clemenceau was to make concessions to Britain outside Europe, so as to gain "leverage" when the peace conference turned to discuss the future of the Rhineland.<sup>39</sup> In other words, Clemenceau was prepared to sacrifice the Middle East to Britain in return for maintaining French security *vis-à-vis* Germany. This explains why Clemenceau was willing to give up France's share of the Mosul *Wilayet* and accept British control over Palestine. In contrast, British policy makers, as L.C.B. Seaman points out, were in agreement that Britain's responsibilities to its Empire and Commonwealth, which had been increased as a result of the war, made military involvement in Europe totally unpalatable.<sup>40</sup> The consolidation of the British position in the Middle East and the containment of Bolshevik threat were now Britain's two main priorities.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Britain did not trust France in Europe, and was in favour of a balance of power that ensured that no power, including France, dominated the Continent.<sup>42</sup> With America's support, Britain ensured that Germany was not dismembered as much as France desired, and that the strategic Rhineland, though demilitarised by the Versailles treaty, remained German contrary to France's wishes. Thus the European settlement at the Paris peace conference poisoned the bilateral relations between Britain and France and had considerable influence over the subsequent settlement of the future of the Ottoman Empire at the San Remo conference.

The Ottoman Empire was already divided into various economic spheres of influence among the European Powers when the First World War broke out in 1914. The war offered France an unprecedented opportunity to consolidate its interests and influence in these

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37\* Busch, *Mudros to Lausanne*, pp.79 & 84.

38\* Kent, *Moguls and Mandarins*, p.100.

39\* Andrew, 'France, Britain and the Peace Settlement', p.159.

40\* L.C.B. Seaman, *Post-Victorian Britain, 1902-1951*, (London: University Paperbacks, 1967), pp.127-129.

41\* *Ibid.*

42\* Sally Marks, *The Illusion of Peace: International Relations in Europe, 1918-1933*, (London: MacMillan, 1976), p2.

Ottoman territories. Indeed, France became a key player in concluding several secret agreements, one of which was particularly concerned with Ottoman Kurdistan's post-war future, i.e. the Sykes-Picot agreement. With the disappearance of Czarist Russia as a major player in determining the future of the Ottoman Empire, France pressed Britain for a large scale partition of Ottoman Kurdistan, based on their wartime agreements. Similarly, in the absence of German rivalry, Britain increasingly perceived France as a serious obstacle in the way of constructing a post-war Middle Eastern order. In the Eastern Committee, Curzon identified France as the power whom Britain had most to fear in the future.<sup>43</sup> This then was the setting for the contradictory British and French policies towards Kurdistan after the war.

One of the earliest British attempts to hold back French territorial ambitions in Kurdistan was Mark Sykes' proposal for the establishment of a Kurdish *Emirate*, which would include Mosul. François Georges-Picot, the representative of the French Government, rejected the plan on the grounds that it was "*contrary to French interests*" and sacrificed people such as the Chaldeans and Nestorians, who were "*traditionally protected by the French*".<sup>44</sup> He emphasised that the French Government wanted Mosul to be in its sphere of influence according to the Sykes-Picot agreement.<sup>45</sup> One of Britain's early manoeuvres to prevent the emergence of political vacuums in Kurdistan and Armenia, where France could step in, was to persuade America to accept a mandate for Armenia.<sup>46</sup> Unlike France, America was not a rival colonial power, and therefore, constituted a far lesser threat to British imperial interests in the Middle East. In other words, Britain sought to replace France with America as its "*junior*" partner in redrawing the new political map of the Middle East.<sup>47</sup> Resorting to American power was also necessitated by the over-extension of British imperial responsibilities as well as the Bolshevik takeover in Russia. The British Government hoped that, if America took the Armenian mandate and Britain brought under its mandate Kurdish areas situated between Armenia and Mesopotamia, France's ambitions to extend its political and economic control deeper into Kurdistan would be frustrated.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the British delegation at the Paris peace conference confirmed France's intention to bring under its mandate Kurdish areas situated between Arm-

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43\* Eastern Committee Minute 40, 2 December 1918, CAB27/14.

44\* IDCM, Secretary Note: Situation in Kurdistan, 6 September 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

45\* G.L. Bell, Northern Kurdistan. 8 March 1920, AIR 20/513, PRO.

46\* War Cabinet Minutes No.457 & 459, 13 & 15 August 1918, CAB23/43, PRO.

47\* Barry Rubin, 'America as Junior Partner: Anglo-American Relations in the Middle East, 1919-1939', - in- *The Great Powers in the Middle east, 1919-1939*, op. cit., pp.241-242.

48\* Ibid & William Stivers, *Supremacy and Oil: Iraq, Turkey and the Anglo-American World Order, 1918-1930*, (London& Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p.30.

enia and Mesopotamia.<sup>49</sup> America's rejection of the League of Nations' covenant, and its subsequent refusal to take the Armenian mandate in late 1919 as a result of the opposition of the Congress,<sup>50</sup> changed the political landscape. These developments brought France to the fore as a major player in determining the future of the non-Turkish *Wilayets*.

Unable now to extend its Mesopotamian mandate to Northern Kurdistan, Britain was in no position to resist France's persistent demand for territorial re-arrangements in Kurdistan. Stéphane Pichon, the French Foreign Minister, told Curzon that

*America having disappeared from the scene as a factor in the settlement of the East, and all chances of an American mandate for any portion of the Turkish Empire having.. vanished, there remained only two parties [France and Britain], whose interests had seriously to be considered and reconciled.*<sup>51</sup>

Pichon made clear that he was authorised by his Government to enter into confidential discussion with the British as soon as possible to determine the future of non-Turkish *Wilayets*.<sup>52</sup> Britain had three options for the future of the Kurdish areas to the north of British-controlled Southern Kurdistan. The first option was to partition these Kurdish areas between Britain and France. This was inconceivable to Britain for it entailed extra military and financial commitments. The second option was to immediately declare these areas an independent state. This option would certainly meet French opposition, as was the case in the past. France always suspected that Britain would benefit politically and economically from establishing a Kurdish state, as the Kurdish nationalists were clearly British-orientated in their political outlook. The final option was to re-establish Turkish rule over those Kurdish areas which might enjoy local autonomy in order to satisfy some Kurdish political aspirations.

In contrast, the French approach to the future of Kurdistan was very straightforward and revolved around one idea: its partition between France and Britain. France displayed a more notable consistency in its attitudes towards the Kurdish situation than Britain, probably because it knew what economic and political benefits could be gained from the partition of Kurdistan. Indeed, since the end of the First World War, France had pressed for territorial re-arrangements in Ottoman Kurdistan, based on the Sykes-Picot agreement. As Britain continued to resist the implementation of that agreement, France presented a new partition plan in

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49\* Crowe, British Delegation, Paris, to Curzon, 12 October 1919, FO371/4193, PRO.

50\* Stivers, *Supremacy and Oil: Iraq, Turkey and the Anglo-American World Order, 1918-1930*, pp.44-45.

51\* Curzon, Memorandum, 12 November 1919, FO406/41, PRO.

52\* Curzon's Record of a Conversation with the French Foreign Minister, 12 November 1919, DBFP, Vol. IV, pp.879-81.

late 1919. Philippe Berthelot, the Chief Secretary for Political and Commercial Affairs in the French Foreign Office, argued that, as the Kurds were "*divided into tribes and clans*" and as they, like the Arabs, had "*hardly ever been united into a national state*", France and Britain should divide Ottoman Kurdistan among themselves. This solution, he stated, was temporary, necessitated by the "*geographical situation*" and "*natural wealth*" of the country and pending the peace conference's final decision on the Kurdish question. Berthelot's plan provided for the establishment of a federal organisation in Kurdistan under French and British control. The authority of the Turkish *Sultan* would be nominal, while a number of local elective councils would be established under French and British supervision. The French plan confined the political geography of Kurdistan to the Diyarbekir *Wilayet* and the southern portion of the Bitlis and Van *Wilayets*. The British felt that Berthelot's plan was not temporary, but a permanent territorial and political division of Ottoman Kurdistan, with a view to granting France considerable political and economic spheres of control. Accordingly, Curzon rejected the French plan, arguing its unfeasibility on political and technical grounds. Firstly, the Kurds would oppose it. Secondly, apart from the boundaries of Southern Kurdistan, it would be difficult, Curzon argued, to define the boundaries of the remainder of Kurdistan. <sup>53</sup>

On the other hand, France too was anxious about the extent of Britain's imperial ambitions in Kurdistan. As it was clear that Kurdish nationalists were British-orientated, France was suspicious of any scheme that provided for a separate Kurdistan. Such French fears surfaced when Curzon put forward what he called "*the outlines of a general policy*" which would supposedly guide British and French approaches to Kurdish affairs, pending the peace conference's final decision. The most important points were the following: firstly, there would be no British or French or British-French mandate for Kurdistan as a whole, except those parts which came under British and French mandates over Mesopotamia and Syria respectively. Secondly, Turkish rule should not continue in Kurdistan "*even in a nominal form*". Thirdly, the Kurdish question could not be considered in isolation of the issue of Armenia, as the Kurds were capable of making "*a workable arrangement*" with both the Armenians and Assyrians. Fourthly, the Kurds should be allowed to decide whether they would form "*a single state or a number of small loosely-knit areas*". Fifthly, it was preferable not to have British or French advisers in Kurdistan, though the Kurds would be given a guarantee against "*Turkish aggression*". Finally, it was desirable not to create "*a frontier problem*" for Mesopotamia in Kurdistan akin to the one

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53\* Ibid.

which Britain confronted in India.<sup>54</sup> These outlines partly reflected the military and financial restrictions that prevented Britain from accepting a separate mandate for Ottoman Kurdistan or partitioning it with France. In other words, these outlines sought to restrain France from extending its mandatory control to additional Kurdish areas. It seems that Britain raised the issue of an independent Kurdistan, so as to make France abandon the idea of a large-scale partition. Indeed, France, suspecting ulterior British motives behind the establishment of a separate Kurdistan, changed its position, when Berthelot insisted on amending the synopsis of the Turkish peace treaty so that the remainder of Kurdistan would come under Ottoman sovereignty.<sup>55</sup>

In the end, leaving the Northern Kurds to their own devices -as to whether they wanted to separate from or remain within Turkey- emerged as the ideal solution under the circumstances. On the one side, the French vetoed a separate Kurdistan and, on the other, the British vetoed a Kurdistan-wide partition. It also became necessary that Britain should relegate to the background the idea of an autonomous state in Southern Kurdistan lest France demand the establishment of a parallel Kurdish state in Northern Kurdistan under its control. Curzon highlighted this latter point at the IDCM meeting of 13 April 1920, when making reference to the interconnection between political developments in Southern Kurdistan and those of Northern Kurdistan.<sup>56</sup>

Having failed to persuade the British to jointly partition Northern Kurdistan, the French insisted on obtaining some economic and territorial compensations. Berthelot explained to the British how their zone in Kurdistan had "*mineral resources of much greater value*" than that of the French zone in Cilicia.<sup>57</sup> The French sought British assurance that their economic interests would be secured in the settlement of the Kurdish question, and this eventually became their precondition for accepting the British draft terms on the Kurdish settlement.<sup>58</sup> Accordingly the Sèvres terms on Kurdistan satisfied some French economic ambitions when recognising their special interests in those Kurdish areas situated between Anatolia and Southern Kurdistan, on the one side, and Armenia and Syria, on the other (see map Eighteen). France also sought to bring new Kurdish areas under its control, in addition to Jezirah-ibn-Omar. Berthelot belatedly raised the issue of Kurdistan's boundaries in the Turkish peace set-

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54\* IDCM, Second Additional Note on the Situation in Kurdistan, 10 January 1920, FO371/ 4193, PRO.

55\* British Secretary's Note..., London, 20 February 1920, DBFP, Vol. VII, p.159.

56\* IDCM, Minute No.37 13 April 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

57\* British Secretary Note..., London, 26 February 1920, DBFP, Vol. VII, p.258.

58\* British Secretary's Note..., San Remo, 21 & 23 April 1920, DBFP, Vol. VIII, pp.77 &133.

tlement when criticising the British decision to place them to the east of the Euphrates.<sup>59</sup> This was a clear indication that he wanted to extend French mandatory control to some Kurdish areas in that direction. Eventually, a bilateral French-British agreement at San Remo satisfied the minimum of France's territorial ambitions. The Sèvres treaty finalised the partition of Kurdistan by giving France Urfa, Mardin and Nisibin.

To avoid future inter-Allied rivalries in Kurdistan, be they of a political or economic nature, the Allies also concluded on 23 April 1920 what is known as the Tripartite agreement:<sup>60</sup>

*In the event of the Imperial Ottoman Government. or, in the circumstances provided for in paragraph 3 of the preamble, the Kurdish Government, being desirous of obtaining external assistance in the local administration, or police of the areas, in which the special interests of Great Britain, France and Italy are respectively recognised, the contracting Powers will not dispute the preferential claim of the Power, whose special interests in such areas are recognised, to supply such assistance. This assistance shall be specially directed towards enhancing the protection offered to racial, religious or linguistic minorities in such areas.*<sup>61</sup>

Examination of post-Sèvres relations among the Allies illustrates that, in spite of all these agreements to reconcile differences in their strategic, economic and political interests, neither France nor Britain stopped in its attempts to undermine the position of each other in Kurdistan. This rivalry was intensified when the Kemalists forced France to give up about half of its territorial gains in Kurdistan to Turkey. This development was interpreted by many civilian and military officials in Mesopotamia as a deliberate French attempt to encourage the Kemalists to invade Southern Kurdistan.

### **Persian Territorial Ambitions And Britain's Kurdish Policy**

The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution ended a ten year understanding between Russia and Britain over Persian affairs, and revived the old rivalry between the two Powers over this question. Such a rivalry now took on an additional ideological dimension, i.e. the struggle between communism and capitalism. From 1919 onwards, British Persian policy suffered from serious setbacks. In May 1920, the Bolsheviks occupied north Persia, and with their help, the anti-British Persian nationalists established the Soviet Republic of Gilan. Apart from the ongoing Kurdish revolt in Eastern Kurdistan, other nationalist movements emerged that posed a threat to Per-

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<sup>59</sup>\* British Secretary's Note., San Remo, 21 April 1920, DBFP, Vol. VIII: No. 8 , p.77.

<sup>60</sup>\* This agreement and the Sèvres treaty were simultaneously signed by Turkey and the Allies in Paris on 10 August 1920.

<sup>61</sup>\* DBFP, Vol. VIII:Appendix A, to No.13, Draft of Tripartite Agreement, 23 April 1920, DBFP, Vol. VIII, pp.141.



sian territorial unity. One of these nationalist movements appeared in Persian Azerbaijan, and was as much anti-British as it was anti-central Government.<sup>62</sup> These internal and external threats to Persian territorial unity greatly alarmed Britain, whose strategic interests were closely linked with the unity of Persia. Curzon once defined Britain's task in Persia as assisting it in remaining united so that it "*should not be left to herself and allowed to rot into picturesque decay*".<sup>63</sup> In other words, through containing internal and external threats and strengthening Persian unity and the power of the central Government in Tehran, Britain could consolidate the security of its positions in India, the Persian Gulf and Mesopotamia.<sup>64</sup> Britain's opposition to a separate Eastern Kurdistan stemmed from its fears that it would lead to the disintegration of the Qajar Kingdom.

The complications in post-war Middle Eastern affairs were not only caused by the contradiction between the political, economic and strategic interests of the Great Powers, but also by the territorial claims of the new nationalities as well as the existing states in the region. Qajar Persia, for instance, had its own territorial ambitions, even though it was itself facing the prospect of territorial disintegration. Its territorial ambitions consisted of annexing vast territories - mainly from the Ottoman Empire and Russia- as compensation for the alleged damages caused by the Ottoman and Russian armies in Persia during the war.<sup>65</sup> The Persian Government hoped that, with the help of Britain and America, it could get a seat at the peace conference, so as to persuade the Allies to radically rectify Persia's western, northern and eastern frontiers in its favour.<sup>66</sup> Insofar as Kurdistan was concerned, the *Shah* of Persia demanded the unification of its Ottoman and Persian parts under his rule.<sup>67</sup> Interestingly enough, Persian nationalist opposition pronounced similar territorial demands. Britain, while refusing to allow Persia to attend the peace conference or support its "*preposterous*" territorial claims, was willing to back "*moderate*" Persian demands for rectifying its western frontier,<sup>68</sup> i.e. the old Ottoman-Persian frontiers in Kurdistan.

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62\* Nasrollah Saifpour Fatemi, *Diplomatic History of Persia, 1917-1923: Anglo-Russia Politics in Iran* (New York: Russell F. Moore, 1952), pp.144-254.

63\* Ibid.

64\* Curzon, Memorandum on the Persian agreement, 9 August 1919, DBFP, Vol. IV: No.710, p.1121.

65\* Ishtiaq Ahmad, *Anglo-Iranian Relations, 1905-1919*, (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1974), pp.314-318.

66\* Curzon to Cox, Tehran, 28 November 1919, DBFP, Vol. IV, pp.1245-9.

67\* Curzon to Earl of Derby, Paris, 25 October 1919, DBFP, Vol. IV, p.1214.

68\* Curzon to the Persian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 19 December 1919 & 5 January 1920, DBFP, Vol. IV, pp.1273-4.

The problem of delimitating the Ottoman-Persian frontiers in Kurdish areas was an old one. On the eve of the First World War, the problem was under the consideration of an international commission, consisting of British and Russian representatives. The outbreak of the war prevented the implementations of its recommendations for a moderate modification of the Ottoman-Persian frontier. Following the war, the British -because of their concern for the security of their position in Southern Kurdistan and Persia- paid attention to these unstable frontiers, over which neither the Turks nor Persians had effective control. Mark Sykes sought a radical solution to end the existing instability in Urmia in Eastern Kurdistan, where the pro-Allied Christian communities lived. His solution was not to detach the area from Persia, but to

*transfer Turkish Kurdistan to Persian sovereignty on the condition that the Urmia district should be united with it administratively, and that the whole should form an autonomous province with foreign assistance in its administration. This would (a) secure an effective reconstruction of the Urmia (b) unite the Nestorians on both sides of the frontier (c) satisfy long-standing Persian claims on the former Turko-Persian frontier.. and (d) safeguard our position strategically in Mesopotamia.*<sup>69</sup>

The application of this solution was not practical due to the strength of Kurdish nationalist movement on both sides of the Ottoman-Persian frontier and Britain's unwillingness to commit itself either politically or militarily. But, one main aspect of Sykes' approach, which linked the issue of the Assyrians and other Christian minorities with that of rectifying the Ottoman-Persian frontiers in Kurdistan, drew the attention of the British Government.

When many Assyrians and other Christians were made to leave Persian territory during the war and enter Mesopotamia, the British military authorities suggested their resettlement in Southern Kurdistan by displacing anti-British Kurds from their villages. This solution seemed undesirable because of its financial cost and the fact it helped intensify local troubles. In early 1920, Wilson suggested another solution to the question of the Christian refugees, whom he described as a financial burden on his Mesopotamian administration. It entailed their repatriation to an area in Ottoman Kurdistan close to the Persian frontier. Then Persia's control would be extended to that area by means of rectifying the existing frontier in its favour. In this manner, Wilson argued, these Christians would be freed from Turkish rule and cease to be a heavy financial burden on the British administration in Mesopotamia.<sup>70</sup> Such a view was also backed by the India Office and the Foreign Office. Curzon stated that the British were all "anxious" to repatriate the Christians, and searched for the appropriate means to achieve it in a manner that would not incur political complications. In his view, it was the Kurds with whom

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69\* Toynbee, Foreign Office Minute No. 174037, 22 November 1918, FO371/3407, PRO.

70\* IDCM, Minute No.37 13 April 1920, FO371/5068, PRO.

the Persian Government should discuss the issue of rectifying the frontier in Kurdistan. His motive was to sidestep any Turkish opposition to the rectification of the frontiers. Accordingly, the Sèvres terms provided that the Persian Government would negotiate with the Kurds, not the Turks, with a view to securing the rectification of the frontier. The striking thing about the Sèvres terms on the issue of defining the southern frontiers of Armenia with Kurdistan was that the Armenians would negotiate with the Turks, not the Kurds, even though that issue concerned the would-be autonomous Kurdish entity.

On the other hand, the issue of Persian territorial claims presented Britain with an opportunity to realise several objectives. Article 62 of the Sèvres treaty stated that

*the scheme [of autonomy] shall contain full safeguards for the protection of the Assyro-Chaldeans and other racial or religious minorities within these areas, and with this object a commission composed of British, French, Italian, Persian and Kurdish representatives shall visit the spot to examine and decide what rectifications, if any, should be made in the the Turkish frontier where, under the provisions of the present Treaty, that frontier coincided with that of Persia.*

The implementation of Article 62 would have far-reaching political and strategic implications insofar as Britain and Persia were concerned. Firstly, it had the effect of perpetuating Turkish-Persian frontier problems. This meant the pre-empting of any attempt to form an anti-British and a pan-Islamic movement by the Kemalists. It is worth noting that the Kemalists still used Islamic sentiment to mobilise the Muslims of different ethnic background for their cause and to forge regional allies against Western domination. Moreover, the Kemalists' efforts converged with those of the Bolsheviks, who waged a comprehensive anti-British propaganda campaign among Muslim nationalities. British officials in London and on the ground were greatly alarmed by the ongoing anti-British and pan-Islamic propaganda in Persia,<sup>71</sup> where the Muslims formed an absolute majority. Secondly, the rectification of the frontiers in Persia's favour, the British hoped, would encourage the Persian Government to effectively extend its authority to these areas where Kurdish rebels threatened its territorial unity.<sup>72</sup> Thirdly, on moral ground, Britain found it difficult to escape from its responsibility towards these Christian communities, who had supported the Allies during the war. Yet it wished to solve the Assyrian problem as cheaply as possible,<sup>73</sup> without making any political commitment. Like the British authorities in Baghdad, Curzon, who constantly referred to the Assyrians as a heavy financial burden on the

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71\* Commander Luke to Admiral Webb, 25 December 1919, Enclosure 1, DBFP, Vol. IV, pp.1001-1003. & Ryan, Memorandum, Constantinople, 29 December 1919, Enclosure 2 in No.647, DBFP, Vol. IV, pp.1003-1005.

72\* Curzon to the Persian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 5 January 1920, DBFP, Vol. IV, p.1248.

73\* British Secretary's Note..., San Remo, 19 April 1920, DBFP, Vol. VIII, p.44.

Mesopotamian administration, viewed the re-adjustment of the Ottoman-Persian frontier as a practical solution. Lastly, the construction of the Assyrian settlement and the extension of Persian rule to the mutinous Kurdish areas would create a stable zone close to the northern frontiers of the British sphere in Southern Kurdistan. In other words, the readjustment of the Ottoman-Persian frontier would simultaneously strengthen and shorten Britain's strategic defensive line *vis-à-vis* future Turkish and Bolshevik attacks across Kurdistan. These various considerations demonstrate that Britain's willingness to support the Persian claim in the direction of Kurdistan was calculated, and was not coincidental or done out of sympathy.

## Conclusion

Both Britain's diplomacy and the Kurdish policy on the ground considerably influenced the development of the Kurdish question and its settlement at the San Remo conference in 1920. Indeed, when the First World War ended, the British were in control of vital Turkish areas, notably the Bosphorus and Constantinople. Their forces -and those of their Allies, such as France, Italy and Greece- directly or indirectly controlled most of the Turkish and non-Turkish *Wilayets*. British forces were also present in southern and northern Persia. The Ottoman army was in the process of rapid disintegration and the Qajar army was suffering from the same fate. The authorities of the central Governments in Constantinople and Tehran were so weak that they lost control over remote regions, especially in Kurdistan. In various parts of Kurdistan, Kurdish nationalists, who emerged to fill the existing political vacuum, were politically or militarily engaged in activities aimed at realising Kurdish nationalist aspirations. Under such conditions, Britain was in a strong position to create a Kurdish state, if it so wanted. It was unfortunate for the Kurdish nationalists that British strategic, economic and political interests did not require the establishment of a Kurdish national state in the period 1918-1920. This disharmony between British interests and Kurdish nationalist aspirations can, to a considerable degree, explain why the Kurds emerged stateless in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and also why Kurdistan was re-partitioned. The one positive aspect of the Sèvres treaty, from a Kurdish viewpoint, as Ghassemlou points out, was that Kurdish rights had been mentioned by an international treaty for the first time.<sup>74</sup>

The forgoing survey of the evolution of Britain's Kurdish policy and the crystallisation of its various objectives in Kurdistan after the First World War highlighted two main points.

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<sup>74</sup>\* Ghassemlou, *Kurdistan and the Kurds*, p.42.

Firstly, there was a pressing need for Britain to define its interests and the limits of its political influence in Kurdistan. Such a definition was conditioned by Britain military and financial capabilities, which became severely restricted as a result of the First World War. Priority was given to the security of the British strategic position in Mesopotamia, and this considerably influenced the direction of British policy towards Kurdistan. One of its important consequences was to bring Southern Kurdistan under the British mandate of Mesopotamia, which represented the *de facto* partition of Ottoman Kurdistan even before the peace conference could take its final decision on the settlement of the Kurdish question. Secondly, Britain also approached the settlement of the Kurdish question from regional and international perspectives. The revival of imperial rivalry with France, the growing threat of Bolshevism, the uncertainty about the future of both Turkey proper and Armenia and the importance of Persian territorial unity influenced, in various degrees, British Kurdish policy and ultimately the terms of the Sèvres treaty on Kurdistan.

## Chapter Six

### Southern Kurdistan Under Britain's Mesopotamian Mandate: From Separation To Incorporation, Autumn 1920- Autumn 1923

An urgent need emerged in late 1920 for the winding up of the system of divided control between the Foreign, India and War Offices in the Middle East. This was a direct consequence of both the failure of direct British control in the mandated regions such as Mesopotamia, where a bloody rising broke out in mid-1920, and the huge financial cost of the administration and the defence of the mandated regions in the Middle East. These two factors were the focus of Britain's newspapers criticisms. Soon these criticisms were carried over into parliamentary debate, in which the entire Mesopotamian policy came under severe attack. The parliamentary debate provided, in Klieman's words, "*the final stimulus*" for change in policy making process and policy direction.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, the British Cabinet decided on entrusting the Colonial Office -through the newly-formed Middle East Department- with the responsibility for policy making and administration, as well as all civil and military expenditure.<sup>2</sup> Central to the new changes was the policy of indirect control based on the formation of a native administration under British supervision in Mesopotamia, with a view to ending its huge financial burdens on Britain.

These changes in both the policy making process and policy direction insofar as they affected the Middle East, had great a impact on Southern Kurdistan's future. The analysis of this chapter is primarily focused on the role of Percy Cox, the new High Commissioner for Mesopotamia, and Winston Churchill, the new Secretary of State for the Colonies, with whom the two contradictory alternatives of the incorporation and the separation of Southern Kurdistan were associated respectively. Crucial to their approaches to the Kurdish situation was Britain's need for a new political formula that would accommodate two important objectives: firstly, the consolidation of the British position in Mesopotamia and Southern Kurdistan in the long-term, and secondly, the containment of the growing Kemalist threat to Mesopotamia at the same time as withdrawing the British imperial garrison from the latter.

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1\* Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, pp.84-85 & 87.

2\* Recommendations of the Prime Minister's Interdepartmental Committee, C.P.2545, 7 February 1921, CAB21/186, PRO.

## **The Emergence Of Two British Policy Alternatives At The 1921 Cairo Conference: Separate Entities *Versus* Unitary State**

The Cairo conference opened on 12 March 1921 and lasted until the end of the same month. Forty civilian and military experts on British policy in Middle East attended its meetings. The participants were divided into groups to conduct the agenda of the conference: a Political Committee and a Military and Financial Committee. The Political Committee, headed by Churchill, discussed three interconnected issues: the political future of Mesopotamia, the immediate reduction of military commitments and Britain's future relations with Mesopotamia under the mandate. The discussion of these issues brought to the fore the future of Southern Kurdistan, which came under special consideration at the final meeting of the Political Committee. From the very beginning two distinct and contradictory political alternatives for Southern Kurdistan's future came to the surface among the members of the Political Committee. On the one side, Cox with the support of his Oriental Secretary, Gertrude Bell, approached the issue of Southern Kurdistan's future from an Arab viewpoint by supporting the territorial claims of the Sharifian family and their Sunni followers in Mesopotamia. Cox asserted that Southern Kurdistan was an integral part of Iraq and that the Southern Kurds were aware of being economically linked with Iraq. Apart from Sulaimaniya, both Cox and Bell argued that all Southern Kurds wanted to join Iraq. To reinforce his point, Cox advocated that the revenue, which came from the Kurdish areas, was not enough to cover the cost of their administration.<sup>3</sup> Before the Cairo conference, Cox had opposed Montagu's idea for the appointment of a Kurdish governor for Southern Kurdistan.<sup>4</sup>

Cox and Bell's argument that the Southern Kurds would accept Arab rule, and that Southern Kurdistan could not economically sustain itself, diametrically contradicted the previous information that both Wilson and Noel had provided. Despite their differences on Kurdish affairs, Wilson and Noel agreed that the Southern Kurds would unanimously reject the idea of Arab rule. Moreover, the evidence that Wilson always represented as a justification for his attempt to incorporate the Kurdish areas into British-administered Mesopotamia was the economic richness of Southern Kurdistan in comparison with Arab Mesopotamia. He had always emphatically referred to the latter as having considerable surplus in wheat production, lumber, fruits, tobacco and most importantly, potential oil wealth. Indeed, Southern Kurdistan,

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<sup>3</sup>\* Report on Middle East Conference Held in Cairo and Jerusalem, 12-30 March 1921, FO371/6343, PRO.

<sup>4</sup>\* S/S for India to High Commissioner, Baghdad, 27 October 1920 & High Commissioner, Mesopotamia, 17 November 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

unlike British-administrated Mesopotamia, had not been a heavy financial burden on Britain. Most British expenditure focused on the construction of railways, roads, ports, dams, bridges and other facilities in Mesopotamia, rather than Southern Kurdistan.

In contrast to Cox and Bell's views, Hubert Young, who became the Assistant Secretary to the newly-established Middle East Department, argued that Southern Kurdistan should be immediately established as a separate state, so as to function as a strategic buffer against any future Kemalist threat to Iraq. He was supported not only by Noel, who attended the conference as the only expert on Kurdish affairs, but also by Churchill, who expressed his fears about ignoring Kurdish sentiment and the oppression of the Kurdish minority by a Shari-fian ruler with the support of his Arab army.<sup>5</sup> He underlined the principle that London would not force the Southern Kurds into joining Arab Iraq or overlook their nationalist aspirations. Moreover, Churchill, like Noel, did not wish to see a strong Arab state that might encourage Faisal to weaken the British hold over Mesopotamia. When the conference ended, it became clear that four out of the seven British officials who attended the conference were in favour of the alternative of a separate Southern Kurdistan not subordinate to Arab rule. They were Churchill, Young, Noel and T. E. Lawrence, who acted as the Political Adviser to the Middle East Department. By contrast, Cox and Bell were the only two officials who favoured the alternative of Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Iraq. Thus the conference did not abandon the idea of a separate Southern Kurdistan, as McDowall believes.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, it emphatically rejected the incorporation alternative, unless the Southern Kurds were to ask for it.

The Cairo conference laid down a clear-cut principle not to force Southern Kurdistan to join the Iraqi state. Most importantly, it decided to keep Southern Kurdistan a separate country in order to function as a strategic buffer for Mesopotamia, until such a time when the Southern Kurds or their representatives would determine their own political future. In the light of the Cairo decisions, Churchill raised an important question as to whether Britain needed to insert a special provision into its draft mandate over Mesopotamia. Against this background, the Legal Adviser to the Colonial Office entered into informal consultation with the Assistant Legal Adviser to the Foreign Office. Their final recommendation resulted in modifying the terms of the Mesopotamian mandate, in spite of Cox's opposition:

*Article 16 of the Mesopotamian mandate would read thereafter:  
Nothing in this mandate shall prevent the mandatory from establishing such an autonomous*

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5\* Report on Middle East Conference Held in Cairo and Jerusalem, 12-30 March 1921, FO371/6343, PRO.

6\* McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p.151.



*system of administration for the predominantly Kurdish areas in the northern portion of Mesopotamia, as may consider suitable.*<sup>7</sup>

The position of the Colonial Office was mainly dictated by its fears that the imposition of Arab rule over reluctant Southern Kurds might increase political instability and thus force Britain to make undesirable political and military commitments towards the security of Mesopotamia. These British fears were steadily growing due to what seemed to be a Kemalist drive southwards towards Mesopotamia. In these circumstances, any Kurdish resistance to the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq would most likely result in a Kemalist-Kurdish alliance against Britain and Arab Iraq. As a result, Britain would have to stop the withdrawal of its imperial garrison to protect Iraq, which was the central objective of the new policy of indirect control. By contrast, as the records of the conference show, the alternative of keeping Southern Kurdistan out of Iraq would enable Britain to put into effect its plans for the withdrawal of its forces and end its heavy financial responsibilities in Mesopotamia. Churchill hoped that British officers would supervise the formation of inexpensive Kurdish military units to replace the existing British garrison, with a view to taking a full responsibility for the defence of Mesopotamia.<sup>8</sup> He had no faith in the Arab army's ability to defend Mesopotamia from the Kemalists, and reiterated to Cox the military value of the Kurdish military units for the defence of Mesopotamia.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the reinforcement of a Kurdish sense of nationality by the establishment of Kurdish autonomous rule would help restore stability to Southern Kurdistan.

In light of these considerations, Churchill informed the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, of a general line that would temporarily guide the Colonial Office's Kurdish policy, which was that while awaiting the expiration of the year allowed by Article 5 of the Sèvres treaty, the affairs of Southern Kurdistan would continue to be directly conducted by the High Commissioner, not by the provisional Arab Government in Baghdad. Lloyd George, who was anxious about the Kemalist activities in Kurdistan, approved of what the Cairo conference recommended.<sup>10</sup> It became clear that the British Government favoured the concept of a buffer state, and expected it to be central to British policy towards Southern Kurdistan after the Cairo conference.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>\* Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, p.123.

<sup>8</sup>\* Report on Middle East Conference Held in Cairo and Jerusalem, 12-30 March 1921, FO371/6343, PRO.

<sup>9</sup>\* Churchill to Cox, 18 June 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

<sup>10</sup>\* Message from Prime Minister to Churchill, 22 March 1921, FO371/6342, PRO.

<sup>11</sup>\* Young, Colonial Office Minute of 20 June 1923 & H. Read, Colonial Office Minute of 21 June 1923, CO730/40, PRO.

## Cox's Kurdish Policy In the Wake of The Cairo Conference

Although the Cairo conference recommended a separate Southern Kurdistan in the shape of a buffer zone, the Colonial Office did not instruct the British authorities in Mesopotamia to implement it immediately, as was the case with the formation of the Arab state in Mesopotamia. The reason for this lack of concrete instructions could be attributed to the fact that the Colonial Office focused much of its attention and time on the organisation process of the Arab state and Feisal's candidature for the Iraqi throne. This state of affairs enabled Cox to ignore the initiation of any step towards Kurdish autonomy. Instead, he suggested various schemes for Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into the Iraqi state based on several economic, financial and political arguments. No sooner had the Cairo conference ended than Cox criticised the economic implications of Southern Kurdistan's separation for the future of Mesopotamia. He and his subordinates argued that the economic links between the Kurdish districts of the Mosul division and the Arab town of Mosul were so close that the local Kurds would not welcome any administrative separation that would lead to the erection of "a customs barrier". Instead of separation, they preferred to turn these Kurdish districts into a *subliwa* (subdivision), that would be politically, financially and judicially subjected to Baghdad.<sup>12</sup> Cox extended the economic aspect of his argument to other Kurdish districts, arguing that "the leaders of Kurdish opinion" were fully aware of Southern Kurdistan's economic and industrial connection with Arab Iraq, and of the inconveniences which its separation from Iraq might involve.<sup>13</sup> Having said that, the British authorities acknowledged that the people of Sulaimaniya wanted nothing to do with Arab rule whatever the economic consequences might be.<sup>14</sup>

Apart from the economic factor, Cox sought to prove to Churchill that Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Iraq was the only viable political and administrative option. He devised a complicated scheme for Kurdish autonomy within the Arab Iraqi state in May 1921, a step which clearly contradicted Cairo's general line. The Kurdish districts of the Mosul division would form a *subliwa* under a British assistant *Mutassarif*, the existing British *Qaimmaqam* would be replaced by a Kurd or a Kurdish-speaking Arab. The division would be financially and judicially subjected to the national Government at Baghdad and would send its representatives to the National Assembly. The High Commissioner would appoint their administrators in

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<sup>12</sup>\* Mesopotamian Intelligence Report (MIR), No.12, 1 May 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

<sup>13</sup>\* MIR, No.13, 15 May 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

<sup>14</sup>\* High Commissioner's Communique No.13 to the Provisional Majlis of the Mosul Wilayet -in- MIR, No.14, 1 June 1921, FO371/6352, PRO.

consultation with local authorities. In other words, the Kurdish districts of Dohuk, Zakho, Aqra, Zibar and Amadia would come under mixed British-Iraqi control and be officially part of Iraq. As for Arbil, Rowanduz and Keuisenjaq, British officials would control their administration, whereas the appointment of junior officials would be made according to Kurdish wishes. Thus, these Kurdish areas, though being part of Iraq, would remain under British control. Cox left out of his scheme other important Kurdish areas in the Kirkuk division, which would be directly ruled by the Arab Government in Baghdad. The remainder of Southern Kurdistan, notably Sulaimaniya and its surrounding areas, would have a mixed British-Kurdish administrative control. The High Commissioner would appoint the *Mutassarif*, whose right was to appeal directly to him, while the *Qaimmaqam* would be Kurdish.<sup>15</sup>

The existence of superficial safeguards against any Arab oppression -such as the presence of British officials in local administration in Southern Kurdistan- failed to moderate the fears of the Kurds about the prospect of being under Arab rule. British official reports on Kurdish reactions to Cox's scheme suggested limited successes even among the local councils, which were formed by the British in the districts of Aqra and Zakho. In other Kurdish areas, where many Kurds were given an opportunity to freely express their opinion, the vast majority opposed any form of subordination to Arab rule. The people of the Sulaimaniya division overwhelmingly rejected Arab rule through a plebiscite taken on Cox's communique. In Sulaimaniya town, where the right to vote rested on property qualification and therefore was limited, only 32 out of 190 people were in favour of inclusion into Iraq. In other areas, where the right to vote was unrestricted, people were decisively opposed to inclusion in Iraq. In Sulaimaniya district, only 32 out of 6,000 people voted for inclusion. In Sharbezher, people unanimously voted against Arab rule, and only one section of the Jaf among the Kurdish tribes was in favour of inclusion.<sup>16</sup> Cox reported to the Colonial Office that the reactions of the leaders of Kurdish communities to his communique was positive, except in Sulaimaniya. But the results of the subsequent election of Feisal to Iraq's throne contradicted Cox's report of the Kurdish situation, when the majority of the Kurds rejected the extension of Arab rule to Southern Kurdistan (detailed in the following chapter).

What really mattered for the success of the new British policy, in Cox's view, was Arab public opinion.<sup>17</sup> The Kurds had neither a sense of nationality nor political reliability. As he

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<sup>15</sup>\* MIR, No.13, 15 May 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

<sup>16</sup>\* MIR, No.14, 1 June 1921, FO371/6352, PRO.

<sup>17</sup>\* High Commissioner For Mesopotamia to S/S for the Colonies, 20 April, CO730/1, PRO.

found no sizable support among Kurdish notables for his incorporation alternative, Cox excluded them from any discussion concerning their future, in marked contrast to his treatment of the Arabs. Instead of negotiating with the Southern Kurds, whose fate was under consideration, Cox discussed with the Arab Council of State in Baghdad the solution for the Kurdish problem. Meanwhile, he purged the British personnel in Southern Kurdistan of those officials who advocated a separate Southern Kurdistan, notably Soane, who turned into a protagonist of Southern Kurdistan's political separation. Although he was replaced by Goldsmith immediately after the Cairo conference, Soane continued to provide the Colonial Office with a picture of Kurdish attitudes towards Arab rule contrary to the one drawn by Cox. In this way, Cox created unanimous support among his subordinates for his position on Kurdish affairs. Indeed, when arguing the case against the establishment of a separate Southern Kurdistan, Cox constantly made references to the absolute agreement among his Kurdish experts on the ground that Southern Kurdistan, including Sulaimaniya, should be made part of Iraq on political and financial grounds.<sup>18</sup>

The most revealing aspect of Cox's scheme was its political and administrative dismemberment of Southern Kurdistan. Like his predecessor, Wilson, Cox was never willing to consider the Kurdish areas as constituting one concrete unit even within the Iraqi state. Keeping an autonomous Sulaimaniya outside Iraq was, in Cox's views, an encouragement to the remainder of the Kurdish areas to demand the same treatment. Thus, his whole scheme for the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq would collapse. Cox feared that as soon as the Kurds witnessed the re-emergence of a nationalist leader and a nationalist stronghold, they would turn against the authority of Baghdad. It was precisely this prospect that Cox was to face in the autumn of 1922, when Mahmud formed his second Government (as will be examined later). Cox justified to Churchill his desire to bring Sulaimaniya under Arab rule, despite the unquestionable opposition of its population, by underlining the dangers it posed to the unity of Mesopotamia itself:

*It will be realised by you that the picture would be somewhat spoilt if Sulaimaniya alone was to stand out. Customs barrier involved by that solution would be a chronic source of difficulty and if Sulaimaniya was allowed to separate, Basra and other communities [i.e. Turkoman, Jewish and Christian] would want to follow suit and it would be difficult to argue with them.<sup>19</sup>*

To reassure Churchill of the success of his incorporation alternative, Cox argued that some

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<sup>18</sup>\* High Commissioner for Mesopotamia to S/S for the Colonies, 5 June 1921 & MIR, No.13, 15 May 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

<sup>19</sup>\* High Commissioner for Mesopotamia to S/S for the Colonies, 5 June 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

formal British insurance to Sulaimaniya, such as a three-year joint British-Kurdish administration, would make the latter change its attitude towards rejecting Iraqi rule.<sup>20</sup>

Having been informed of the incompatibility of his approach to the future of Southern Kurdistan with the general line formulated by the Cairo conference, Cox stated that he had come back from the conference with the impression that the Colonial Office favoured his incorporation alternative.<sup>21</sup> But the records of the conference show that the balance of opinion was clearly in favour of the separation alternative, and that its recommendations were not ambiguous or open to contradictory interpretation. On the one side, there would be an Arab state created by merging the Baghdad and Basra *Wilayets* under a Sharifian ruler, and on the other, there would be a separate Southern Kurdistan. The latter would function as a buffer entity to protect Iraq from Kemalist Turkey. It is difficult to imagine that Cox misinterpreted the Cairo recommendations, especially when he himself was entrusted with the implementation of British policy on the ground. Young's Colonial Office minutes of 20/21 June 1923 clearly suggest that Cox consciously "*turned down*" Cairo's recommendations for the establishment of a Kurdish buffer state.<sup>22</sup> Cox's subsequent actions clearly indicate that he was determined to prepare the ground for the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq regardless of Kurdish wishes. Indeed, after being informed of the incompatibility of his suggestions with the Colonial Office's position on Kurdish affairs, Cox went on to propose another complicated scheme for the future of Southern Kurdistan; the essence of which was its political and administrative dismemberment with the view to bringing it under Arab rule. Firstly, while the Kurdish areas to the north of the two Zabs (the five Kurdish districts of Amadia, Dohuk, Aqra, Zakho and Sinjar) would be, for the time being, within Iraq, they would have the right to reconsider their fate sometime in the future. Secondly, the sub-mountainous areas situated between the two Zab Rivers, including Arbil, would be within Iraq. Thirdly, the mountainous districts that were situated between the two Zab Rivers such as Rowanduz and Rania, would be under Cox's control. These districts might be united with the Sulaimaniya division to form a separate province outside Iraq. Finally, the remainder of the Kurdish areas, which would be temporarily incorporated into Iraq, might join the Kurdish province after the expiration of three years.<sup>23</sup>

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20\* Ibid.

21\* High Commissioner for Mesopotamia to S/S for the Colonies, 21 June 1921, FO371/6346, PRO.

22\* Young, Colonial Office Minute of 20 June 1923 & H. Read, Colonial Office Minute of 21 June 1923, CO730/40, PRO.

23\* High Commissioner for Mesopotamia to S/S for the Colonies, 21 June 1921, FO371/6346, PRO.

## Churchill's Approach To The Question Of Southern Kurdistan's Future

The most important evidence suggesting that the Cairo recommendations became a guide for Britain's policy towards Southern Kurdistan was Churchill's statements in the House of Commons, where he shed light on Britain's future relationship with both Southern Kurdistan and Iraq. As the Kurds did not "*appreciate the prospect of being ruled by an Arab government*", Churchill asserted, Cox would continue to directly administer the affairs of Southern Kurdistan. In his capacity as the High Commissioner for Mesopotamia, Cox would perform "*a dual function*" towards Southern Kurdistan and Iraq.<sup>24</sup> Churchill was optimistic that under British supervision and intervention, the Southern Kurds would accept union with Arab Iraq in the future. Yet, the word "*union*", in this case, meant a type of confederated relationship between Southern Kurdistan and Iraq. Therefore, it should not be equated with such concepts as incorporation or unitary state:

*I want to make it quite clear that we are developing, as it were, a principle of home rule for Southern Kurdistan within the general area of Mesopotamia, at the same time that we are developing the general self-government of Mesopotamia.*<sup>25</sup>

In other words, there would be two entities with differing political status, which would be united in terms of their economic and strategic interests but politically and administratively separate. With British advice and support and under the High Commissioner's supervision, the Southern Kurds would conduct their own political-administrative affairs, local policing and defence, without being under Feisal's rule. Just four days after his speech in the House of Commons, Churchill asserted to Cox that the aim was to keep Southern Kurdistan "*just as distinct from Arab countries as Nepal from India*".<sup>26</sup>

Up until October 1922, when Churchill lost his position as the Colonial Secretary in the wake of the collapse of Lloyd George's coalition Government, he continued to repeat his commitment to the principle that London would not force the Southern Kurds to join the Iraqi state against their wishes. Meanwhile, none of Cox's proposals for a partial and temporary incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq received the approval of Churchill, who continually recommended a clear-cut political and administrative distinction between Southern Kurdistan and Iraq.<sup>27</sup> The former would be under the British High Commissioner's direct supervi-

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24\* Middle East, Government Policy, 14 June, House of Commons. Robert Rhodes James, *Winston S. Churchill, His Complete Speeches, 1897-1963*, Vol.III, 1914-22. (Chelsea House Publishers, London & New York 1974), pp.3104-3105.

25\* Ibid.

26\* Churchill to Cox, 18 June 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

27\* Colonial Office Minute No.31558, 23 June 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

sion, while the latter would be under Arab rule.<sup>28</sup> Churchill also questioned all the strategic, political and economic aspects of Cox's argument. In terms of ethnic distribution, which Cox used as proof of the impracticability of the separation alternative, Churchill -with the help of Noel, Soane and Young- was able to point out that there was no serious difficulty in drawing the boundaries between Southern Kurdistan and Arab Mesopotamia. Moreover, Churchill included all the areas which Cox claimed to be non-Kurdish -such as Kirkuk, Kifri and Arbil- in his Kurdish buffer scheme. Churchill resorted to Maj. Soane and Capt. Longrigg when drawing the ethnic boundaries of Southern Kurdistan. The ethnic factor had a central position in Churchill's strategic argument, insofar as he believed the creation of a separate Kurdish entity was the best way of containing the Kemalist threat. Cox's argument that the ethnic separation would give Iraq strategically inferior and indefensible frontiers,<sup>29</sup> would lose its value as Southern Kurdistan and Iraq would remain under the British mandate. Moreover, with British help and supervision, Southern Kurdistan would function as a strategic buffer for Iraq against future Kemalist threats. In other words, the Southern Kurds and the Arabs had the same strategic interests, i.e. the containment of Kemalist territorial ambitions. It was then in Iraq's interest that Southern Kurdistan stayed separate.

As for the economic aspect of Cox's argument that the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan was a necessity, the political and administrative separation suggested by Churchill would not prevent the Arabs and the Southern Kurds from making a close economic union in the same way that they had similar strategic interests. Unlike Cox, who considered the separation alternative as harmful for British influence in Iraq because the Arabs would resent the idea of a separate Southern Kurdistan, Churchill believed that the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq would excessively strengthen the Arabs. A separate Southern Kurdistan was then, in Churchill's view, a useful political move, if Britain was to retain a strong hold over Iraq. For all these strategic and political reasons, he insisted that the British policy of setting up a separate Southern Kurdistan should never "*be deflected either by Arab pressure or by other causes*".<sup>30</sup>

As previously examined, Churchill's position was to keep separate the political and administrative affairs of Southern Kurdistan from those of Arab Iraq before Feisal's arrival in

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28\* S/S for the Colonies to High Commissioner for Mesopotamia, 24 June 1921, FO371/6346, PRO.

29\* High Commissioner for Mesopotamia to S/S for the Colonies, Part One: 24 June & Part Two: 5 July 1921, FO371/6346, PRO.

30\* S/S for the Colonies to High Commissioner for Mesopotamia, 13 June 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

Baghdad, and that British officials would remain the only link between the two countries. Churchill thought this step would ensure that Britain would be able to prevent the Arabs from interfering in Kurdish affairs.<sup>31</sup> However, the arrival of Feisal and the issue of his election to the Iraqi throne changed the political situation. The exchange of views on the political future of Southern Kurdistan between the Colonial Office and the British authorities in Mesopotamia was suspended. To prevent the Kurdish issue from becoming an obstacle in the way of installing Feisal as king of Iraq, the Colonial Office postponed not only the drawing of the ethnic boundaries between Southern Kurdistan and Arab Mesopotamia, but also the political future of the former.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Churchill, who had so far rejected all of Cox's incorporation schemes, moderated his position when agreeing to the participation of the Southern Kurds in the forthcoming referendum on Feisal's candidature for the Iraqi throne. He, however, re-emphasised his adherence to "*the principle of not putting the Arabs over the Kurds*"<sup>33</sup> and that the latter should be informed that they were free to take part in the referendum, without compromising their interests. As can be seen, a paradox emerged as a result of the Colonial Office's adherence to the principle of not placing the Southern Kurds under Arab rule and the idea of allowing them to take part in the referendum. The probable explanation of this paradox is that Churchill hoped that the referendum would help clarify the real attitudes of the Kurds towards Feisal and Arab rule.

For Cox, the participation of the Southern Kurds in the referendum offered an ideal opportunity to demonstrate that Southern Kurdistan would definitely vote in favour of his incorporation scheme, and thus the issue of its future would be decided once and for all. Cox and Feisal were optimistic that they would be able to persuade the Southern Kurds to vote in favour of inclusion in Iraq. Helmi perceived the business of Feisal's election as a British attempt to settle the Kurdish problem by bringing Southern Kurdistan under Arab rule.<sup>34</sup> In spite of all Cox's efforts and those of his subordinates in the Kurdish areas, the vast majority of Southern Kurds refused to vote in favour of Feisal as their King and Iraq as their state (see chapter seven for the details on Feisal's election). Cox's failure to persuade Southern Kurdistan to join Iraq, coupled with the growing political instability in the Kurdish areas, brought to

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31\* S/S for the Colonies to High Commissioner for Mesopotamia, 9 June 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

32\* Colonial Office Minute No.31558, 23 June 1921, CO730/2 & S/S for the Colonies to High Commissioner, Priority, 9 July 1921, FO371/6552, PRO.

33\* Churchill to Cox, 9 July 1921 -in- Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Vol.IV: Companion Part 3, Documents, April 1921-November 1922*, (London: Heinman, 1977), p.1548.

34\* Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol.II, pp.345-6.



the fore the separation alternative. After the referendum, the Colonial Office directly interfered in Kurdish policy, when it decided to allow the Kurdish nationalists to re-establish a second Kurdish government. Despite Cox's firm opposition, Mahmud was brought back from his exile in India. On his return to Kurdistan Mahmud was accompanied by Maj. Noel, whom Churchill sent so as to facilitate the implementation of the new measures.

### **The Establishment Of The Second Kurdish Government In Autumn 1922: Circumstances And Objectives**

Neither the declaration of the Sèvres terms nor the subsequent British policy on the ground helped to stabilise the political situation in Southern Kurdistan. The mountainous regions of Rowanduz, Sulaimaniya, Barzan and Aqra in particular were the scene of growing disorder. The British authorities in Mesopotamia were constantly engaged in carrying out ground and air operations to suppress local rebellions among the Barzani, Surchi, Zibar and Khushnaw Kurds.<sup>35</sup> To recover former Ottoman territories, the Kemalists made the most of the existing instability by providing arms and officers to the Kurdish insurgents and by organising political societies to wage an anti-British propaganda campaign throughout Southern Kurdistan and Arab Mesopotamia. Meanwhile, a broad political movement took shape in Sulaimaniya, and this spread to other Kurdish areas such as Halabjah, Kifri and Kirkuk. It demanded that the British release and bring back Mahmud to Southern Kurdistan.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, some of Mahmud's followers were still engaged in military activities directed against the British. The description given by Kurdish contemporaries, such as Rafik Helmi, of the British position in Southern Kurdistan in that period was far worse than the reports of the British authorities in Mesopotamia,<sup>37</sup> which suggested that the change in British policy on the ground was unavoidable.

Cox confined the reasons for British troubles in Southern Kurdistan to Kemalist propaganda activities among the Kurds,<sup>38</sup> rather than Kurdish resentment of, and opposition to, his policy. Political unrest and Kurdish uneasiness were especially intensified by the formation of an Arab state in the Baghdad and Basra *Wilayets*. A Kurdish notable told the British Assistant Political Officer for Chemchemal, where demands for the return of Mahmud to Southern

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35\* MIR, No.16, 1 July 1921 FO371/6352 & NO.20, 1 September 1921 FO371/6353 & No.9, 1 May 1922 & No.11, 1 June 1922, FO371/7771,PRO.

36\* MIR, No.23, 15 October 1921, FO371/6353 & No.8, 15 April 1922, FO371/7771,PRO.

37\* Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol.II, pp.565-80.

38\* High Commissioner for Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 1 February 1922, FO371/7780,PRO.

Kurdistan were made, that:

*the policy of the British Government had been dangerously inconsistent. The British had denied to the Kurds their racial aspirations and, while carrying Feisal and the Iraqi Government on their shoulders, showed no inclination to do the same for Sheikh Mahmud and Kurdistan. If HBMG was not ready to play the part expected of it, the Kurds must bring peacefully pressure to bear; otherwise, there would be no alternative but anarchy fostered by Turkish propaganda.<sup>39</sup>*

Broadly speaking, Southern Kurdistan's political instability stemmed from various worries and reflected different wishes. Firstly, there were those Kurds who were afraid of the imposition of Arab rule over Southern Kurdistan. To forestall such a prospect they sought concrete British guarantees that the *status quo* would not change, i.e. British administration. Secondly, there were those Kurds who were suspicious of Britain's political intentions in Southern Kurdistan and therefore wanted to keep both the British and Arabs out of their locality. They perceived their co-operation with the Kemalists as no more than a means to achieve that end. As a last option, they preferred Turkish rule rather than Arab rule, believing that the devil you know is better than the devil you do not know. Thirdly, and most importantly, there were those Kurdish nationalists who wanted nothing but the establishment of a separate Kurdish administration, with or without British supervision.

The existing political instability and the prospect of its development into a general anti-British revolt in Southern Kurdistan alarmed the Colonial Office, especially as Britain was determined to withdraw its imperial garrison from Mesopotamia as soon as possible. What intensified British fears even more was the Kemalists' absolute determination to undo the terms of the Sèvres treaty on Kurdistan and Armenia. Having scored important victories against both the Greeks and the Armenians, the Kemalists were now able to focus their political and military efforts on Southern Kurdistan, where they provided some Kurdish insurgents with arms and officers.<sup>40</sup> This enabled the Kemalists to penetrate deeply into Southern Kurdistan, to such an extent that their officers, who accompanied the Kurdish rebels, were seen in many important Kurdish districts such as Rowanduz, Rania and Keuisenjaq. Moreover, the Kemalists seemed to be in a far stronger political position than the British to win over the Southern Kurds, given the recognition of their National Pact on Kurdish autonomy. The Great National Assembly of the Kemalists undertook to establish an autonomous administration for "*the dignitaries of the Kurdish nation*" in harmony with their national custom. The Kurds would choose a Governor General, Assistant Governor-General and an Inspector, and they would

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<sup>39</sup>\* Iraq Intelligence Report (IIR), No.12, 15 June 1922, FO371/7771, PRO.

<sup>40</sup>\* High Commissioner for Mesopotamia to S/S for the Colonies, 26 August 1921, FO371/6346, PRO.

freely elect a Kurdish National Assembly for the eastern *Wilayets*.<sup>41</sup>

Naturally, the Kemalists' Kurdish policy alarmed the British because of its political effects on the Southern Kurds. Lloyd George was alive to the danger, and had earlier drawn Churchill's attention to the fact that any British decision on Southern Kurdistan's future should take into account the Kemalists' attempts to "*seduce Southern Kurds into co-operation with their northerly brethren with a view to incorporation in Anatolia's state*".<sup>42</sup> British reports on the Kemalist activities in Southern Kurdistan increasingly contained unwelcome news:

*The Kurdish situation is extremely delicate. It is, at least, a possible, if not probable theory that the Turks, still intending to attack Iraq in the spring, are deliberately working to drive wedge between the Kurds and ourselves. We know that Turkey is prepared to grant considerable local autonomy to [Northern] Kurdistan. We know that the Kurds themselves are working for some independence under the protection of some power.*<sup>43</sup>

Against this background, the Colonial Office repeatedly instructed Cox about the need to reassure the Southern Kurds that London would not place them under Arab rule against their will, and that he should conduct Kurdish affairs according to local wishes. This explains why the administration of Southern Kurdistan remained separate and unaffected by the rapid political developments taking place in Arab Mesopotamian. Moreover, Kurdish bodies were formed by the Southern Kurds to conduct their own local affairs, and in such Kurdish districts as Kifri and Keuisenjaq councils were set up to run local affairs.<sup>44</sup> In December 1921, the Sulaimaniya division formed its own elective council, presided over by Maj. Goldsmith and containing Kurdish representatives from four Kurdish districts: Halabjah, Sharbezher, Chemchemal and Rania. The council was responsible for the conduct of financial, economic, educational and other local affairs.<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, the British needed to adopt further measures if they were to turn the situation in Southern Kurdistan in their favour. The nationalist followers of Mahmud, who were still unsatisfied by the modest administrative changes in Sulaimaniya, were very active, and focused their efforts on two fronts: the political and the military. Firstly, they organised a broad political movement as well as a propaganda campaign for the return of Mahmud to Southern Kurdistan. Three Kurdish petitions for the return of Mahmud were signed by Kurdish notables from the Sulaimaniya division.<sup>46</sup> Similar petitions were signed by other Kurdish notables from

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41\* Rumbold to Curzon, 29 March 1922, FO371/7781, PRO.

42\* Message From Prime Minister to Mr. Churchill, No.193, 22 March 1921, FO371/6342, PRO.

43\* Baghdad, News Summary For Period Ended 21 December 1921, CO730/8, PRO.

44\* MIR, No.23 15 October 1921, FO371/6353, PRO.

45\* Residency, Baghdad, 7 December 1921, CO730/8, PRO.

46\* High Commissioner to S/S for the Colonies, 5 July 1922, FO371/7781, PRO.

Kirkuk and Kifri. These petitions conveyed a clear message to the British authorities that, if the latter sought Kurdish support and wished to restore Kurdish confidence, they should bring back Mahmud and Kurdish self-government. Secondly, the followers of Mahmud intensified their military activities. The Hamawand Kurds killed Capt. S.S. Bond, the Assistant Political Officer at Chemchemal, and Capt. R.K. Makant.<sup>47</sup> Mahmud Dizli's attacks in the Halabjah region resulted in the murder of Capt. Fitzgibbon, as well as the killing and the disappearance of twenty other officers.<sup>48</sup> These developments indirectly enhanced the political position of certain Kurdish nationalists, whose brand of nationalism was essentially anti-Kemalist. Given the increasing deterioration in the political and military situation in Southern Kurdistan, the British could not afford to lose these Kurdish nationalists as a means of containing the growing Kemalist threat. These nationalists, led by General Kurd Mustafa Pasha, established their own organisation, the Independent Kurdistan Society, and published their own newspaper, the *Call of Kurdistan*, to mobilise the Kurds for an independent Southern Kurdistan. At the same time, they worked towards persuading the British to support their political efforts as the ideal way of containing the growing political influence of the Kemalists, and of further pre-empting a general anti-British revolt in Southern Kurdistan.<sup>49</sup>

By the middle of 1922, the Colonial Office realised the difficulty of ignoring the growing demand for the return of Mahmud, given the absence of peace with Kemalist Turkey and the failure of Cox to persuade the Southern Kurds to join Iraq. Under such circumstances, Mahmud emerged once again as the only person who could mobilise the Southern Kurds under a nationalist banner against the Kemalists and restore stability, as he had done between the autumn of 1918 and the spring of 1919. In the House of Commons, Churchill reassured British parliamentarians, who expressed their opposition to any military commitment in Southern Kurdistan, that the British Government did not have "*the slightest intention*" of getting itself entangled in any serious way in that country. He simultaneously re-emphasised not only his position that the Southern Kurds would not be forced to come under Feisal's rule, but also his great anxiety to study Kurdish wishes and "*to develop any local variant of the self-government, which has been given to Iraq, that may command itself to them*".<sup>50</sup> Initially, Curzon supported the idea of encouraging Kurdish nationalism in Southern Kurdistan as a barrier

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47\* High Commissioner of Iraq to Colonial Office, 22 June 1922, FO371/7781, PRO.

48\* High Commissioner to S/S for the Colonies, 14 January 1922, FO371/7780, PRO.

49\* Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol.II, pp.331-2, 351-2 & 506.

50\* British Policy In Iraq, 11 July 1922, House of Commons -in- Robert Rhodes James, *Winston S. Churchill, His Complete Speeches*.

against Kemalist intrigues.<sup>51</sup> Noel's testimony was important as he emphasised that the previous experiment of Kurdish self-government under Mahmud was successful in providing political stability, without making military and financial commitments.<sup>52</sup> Maj. Soane and other former officers acknowledged that the Southern Kurds did not wish to be under Arab rule, and that their separation from the Arabs was a logical option. Ultimately, the Colonial Office overlooked Cox's firm opposition, and Mahmud returned to Sulaimaniya, where he formed a second Kurdish Government. Thus by the middle of 1922, British fear of further deterioration in the Kurdish situation helped to tip the balance in favour of Churchill's separation alternative.

### **Cox And The Formation Of The Second Kurdish Government**

The return of Mahmud to Sulaimaniya did not mean that London finally adopted the separation alternative. Southern Kurdistan's future still depended on whether the idea of satisfying Kurdish nationalist aspirations through the re-establishment of a Kurdish government was the ideal way to thwart Kemalist threats, maintain stability in the Kurdish areas and facilitate the withdrawal of the Imperial garrison. In practice, as it turned out later, the Kurdish situation primarily depended on the attitudes of Cox and like-minded subordinates towards the Kurdish Government. Cox acknowledged, according to Young, that *"the Cairo policy was the best after all"*.<sup>53</sup> Yet, the evidence suggests otherwise. On the eve of Mahmud's return, Cox endeavoured to dissuade the Colonial Office from the idea of re-introducing Kurdish self-government in Southern Kurdistan, warning against the dire consequences of such a policy:

*In contrast with [the] Iraqis, whose objects generally were patriotic and constitutional, Sheikh Mahmud was actuated mainly by personal and dynastic considerations. Of this, there is sufficient proof in the fact that in spite of his pan-Islamic preaching of Jihad, his supporters were only the few hirelings he could attract by pay... I think, it would be unwise to give Sheikh Mahmud his liberty until political future is more assured. It may not be fully realised that our policy is more truly in interest of Kurdish nationalism than Sheikh Mahmud's for, whereas we are working with some success for a constitution, which though oligarchical in its present stage, is developing towards democracy. Sheikh Mahmud is identified with a policy of absolutism and he himself is feared as a feudal baron of the worst type. Even if he were only set at large in India, I think, it would have an unsettling effect just now.*<sup>54</sup>

In his examination of Cox's position on the Kurdish situation, Olson shows how he deliberately delayed his response to Churchill for two months, when the latter queried Mahmud's return to Southern Kurdistan.<sup>55</sup>

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51\* Shuckburgh to Foreign Office, No.55849, 11 September 1922, FO371/7781, PRO.

52\* E.W.L. Noel, Note -in- Colonial Office Minute No.4958, 22 July 1922, PRO.

53\* Maj. Young, Colonial Office Minute, 20 June 1923, CO730/40, PRO.

54\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S the Colonies, 26 August 1921, CO730/4, PRO.

55\* Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, p.61.

Cox also argued that despite the existence of strong Kurdish feelings against incorporation in the Iraqi state and “a general desire for a national ruler”, it was “impossible” to select a Kurd because not all the Kurds would recognise him as ruler. Furthermore, without granting him strong British protection, Southern Kurdistan would sink into a state of chaos.<sup>56</sup> He described the attitudes of those Kurds who demanded Mahmud’s return as not reflecting of the wishes of the Kurdish people. The latter, he argued, were either “definitely opposed to Sheikh Mahmud or... indifferent”.<sup>57</sup> In other words, although Cox was forced by the results of the referendum of 1921 to acknowledge the Kurdish rejection of Arab rule, he still believed that the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq was the only option, given the non-existence of an eligible Kurdish leader. Cox focused his efforts on hindering Mahmud’s endeavours to establish a workable Kurdish administration in Sulaimaniya and extend its jurisdiction to other Kurdish areas, hoping that he might dissuade the Colonial Office from its position. As a High Commissioner, Cox was in a position to take *ad hoc* decisions if the Kurdish situation so required. Therefore, he remained the most important factor in determining the failure or success of the new experiment in Kurdish autonomy. In other words, this new experiment was carried out by the very people who opposed it. The way in which Cox expressed his opposition to the return of Mahmud and Noel and his determination to incorporate Southern Kurdistan into Iraq in their absence is perceived by Olson as the beginning of the domination of the policies of “the officials on the spot” over those of “the distant capital”.<sup>58</sup>

One of Cox’s measures to obstruct the formation process of the second Kurdish Government was his introduction of the Said Taha scheme. Initially and before Mahmud’s return, this scheme was based on the creation of an autonomous entity in Sulaimaniya and Rowanduz under a Kurdish governor.<sup>59</sup> These two regions had been the scene of continuing anti-British activities and never ceased to be a constant source of irritation to the British authorities in Mesopotamia after June 1919. By projecting Said Taha as the ideal alternative, Cox sought not so much the containment of the growing Kemalist threat as preventing Mahmud from returning as governor. The lack of support for Said Taha as ruler of a new Kurdish province, while Mahmud was on his way to Southern Kurdistan, forced Cox to modify his scheme by confining it to Rowanduz and its surroundings. Cox asked London to grant Said Taha -who

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56\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 2 July 1922, FO371/7781, PRO.

57\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 5 July 1922, FO371/7781, PRO.

58\* Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, p.61.

59\* IIR, No.14, 15 July 1922, FO371/7771, PRO.

arrived on 6 November 1922- money, ammunition and Kurdish volunteers to suppress the Kemalist-instigated troubles. The strengthening of Said Taha's position would give Cox considerable advantages with regard to his foiling of the experiment in Kurdish autonomy. Firstly, by ending British troubles in Rowanduz, Cox would be in a strong position to resist any political concession asked for by the Kurdish nationalists, led by Mahmud. Secondly, Said Taha would be used as a rival nationalist figure to undermine Mahmud's influence, thus generally dividing the Kurdish nationalists and the Southern Kurds. C.J. Edmonds, who served as the Political Officer in Southern Kurdistan, revealed that the Said Taha scheme aimed principally at undermining Mahmud's position.<sup>60</sup> Cox himself admitted that one of the main reasons for the scheme was to counter the "*pretensions*" of Mahmud,<sup>61</sup> namely that he was indispensable. Mahmud was also aware of the British authorities' motive behind the Said Taha scheme and was probably confused by this contradiction in British policy. On the one hand, he was brought back to Southern Kurdistan to form a second Kurdish government, with a view to containing the Kemalist threat and re-establishing peace and order. On the other, the British authorities used Said Taha to undermine his position among the Southern Kurds. It was natural then that Mahmud's confusion was transformed into utter disillusionment, given his negative past experience with Col. Wilson during the time of his first Government.

The formation of the second Kurdish Government was a gradual process, dictated by the course of events. Before Mahmud's return, the British authorities in Mesopotamia were in disarray as the growing deterioration in the Kurdish situation forced British officials to leave the Sulaimaniya division, Rowanduz and other Kurdish areas. To fill the ensuing power vacuum, the Kurdish nationalists took over the local administration in the Sulaimaniya division. Whereas Cox and his officials reported to the Colonial Office that they had made this arrangement, Helmi states that it was the Kurds who took the initiative in forming the Kurdish National Council.<sup>62</sup> Given the hasty way in which British officials left Sulaimaniya, the domination of the nationalists over the Council and Mahmud's decision to turn it into a Kurdish government, the latter version seems to be more accurate. Being Mahmud's representative, Sheikh Qadir was elected by the Kurds as the president of the Kurdish National Council, which appointed heads of police, treasury, customs, etc. The Kurdish nationalists expressed their willingness to contain

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60\* C.I. Edmonds, Note on the Kurdish Situation, 4 January 1923, -in- Shuckburgh, Colonial Office, to Osborne, Foreign Office, 25 January 1923, FO371/9004, PRO.

61\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, December 1922, FO371/7782, PRO.

62\* Helmi. *Memoirs*, Vol.II, pp.331-2 & 351-52.

Kemalist influence by arresting three pro-Turkish notables and asking for the maintenance of a close link with the British High Commission in Baghdad.<sup>63</sup> According to British reports, the Kurdish Council was successful in its main tasks of providing stability in the Kurdish areas both inside and outside of its direct control, such as Pizhder and Khushnawati.<sup>64</sup> All these developments reduced the influence of the Kemalists, who tended to capitalise on instability. The Iraq Intelligence Report highlighted the favourable changed in the Kurdish situation:

*a reign of licence under Kurdish Sheikhs or Aghas makes a stronger appeal than the Kemalists can rival, unless they can back propaganda with force... In [the] Kirkuk division, events in Sulaimaniya have aroused no demonstration of hostility to [the British] Government among the Kurdish tribes, many of whom are supporters of [the] Sheikhs [i.e. Mahmud's relatives] and will presumably be gratified by the return of Sheikh Mahmud.*<sup>65</sup>

Following his return in early October, Mahmud capitalised on these political developments to create an autonomous Kurdish entity under his rule. His rejection of a new title as the head of the Kurdish National Council in favour of his old title as governor of Kurdistan,<sup>66</sup> his creation of a Kurdish army with the help of Kurdish officers and adoption of a national flag illustrate that Mahmud's main ambition was to be a national ruler rather than a local chief.

These measures, which encountered no British opposition, created a strong impression among the Kurdish nationalists that Britain, at last, accepted the idea of a separate Southern Kurdistan under Kurdish rule. Noel described how Mahmud's arrival in Sulaimaniya led to a nationalist upsurge, and how Kurdish support for his Government exceeded the boundaries of the Sulaimaniya division to include Arbil. All Kurdish tribal leaders of the Kifri district were present at Sulaimaniya, where they asked for an early date for the holding of elections "so that they may give publicity to their intention of declaring for Sheikh Mahmud". The Zanganah and Talabani Kurds all declared their support for the Kurdish Government led by Mahmud. In the space of a few days, other Kurdish tribes in Kirkuk and Arbil professed similar inclinations. For his part, Mahmud sent deputations to Kirkuk, Kifri and Arbil to mobilise the Kurds for the cause of an independent Southern Kurdistan.

The rapid developments in Southern Kurdistan following Mahmud's return did not please the British authorities in Mesopotamia. They interpreted the declaration of Kifri's population of their allegiance to the Mahmud leadership as a manifestation of disorder,<sup>67</sup> and similar

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63\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 9 September 1922, FO371/7781, PRO.

64\* IIR, No.18, 15 September 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

65\* Ibid.

66\* Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol.II, p.535.

67\* IIR, No.1, 1 January 1923, FO371/7772, PRO.



criticisms were levelled at Kurdish support for the Kurdish Government in Arbil. Edmonds, who reported that the Kurds of Kirkuk were won over to Mahmud, feared that the Dizai Kurds in Arbil would demand unification with the autonomous Kurdish region.<sup>68</sup> He warned against the *“increasing”* influence of Mahmud, who represented extreme Kurdish nationalism.<sup>69</sup> Kurdish support for the autonomous movement was also rapidly increasing in Rania, Halabjah, Khushnawati and other Kurdish areas. Encouraged by the overwhelming Kurdish support for an independent Southern Kurdistan, Mahmud asked Cox to hold a referendum similar to that of Mesopotamia in 1921. In retrospect one can see that what Mahmud asked for did not contradict the Colonial Office’s original position, namely that the Southern Kurds should be allowed to freely decide their own future.

### **The Reversal Of The British Policy From Separation to Incorporation**

Given the considerable popularity which autonomous Kurdish rule enjoyed among the Kurds and its success in restoring stability to many Kurdish areas in a very short period, Britain’s decision to incorporate Southern Kurdistan into Iraq seemed incompatible with its desire for a stable Southern Kurdistan. There were three main reasons why Britain eventually decided to extend Arab rule to the Kurdish areas against the wishes of the population. Firstly, from the very beginning, the Kurdish Government of Mahmud faced hostile attitudes from Cox and Henry Dobbs, the Acting High Commissioner, who were determined to end the experiment of Kurdish autonomy. Secondly, in October 1922 Winston Churchill was no longer the Colonial Secretary in the wake of the collapse of the coalition Government of Lloyd George. The new Colonial Secretary, Leo Amery, was unfamiliar with Kurdish affairs and he therefore had no concrete approach to Southern Kurdistan’s situation, unlike his predecessor. Thirdly, the start of the Lausanne conference in November 1922 did not help the cause of the Southern Kurds as the new Conservative Government of Bonar Law in Britain was determined to reach a peace agreement with Kemalist Turkey by offering some concessions. It was necessary that Britain should not make Kemalist Turkey feel that Southern Kurdistan might pose a serious threat to its security and territorial unity. Under these circumstances, the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq and the containment of Kurdish nationalist aspirations emerged as the only option to reassure the Kemalists of British intentions.

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<sup>68</sup>\* C.I. Edmonds, Note on the Kurdish Situation, 4 January 1923, -in- Shuckburgh, Colonial Office, to Osborne, Foreign Office, 25 January 1923, FO371/9004, PRO.

<sup>69</sup>\* IIR, No.1, 1 January 1923, FO371/7772, PRO.

Mahmud's initial success in mobilising the Kurds for an independent Southern Kurdistan was unwelcome news for Cox, who intensified his efforts to contain the Kurdish nationalist movement. To achieve this objective, he was active on two fronts: London and Southern Kurdistan. Apart from the Said Taha scheme, Cox and his subordinates castigated doubt on the reasons why the Kurdish Government of Mahmud was popular among the Southern Kurds. The desire of Kurdish tribes to avoid paying taxes and Kurdish antipathy to the existence of a real government were, in the view of the British Divisional Adviser in Kirkuk, the only reason why Mahmud was popular.<sup>70</sup> In his reports to London, Cox emphasised Mahmud's cooperation with the anti-British Kurds and his increasing contacts with the Kemalists, who brought him under their control. There is no evidence to suggest that Mahmud established his contacts with the Kemalists before the deterioration in relations between the Kurdish Government and the British High Commission in Baghdad. Mahmud's contacts with the Kemalists, as Helmi shows, started after Cox rejected the demands of the Kurds for the holding of a referendum to decide Southern Kurdistan's future in the manner of Mesopotamia, and after it became clear that Cox was determined to bring the Southern Kurds under Arab rule against their will. British records show that Cox promised to send Mahmud arms, ammunition and possibly aerial assistance as well as 200 levies, but nothing of this promise materialised. Moreover, Cox ordered the return of those Kurdish officers who had accompanied Mahmud when returning to Sulaimaniya. These Kurdish officers were helping Mahmud to create a Kurdish army. Helmi asserts that Mahmud wanted to fight the Kemalists, but he was not in a position to do so because of the lack of material aid from the British.<sup>71</sup>

Several developments were responsible, in Helmi's view, for the deterioration in Mahmud's relations with the British. Firstly, the British offered Mahmud no military or financial assistance necessary for the expulsion of the Kemalists from Southern Kurdistan. Secondly, after its liberation from the Kemalists, the British refused to hand over Keuisenjaq to the Kurdish Government unless Mahmud drove the Kemalists out of Rowanduz.<sup>72</sup> Thirdly, Mahmud interpreted the reluctance of the British to be directly involved in the fighting against the Kemalists as a sign of their willingness to give up Southern Kurdistan, if they were placed under more Kemalists pressure. By contrast, the Kemalists intensified their military and propaganda activities and seemed far more determined than the British to get hold of Southern Kur-

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70\* IIR, No.20, 15 October 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

71\* Helmi, *Memoirs*, Vol.II, p.565.

72\* *Ibid*, pp.582-3.

distan.<sup>73</sup> For all these reasons, and given British unwillingness to support an independent Southern Kurdistan, Mahmud contacted the Kemalists, who at that time promised generous Kurdish autonomy within Turkey, but the Kemalists never trusted Mahmud because he was a Kurdish nationalist. As soon as the Kurdish Government was established, the Kemalists organised a propaganda campaign against Mahmud.<sup>74</sup> When Mahmud contacted the Kemalists, Euzdemir, the commander of Turkish irregulars in Southern Kurdistan, did not trust his motives and refused to support his rebellion.<sup>75</sup>

What appears from Helmi's interpretation of these developments is that Mahmud sought to keep open his options, unless the British showed strong willingness to accept a separate Southern Kurdistan under his rule. Accordingly, he sought to prove that he held the balance of power in Southern Kurdistan. Mahmud was reported to have said "*in terms scarcely veiled that he could at any time have turned out the Turks, if he had chosen to do so, but he deliberately refrained*".<sup>76</sup> But in the absence of concrete British guarantees for an independent Southern Kurdistan, if the Kemalist threat was defeated, Mahmud saw no point in fighting the Kemalists on behalf of the British or the Arabs. Instead, he endeavoured to make the most of British troubles in Southern Kurdistan to achieve his nationalist aims. The British officials were aware of his tactics, Edmonds highlighting how Mahmud used the Kemalist presence in Rania as a lever to "*extort concessions*" from the British.<sup>77</sup>

On the other hand, Cox focused his efforts on winning Kurdish support for Feisal's rule. From the very beginning, Cox closely co-ordinated his policy in Southern Kurdistan with Feisal and his Arab Government. The main objectives were to politically isolate Sulaimaniya from other Kurdish areas by registering primary electors for the Arab Constituent Assembly<sup>78</sup> and to economically stifle the Kurdish Government by making the Kurdish areas pay taxes to the Arab Government in Baghdad. The registration for the proposed elections included Kurdish areas (such as Kirkuk and Kifri) that voted against Feisal in the referendum of 1921, and expressed their clear desire to come under Kurdish rule. It was Cox's pro-Arab measures which alienated Mahmud, who began to take independent political initiatives without consult-

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73\* Ibid, pp.582-3.

74\* Ibid, p.522.

75\* Foreign Office Minute No.3020, 11 April 1923, FO371/9004, PRO.

76\* IIR, No.1, 1 January 1923, FO371/7772, PRO.

77\* C.I. Edmonds, Note On Kurdish Situation, 4 January 1923 -in- Shuckburgh, Colonial Office, to Osborne, Foreign Office, 25 January 1923, FO371/9004, PRO.

78\* IIR, No.21, 1 November 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

ing the British authorities in Baghdad. On hearing that the elections for the Arab Assembly would include Southern Kurdistan, and that a Kurdish referendum would not be held, Mahmud declared himself king of Southern Kurdistan in late October:

*From today, I have taken in my hands the tiller of the state and assured responsibility for the protection of of the independence of Kurdistan. It is my hope that you will all work and strive for the perpetuation of this glorious day and for the welfare of the progress of the nation. Kurds! Now is your opportunity to labour unitedly as one family for the consolidation and protection of the national rights which we have won.*<sup>79</sup>

Through this step, Mahmud probably sought to step up pressure on the British to meet Kurdish demands for an independent and a separate Southern Kurdistan. In November 1922, Mahmud sent a Kurdish deputation to Baghdad to ask Cox to hold an election for the secondary electors in order to form *"the nucleus of a Kurdish National Assembly to settle the question of the future of the Kurdish state and the form of government best suited to the Kurds"*.<sup>80</sup> The deputation also asked for official and public British recognition of the Kurdish Government and the independence of Southern Kurdistan.<sup>81</sup> Cox refused to hold any free elections in the Kurdish areas,<sup>82</sup> and instead of a free election he demanded that the Kurdish nationalists moderate their demands, while promising that he would recommend to London and the Government of Iraq that *"the right of Kurds within Iraq to set up a national government should be officially recognised"*.<sup>83</sup> Cox must have remembered how the majority of Southern Kurds had rejected Feisal and Arab rule in the 1921 referendum, and that the holding of another referendum or elections would most likely result in overwhelming Kurdish support for Mahmud and his Government. Indeed, Cox's subordinates in Southern Kurdistan advised against asking public opinion in areas, such as Kifri, as to their attitudes towards Feisal.<sup>84</sup>

Given the contradiction between Kurdish political aspirations and Cox's plans for an incorporated Southern Kurdistan, a clash between the Kurdish nationalists and the British authorities in Baghdad was inevitable. In response to Cox's rejection of his demand for the extension of Kurdish rule to Rania and Keuisenjaq, which were administratively part of Sulaimaniya,<sup>85</sup> Mahmud purged all Kurdish officials who were suspected of being loyal to the Brit-

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79\* Ibid, Extract From Bank-i-Kurdistan, the official newspaper of the Kurdish Government.

80\* Ibid.

81\* IIR, No.22, 15 November 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

82\* IIR, No.21, 1 November 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

83\* IIR, No.22, 15 November 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

84\* IIR, No.23, 1 December 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

85\* IIR, No.23, 1 December 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

ish.<sup>86</sup> On 20 November, the Kurdish Government asked the British to prevent the officials of the Arab Government from taking taxes from Kurdish areas until the boundary between the two countries had been settled. At the same time, Kurdish officials began to collect taxes from the Kurdish areas in spite of Cox's opposition.<sup>87</sup> The Kurdish Government in particular resisted Arab attempts to impose taxes, especially on Kurdish tobacco, which was the most important source of revenue.

The turning point came in October 1922, in the wake of the disintegration of Lloyd George's coalition Government and Churchill's losing his position as Colonial Secretary. Curzon, who retained his position as the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in the new Conservative Government, considered Cox's incorporation alternative as an ideal means of keeping British control over Southern Kurdistan's potential oil fields. At the Lausanne conference, Curzon repeated all Cox's political, economic and strategic justifications for the need to incorporate Southern Kurdistan into Iraq, warning the Kemalists against holding a referendum because "*the Kurds would doubtless vote for an independent Kurdistan*".<sup>88</sup> Moreover, unlike his predecessor, the new Colonial Secretary, Leo Amery, did not possess strong views on Kurdish affairs. Thus, with the disappearance of Churchill from the picture, the alternative of Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Iraq came to the fore. The first action of the new British Government was to sanction Cox's scheme for an autonomous Southern Kurdistan within Iraq.

The timing of the confrontation between the British authorities in Baghdad and the Kurdish nationalists was not favourable to the latter because it coincided with the inauguration of the Lausanne conference. It must be remembered that one of the reasons the Kemalists laid their claim to Southern Kurdistan stemmed from the fear that Britain would establish it as an independent entity, which would pose a serious threat to the territorial integrity of the new Turkey, where the Northern Kurds formed the second largest ethnic grouping. As Ernest Main points out, the British were aware that Southern Kurdistan was crucial to the security of both new state of Kemalist Turkey and Arab Iraq.<sup>89</sup> Given these Kemalist fears, Curzon must have considered the adoption of Cox's incorporation alternative as a clear message to the Kemalists that it would not threaten Turkey's security through the establishment of a separate

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86\* Ibid.

87\* Ibid.

88\* Curzon's Reply to Ismet Pasha, Respecting Mosul, No.1, 23 January 1923, 371/9058, PRO.

89\* Ernest Main, *Iraq from Mandate to Independence* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1935), p.133.

Southern Kurdistan. Moreover, it became easier to argue that Southern Kurdistan should be part of Iraq by referring to the Mesopotamian mandate as evidence of the fact that the three *Wilayets* of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul had always been treated both politically and administratively as one unit by Britain. As soon as the Lausanne conference started, it was important that Britain should settle Southern Kurdistan's future. Accordingly, a joint British-Feisal declaration was issued which granted the Kurds living within "*the boundaries*" of Iraq the right to form a local government as they desired.<sup>90</sup>

Ironically, Cox described the announcement of his scheme as a consolidation of Kurdish nationalism, even though his scheme merely covered the Sulaimaniya region. He hoped that the declaration of local autonomy would split the Kurdish nationalists into two groups: "*the more enlightened Kurds*" and "*the more ignorant and fanatical elements*" led by Mahmud.<sup>91</sup> Granting local autonomous status to Sulaimaniya became, as Mahmud was duly informed, the only basis for any negotiation with the Kurdish nationalists. Beyond this issue, Cox was not willing to negotiate with Mahmud, who quickly rejected the scheme of local autonomy. In the face of both Cox's determination and refusal to negotiate with the Kurdish Government's delegates, Mahmud and his supporters revolted for the second time against the British authorities, hoping to achieve their political objectives by force. The prospect of an unstable Southern Kurdistan, while Britain and Turkey could not settle its future, was probably the reason why Leo Amery expressed some hesitations about the inclusion of Southern Kurdistan in Iraq's forthcoming elections, as proposed by Henry Dobbs, the new High Commissioner:

*Case of [the]Iraqi Government in [the] event of Mosul's boundary question being referred hereafter to arbitration, may be to some extent weakened by Kurdish vote against participation in [the] elections. It is essential.. in view of explicit assurance given in Parliament on 11 July last [year] by my predecessor.. that we should give Kurds [a] real opportunity of deciding for themselves what is to be their attitude. <sup>92</sup>*

Dobbs, who followed in his predecessor's footsteps, dismissed any danger that might result from Kurdish participation in the elections, and went ahead with the implementation of the incorporation alternative.<sup>93</sup> He also refused to talk with Kurdish nationalists -led by Mahmud- on major political issues such as granting the Southern Kurds an opportunity to decide their

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90\* IIR, No.1, 1 January 1923, FO371/7772, PRO.

91\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 16 November 1922, FO371/7782, PRO.

92\* S/S to Acting High Commissioner, 7 June 1923, FO371/9014, PRO.

93\* Acting High Commissioner to S/S, 16 July 1923, FO371/9014, PRO.

future freely.<sup>94</sup> Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Iraq was symbolised by including most of Southern Kurdistan in the Iraqi elections in the autumn of 1923.

## Conclusion

The deliberate use of gas bombs and air raids against civilian targets in the period 1922-1925 were clear indications of British desperation to quickly restore stability to Southern Kurdistan. Britain needed to create the impression -when negotiating with the Kemalists over the issue of the Mosul *Wilayet*- that the situation in Southern Kurdistan was quiet, and that the Southern Kurds were content with Arab rule. Violent methods were the only way to decisively defeat Kurdish insurgents led by Mahmud, and to prepare the way for the imposition of Arab rule over Southern Kurdistan. Reaching peace with Kemalist Turkey as soon as possible at the Lausanne conference was an important factor in influencing Britain's decision on the future of Southern Kurdistan. With the disappearance of the prospect of a Kemalist invasion from the north, there was no longer any need to turn Southern Kurdistan into a strategic buffer to protect Mesopotamia from Kemalist Turkey. With the decline in strength of the Kurdish nationalist movements in Northern and Eastern Kurdistan, the presence of a Kurdish Government in Southern Kurdistan became an obstacle to Britain concluding a new peace treaty with Kemalist Turkey, as the latter firmly opposed any form of Kurdish self-government.

The prevalence of Cox's incorporation alternative over that of a separate Southern Kurdistan between late 1922 and mid-1923 can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, Cox was an important element in influencing the course of events in Southern Kurdistan. He, in his capacity as High Commissioner, was the channel through which the Colonial Office had to implement its Kurdish policy and receive information on the Kurdish situation. Cox, who had long experience in imperial affairs, having served in India, Persia, the Persian Gulf and Mesopotamia, built on what his predecessor, Wilson, bequeathed to him in terms of political and administrative arrangements in Southern Kurdistan. He also adopted Wilson's tactics, and presented similar political, economic and strategic arguments to support his position. It is reasonable to assume that it was not in Cox's interest to accurately report anything that might weaken the basis of his views on Kurdish affairs or to eagerly implement Churchill's recommendations. By virtue of his position as the High Commissioner responsible for the implementation of the new British policy of indirect control and with the help of his like-minded civilian subordinates

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<sup>94</sup>\* Acting High Commissioner to S/S, 15 June 1923, FO371/9014, PRO.

and military officials, Cox was in a stronger position than anybody else to influence political developments in Southern Kurdistan. Just as Wilson destroyed the first Kurdish Government and pre-empted the emergence of a separate and autonomous Southern Kurdistan in 1918-20, so Cox destroyed the second Kurdish Government and pre-empted the emergence of a separate and an autonomous Southern Kurdistan in 1921-23.



## Chapter Seven

### The Formation Of The Arab State In Mesopotamia And Its Effects On Britain's Post-Sèvres Policy Towards Southern Kurdistan

The formation of the Iraqi state in place of the old British administration was not a straight forward process, given the fact that the British had not experienced a similar situation before, at least, not in the Middle East. Firstly, the Iraqi state still had no well-defined international boundaries -especially in the north and north-west- when the British appointed Feisal king of Iraq in 1921. The delimitation of these boundaries was not purely a political matter, but also financial and strategic. In other words, the delimitation of Iraq's boundaries was to be executed in such a way that Britain would be in a position to withdraw its imperial forces, with a view to ending its military expenditures in Mesopotamia. Secondly, to end all its other financial commitments, Britain wanted the young Iraqi state to be economically self-sufficient in developing its own institutions, such as the army and the police. Finally, the Sunni Arabs, on whom the success of the new experiment of indirect control depended, were numerically inferior in comparison with the Shi'is, and therefore, it was crucial for Britain and Feisal to find a means to redress this critical sectarian imbalance. Given all these British strategic, economic and political concerns, this chapter shows how Southern Kurdistan took on a new importance after the establishment of the Iraqi state and how it decisively influenced Britain's decision to incorporate it into the Arab state. Emphasis will be placed on the way in which Britain's own strategic, economic and political interests converged with those of its client state in Mesopotamia

#### **Arab Territorial Ambitions Versus Kurdish Nationalist Aspirations**

##### ***i- Feisal, The Boundaries Of The Iraqi State And The Political Status Of Southern Kurdistan***

The territorial claims of the Sharifians and their Sunni Mesopotamian followers to Kurdistan paralleled those of the Kemalists in Turkey and the ultra-nationalists in Persia. Each force aimed to consolidate and expand its control in Kurdish areas at the expense of the nationalist aspirations of the Kurds, as well as each other. When the British established an Arab Council of Ministers in late 1920 with a view to its functioning as the nucleus of the Iraqi state, one of its first decisions was to include in the Iraqi electoral law all the Kurdish divisions of the old British administration.<sup>1</sup> The Council adopted a calculated step in restoring the old Ottoman admin-

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<sup>1</sup>\* MIR, No.4, 31 December 1920, FO371/6348, PRO.

istrative system instead of the fourteen divisions of the British civil administration, which had been drawn on ethnical and tribal lines.<sup>2</sup> The Kurdish division of Sulaimaniya would be relegated to the status of a district. The report of the Ministry of Defence, under Ja'fer Pasha, a Sharifian follower, considered Southern Kurdistan as falling within the "natural boundaries" of Iraq, whose defence should be guaranteed by Britain against foreign aggression.<sup>3</sup> The Arab Council took it for granted that Southern Kurdistan was an integral part of the Arab state, regardless of Kurdish wishes and the terms of the 1920 Sèvres treaty. As Southern Kurdistan's future was an unresolved issue, London did not support the Arab Council's unilateral decision. This uncertainty about Southern Kurdistan's ultimate future continued, even when London decided to appoint Feisal as king of the new Arab state in Mesopotamia. London informed Feisal, before his departure to Iraq, that it had not defined the boundaries of his new Arab state, and he accepted this situation without expressing any objection.<sup>4</sup> From the British viewpoint, defining the Mesopotamian boundaries -especially to the north and west- was very premature and should depend on the clarification of the situation in the region, including the future of the Sèvres treaty and the geographical size of both French Syria and the new Turkey. The determination of Iraq's northern, southern and western boundaries was one of the main tasks of the newly-formed Middle East Department.<sup>5</sup>

As soon as it became evident that he would be installed as king of Arab Iraq, Feisal raised the issue of Iraq's northern frontiers by pressing Britain to immediately bring Southern Kurdistan under his rule. He even laid claims to several western Kurdish areas which he had previously considered to be Arab when he had been the ruler of Syria. Feisal's territorial claims on Ottoman Kurdistan, which dated back to his father's wartime correspondence with Britain, went far beyond what the Arab Council had demanded. These claims are clearly illustrated by the way Feisal defined the north-west boundaries of the new Iraq:

*First North of Euphrates: Jezirah-ibn-Omar and Nisibin should... both [be] included in Iraq and that frontier following central course of that river to its junction with Euphrates, should run from Jezirah to Nisibin thence south-ward to [the] bank of Khabour.<sup>6</sup>*

The cornerstone of Feisal's approach was that Britain should consider the Kurdish situation in light of the fulfilment of Iraq's military, economic and political needs, as well as the mainte-

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2\* Philip Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), p.296.

3\* MIR, No.9, 15 March 1921, FO371/6348, PRO.

4\* Minute of the Meeting of the Eastern Committee On November 3, Regarding Policy in Kurdistan, FO371/6347, PRO.

5\* Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, p.93

6\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 12 February 1922, FO371/7781, PRO.

nance of local Arabs' good will towards him and his British patrons. Moreover, he presented British interests as being identical with Arab territorial ambitions in Ottoman Kurdistan, when the British-Turkish dispute over Southern Kurdistan's future came to a head after 1920. To contain the Kemalist threat, Feisal and his Sunni entourage in Baghdad went so far as to suggest the luring of the "Northern Kurds to join an autonomous Kurdistan under suzerainty of Iraq".<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Feisal warned the British against the danger that a united Kurdistan would pose to their interests in Mesopotamia. To pre-empt that development, Feisal invited the British to immediately determine the status of Southern Kurdistan by its inclusion into his Arab state.<sup>8</sup> London, which lacked the necessary military and financial resources to consolidate its own influence (let alone satisfy Feisal's excessive ambitions), refused to take any expansionist step in Kurdistan. The Colonial Office continued to oppose Feisal and his Sunni entourage's demands for Southern Kurdistan's incorporation until the end of 1922, on the grounds that they contradicted its policy of encouraging "Arab nationalism not Arab imperialism".<sup>9</sup>

#### **ii- The 1921 Referendum In Mesopotamia**

The holding of a referendum on his candidature for the newly-created Iraqi throne in the summer of 1921 presented the ideal opportunity for Feisal to bring Southern Kurdistan under his rule. He was able, with the tacit support of the British authorities in Baghdad, to persuade the Colonial Office to allow the participation of the Southern Kurds in that referendum, hoping to obtain convenient results that might be used as justification for Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Iraq. The referendum was a fraudulent experiment, as British advisers and pro-British *Mutassarifs* made every effort to ensure Feisal's victory. It was these officials who expressed the opinion of most divisions, summoned meetings and declared results. The referendum rules were very simple and took the form of a petition (*Madhbata*):

*We, the undersigned, resident of Nahiya/Mahala-----, in Qada/Town of-----, in the Liwa of-----, have heard, understood and fully considered the above Resolution of the Council of State, and it results that----- express themselves in agreement therewith, and profess their allegiance to Amir Feisal, while have signified their dissent-----.*<sup>10</sup>

Given the British decision to install Feisal as king -regardless of local wishes- and the boycott

7\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 15 August 1922, FO371/7800, PRO.

8\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 23 September 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

9\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 25 October 1921. FO371/6347, PRO.

10\* MIR No.18, 1 August 1921, CO730/4, PRO.

of the Shi'is and their traditional leaders, the results of the referendum cannot not be considered as a true expression of the people's wishes, either in Southern Kurdistan or in Mesopotamia. As Philip Ireland shows in his examination of the way in which the referendum was carried out that in the Basra division, "*selected representatives*" of the local people were called in groups to make their declarations in the presence of an Election Committee.<sup>11</sup> Local notables often presented British officials with two petitions on behalf of one area: one was against Feisal, the other in favour. It was up to British officials to choose the petition they wanted.

Originally, the referendum served two political purposes. Firstly, it was an attempt to give some legitimacy to Feisal's ascendancy to the Iraqi throne. Secondly, the British Government sought to convince the British Parliament that the Mesopotamian situation was under control, and therefore, there was no need for Britain to disassociate itself politically from the country in the wake of the bloody 1920 rising. Feisal, like Cox, sought to use the referendum for another purpose, namely, as a means of bringing Southern Kurdistan under direct Arab control. Initially, the referendum concerned only the Mesopotamian Arabs and not the Southern Kurds. By extending the referendum to Southern Kurdistan, however, Feisal hoped to obtain convenient results that would enable him to incorporate the Kurdish areas into the Iraqi state. Thus the desired results of the referendum would not only disarm the Kurdish nationalists in a political sense, but would also forestall any development towards the formation of a separate Southern Kurdistan. Despite an early decision to keep Kurdish affairs separate from those of Mesopotamia, the Colonial Office agreed to allow the three predominantly Kurdish divisions of Sulaimaniya, Kirkuk and Mosul to take part in the referendum, if the local Kurds so wished.

In the Sulaimaniya division, where the Kurdish nationalists were able to make local Kurds understand the real purpose of the referendum, the Kurds unanimously rejected the idea of participation, let alone voting in favour of Feisal's Arab rule. Thus, one third of Southern Kurds did not take part in the referendum. In the Kurdish divisions of Kirkuk and Mosul, where the activities of the Kurdish nationalists were restricted, British sources reported that local Kurds took part in the referendum. Despite the crudity of the referendum, important points can be derived from its results insofar as they concerned Kurdish attitudes towards Arab rule. The local Kurds living within the districts of the Mosul division such as Amadia, Sinjar, Aqra, Dohuk and Zakho, were reported to have voted in favour of Feisal and Iraq. The 68

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<sup>11</sup> Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development*, p.332.

petitions that represented this division, however, showed that these Kurds wanted -apart from the protection of their rights regarding education, government, the law and so on- to retain the right to join Northern Kurdistan in case it became an independent state. This reveals, at the very least, how ill-informed these Kurds were about the political implications of the referendum. Once they accepted Feisal as their ruler, there was no way that they could join any Kurdish state in the future. These Kurds seemed to consider Feisal's rule as a temporary arrangement pending other developments in Kurdistan. Moreover, given the existence of local Kurdish rebellions in most of the above mentioned Kurdish districts, one can dispute the idea that the majority of local Kurds participated in the referendum. The political disorder and local rebellions against the British in these Kurdish districts were incompatible with the British reports that the Kurds of the Mosul division were unanimously in favour of Feisal, or that the submitted *Madhabatas* reflected the opinion of the majority. These Kurdish districts did not desire British control, let alone Arab rule. Indeed, when Co. Wilson held a plebiscite in 1918-1919, the local Kurds in the Mosul division voted overwhelmingly against Arab rule.<sup>12</sup>

The population of the Kirkuk division were reported to have voted against both Feisal and the incorporation into Iraq. There were 21 petitions against and 20 in favour of Feisal, though a number of petitions were not completed. The anti-Feisal petitions mostly stated that they were signed by people who were "not Arabs", and therefore, they "prefer[ed] to wait and see what independent Kurdistan is going to be like".<sup>13</sup> At unofficial meetings in Kirkuk, the participants decided that if Feisal became king they would "demand union with Kurdistan".<sup>14</sup> Kurdish (and even some Arab) notables told a British adviser in a private conversation that "they did not want Feisal or an Arab government".<sup>15</sup> The Turkoman community wanted nothing but inclusion in Turkey, whereas all the Kurdish areas, which formed the majority of the division, asked for a Kurdish government.<sup>16</sup> The very fact that only 261 out of 31,269 people in this division were in favour of Feisal and the inclusion into Iraq, demonstrates how British officials on the ground could manipulate the results by declaring that the difference between those who were in favour of Feisal's Iraq and those who were not, was just one petition. In his analysis of the referendum results, Ireland shows that British officials arbitrarily declared

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12\* Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development*, p.168.

13\* IIR, No.19, 15 August 1921, FO371/6353, PRO.

14\* Ibid.

15\* Ibid.

16\* Ibid.

unanimity instead of “majority” when announcing the results in a town or a district.<sup>17</sup> What can be safely deduced from this referendum is that, despite all Cox’s political efforts in support of Feisal, the vast majority of the Southern Kurds rejected Feisal and Arab rule. The results of the referendum in Southern Kurdistan clearly disappointed Feisal, who intended to use them as evidence of unanimous Kurdish support for Arab rule and the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq.

Following the referendum and the establishment of the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq, Feisal continued to dissuade London from the idea of holding a separate referendum in Southern Kurdistan so that the local Kurds could directly decide their political future. His argument was that the holding of another referendum would cast huge doubt upon the “validity” of the first referendum in Mesopotamia.<sup>18</sup> Feisal closely co-ordinated his efforts with Cox in getting the inclusion of Southern Kurdistan into the electoral law for the Arab National Assembly.<sup>19</sup> This step was taken at a time when tension was reaching a peak in Kurdish areas, accompanied by unceasing Kurdish demands for the return of Mahmud and Kurdish Government. When the Colonial Office finally decided to bring Mahmud back to Sulaimaniya in order to calm the situation, Feisal strongly opposed the move. He apparently feared that Mahmud might be able to fill the existing political and military vacuum resulting from imminent British withdrawal by establishing a workable Kurdish administration. While Mahmud was on his way to Sulaimaniya, Cox arranged a meeting between him and Feisal. Although British sources said nothing about the reasons for the meeting, it is very likely that Feisal hoped to persuade Mahmud to declare his allegiance to him and thus accept Southern Kurdistan’s incorporation into Iraq. The absence of any statement suggests that nothing came out of the meeting; Mahmud would not recognise Feisal and Arab rule, nor would Feisal accept a separate Southern Kurdistan.

The formation of the Conservative Government in London in October 1922 led (as explained in chapter six) to the relegation of the alternative of a separate Southern Kurdistan to the background and the coming to the fore of the incorporation alternative. Against this background, Feisal worked closely with the British High Commission in Baghdad in December 1922 towards producing the so called British-Feisal declaration for local Kurdish autonomy:

*HBMG and the Government of Iraq recognise the rights of the Kurds living within the boundaries of Iraq to set up a Kurdish government within these boundaries and hope that the dif-*

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<sup>17</sup>\* Ireland, *Iraq: A Study In Political Development*, p.332.

<sup>18</sup>\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 5 January 1922, FO371/7780, PRO.

<sup>19</sup>\* IIR, No.8, 15 April 1922, FO371/7771, PRO.

*ferent Kurdish elements will, as soon as possible, arrive at an agreement between themselves as to the form which they wish that that Government should take and will send responsible delegates to Baghdad to discuss their relations with HBMG and the Government of Iraq.<sup>20</sup>*

Feisal hoped through this declaration to undermine Mahmud's position among Kurdish nationalists by dividing them into moderates -who would accept local autonomy- and the extremists -who wanted a separate Southern Kurdistan. The abandonment of the project of Kurdish autonomy a few weeks later reveals that the British-Feisal declaration was nothing more than a tactical manoeuvre by Feisal, who, like Mustafa Kemal in Turkey, had no intention of implementing it.

## **The Establishment Of The Iraqi State And Its Political Implications For The Future Of Southern Kurdistan**

### ***i- The Requirement Of Successful Transition From Direct To Indirect British Control***

The British policy of indirect control depended on the successful implementation of two interconnected political measures: the establishment of an Arab state in Mesopotamia and Feisal's candidacy for the Iraqi throne. In view of its acute financial problems and internal political pressure for British withdrawal from Mesopotamia, London could not afford any delay in implementing its new policy. In Churchill's words, Feisal offered London the "*cheapest solution*" to its Mesopotamian problem.<sup>21</sup> Other political questions, which London was supposed to deal with, were postponed in order to devote all attention to the establishment of the Mesopotamian state under Feisal. One of these important questions was the fate of Southern Kurdistan, whose ethnic boundaries with Mesopotamia were on the verge of being defined. The following Colonial Office minute illustrates the inter-connection between the political affairs of Mesopotamia and Southern Kurdistan:

*no final decision should be taken on our Kurdish policy [i.e. demarcation of Arab-Kurdish boundary] until... Cox had an opportunity of discussing the matter with Feisal... A step in the wrong direction might have disastrous results, which would not be confined to Kurdistan. We are engaged in a very delicate political transaction in Mesopotamia and cannot afford to take any unnecessary risks and it is most important that, when we arrive at a decision on our Kurdish policy, it should be the right one.<sup>22</sup>*

Against this background, Churchill informed Cox that the political priority was to "*make certain of the early choice of Feisal*" as king of the new Arab state, and that "*other questions should*

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<sup>20</sup>\* IIR, No.1, 1 January 1923, FO371/7772, PRO.

<sup>21</sup>\* Report on the Middle East Conference Held in Cairo and Jerusalem, FO371/6342, PRO, p.36.

<sup>22</sup>\* Colonial Office Minute No.31558, 23 June 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

come after",<sup>23</sup> including Southern Kurdistan's future. The immediate effect of this postponement of fresh British measures in Southern Kurdistan was to create a new source of pressure that was to influence the direction of British Kurdish policy. In other words, Britain's need to carry out a smooth and speedy transition from direct to indirect control placed Feisal and his Sunni entourage in such a position that they would become an effective player in Kurdish affairs. The latter were quite aware of London's pressing need to end its financial burdens in the Middle East and made the most of its sensitivities about issues relating to the security, economic viability and political stability of the new state, so as to persuade the British policy makers that, for a number of reasons, Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Arab Iraq was a necessity. The emergence of Feisal and his Sunni entourage as a political force in favour of an incorporated Southern Kurdistan also helped to strengthen Cox's hands *vis-à-vis* the Colonial Office.

The issue of Southern Kurdistan's fate was deliberately incorporated by Feisal and his Sunni entourage into the internal politics of the new Arab state as soon as it came into existence. As Feisal was a foreign ruler, who had neither a legitimate ground for ruling the country nor a mandate from local Arabs, he depended on the support of a number of Sunni Arab officers. Apart from having long-held territorial ambitions in Ottoman Kurdistan, Feisal wanted to turn himself into a champion of the issue of Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Arab Iraq in order to cement his alliance with these Sunni Arabs. He, simultaneously, sought to create a personal popularity among the Arab population by projecting himself as a true Iraqi, who was unwilling to let part of his country break away. The common stand on the issue of Southern Kurdistan's future made the bond between Feisal and the newly-emerging Sunni political-military caucus in the new state much stronger, and it became a new political factor that -to some degree- influenced the direction of Britain's Kurdish policy by hindering any real progress towards the establishment of an autonomous and a separate Southern Kurdistan. Cox warned against the outlining of the ethnic boundary between a separate Southern Kurdistan and the Arab state, which the Colonial Office contemplated thus:

*More extreme Arab nationalist elements would greatly resent our action, and, it will be opposed and ~~and~~ only accepted under protest by Council of State... [The] Arab kingdom, which one day will have to stand alone, from a strategic point of view, is being given indefensible frontier. Arab nationalists are very much alive to this point.*<sup>24</sup>

Feisal focused on questioning Britain's long-term commitments to the defence of

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23\* S/S for the Colonies to High Commissioner of Iraq, Priority, 9 July 1921, FO371/6552, PRO.

24\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/St for the Colonies, Part One, 24 June 1921, FO371/6346, PRO.



Southern Kurdistan from outside aggression, to guarantee Iraq's security from Turkish attack via that area, and to take responsibility for preventing disorder in Southern Kurdistan, which he described as posing a danger to Iraq.<sup>25</sup> Feisal implied that the alternative of Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into his Arab Kingdom would solve British anxieties about using an inexpensive means to protect its interests in Mesopotamia. Whether it was imaginary or real, Feisal wasted no time in presenting any political or military development as a threat to his infant kingdom, and therefore ultimately, to British interests. He defined, for example, the sole objective of the 1921 French-Kemalist treaty as being to defeat both British policies and Arab nationalist aspirations.<sup>26</sup> He referred to the danger the treaty presented to Iraq's security by highlighting the fact that it had given the Kemalists a strong impetus to continue their intrigues and hostile propaganda against Iraq. To counter the Kemalist danger, he pressed London for "*a definite pronouncement*" and "*a clear reply*" on the problem of Iraq's defence.<sup>27</sup> In other words, if Britain was not prepared to accept full military responsibility for the preservation of Iraq's borders, Feisal demanded that he had to have "*a determining voice in the decision as to what these borders are to be*",<sup>28</sup> i.e. the northern edges of the Mosul *Wilayet*. His anxiety about the threat that the Kemalists posed to Iraq through Southern Kurdistan was shared by Cox and British military personnel in Mesopotamia.<sup>29</sup>

Another political consideration used by Feisal and his Sunni entourage to justify their claims to Southern Kurdistan was that the establishment of an independent Southern Kurdistan would encourage Arab areas in Mesopotamia, especially Basra, to demand similar political status from the British Government. Cox, who voiced Feisal's fears, warned Churchill against the idea of establishing a separate Kurdish entity in Southern Kurdistan because it would set an example for other communities, such as the Turkoman and Assyrian-Chaldeans, to follow. He argued that "*if Sulaimaniya was allowed to separate, Basra and other communities would want to follow suit and it would be difficult to argue with them*".<sup>30</sup> The existence of this state of affairs in Mesopotamia highlights the fragility of the foundations on which the British were building a national state in that country. As British records show, when local Arab notables in Basra were asked by the British to express their views on the establishment of a united Arab

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25\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 25 October 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

26\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 18 November 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

27\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 12 November 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

28\* News Summary For The Period Ended 11th November 1921, CO730/7, PRO.

29\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 21 November 1921, CO730/7, PRO.

30\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 5 June 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

state by merging the Baghdad and Basra *Wilayets*, they initially opposed the scheme. These notables had no desire to be ruled from Baghdad by Feisal and his "*Baghdadi officers*". Even when they were finally persuaded by the British to accept the scheme, they insisted on enjoying "*special treatment*" in the form of a local autonomy. This would entail the formation of a special legislative assembly, an army and a police force for Basra.<sup>31</sup> Initially, Churchill contemplated the idea of local autonomy for Basra within Iraq. But the British authorities in Baghdad showed no interest in the idea of a federal Mesopotamian state and it was therefore ignored. The importance of the use of force in building an Arab state is clearly illustrated by the insistence of British officials in Baghdad on retaining British imperial forces in the country. They feared that the premature withdrawal of British forces would not only encourage a Kemalist invasion, but also be interpreted throughout Mesopotamia as "*a sign of weakness and proof of indecision on London's part*".<sup>32</sup> Consequently, Mesopotamia would move towards further disintegration rather than political unity.

Britain's urgent need to conclude a bilateral political-military treaty with Feisal to finalise the basis of the relations between London and Baghdad was used by the latter as a means of exerting pressure on the former. In other words, in return for Britain's acceptance of Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Iraq, Feisal would work towards the successful conclusion of that treaty. At the same time, he sought to persuade London that if this treaty recognised Southern Kurdistan as part of Arab Iraq and thus satisfied Arab public opinion, it would have a deterrent effects on the Kemalists.<sup>33</sup> Cox reported Feisal's views to Churchill as being that:

*Turkey will see the gamble is up so far as Iraq is concerned, once she realises that the country has become an independent and united people hostile to Turkey and in treaty with us... [Accordingly] Feisal urges speedy conclusion of [the] Treaty on [the] above ground.*<sup>34</sup>

To mobilise Arab public opinion behind their demand for the inclusion of Southern Kurdistan in Iraq, Feisal and his supporters waged a propaganda campaign throughout the duration of the Allied talks with Kemalist Turkey on the conclusion of a new Turkish peace treaty. They made clear that the results of these talks would have fateful effects on present and future British-Iraqi relations and general Arab attitudes towards Britain. *al-Iraq*, a pro-Feisal newspaper, wrote that:

*the Arabs are convinced that there is no other nation so sympathetic to Arab aspirations as Great Britain... There is no doubt that His Excellency [i.e. Cox] will strive for the consolidation of the relations between Iraq and Great Britain. Iraq al-Arabi is, before all things, the*

31\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 29 June 1921, CO730/2, PRO

32\* S/S for Air, Memorandum, 16 November 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

33\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 1 February 1922, FO371/7780, PRO.

34\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 4 February 1922, FO371/7780, PRO.

*friend of Britain but also a nation with a deep love of freedom and believes that mutual advantage is the basis on which to protect her relations with Iraq and respect for the opinion of the Iraqi people and the encouragement of national feeling within [the] country.<sup>35</sup>*

While the Colonial Office desired to see Southern Kurdistan outside Arab rule, its principal aim of not hampering Feisal's candidature and the transitional process of from direct to indirect British control in Mesopotamia made it extremely difficult to ignore Arab opposition to the idea of a separate Southern Kurdistan. This state of affairs, coupled with the holding of the Lausanne conference, ultimately tipped the balance in favour of Cox and Feisal's incorporation alternative.

## ***ii- Sectarian Politics And Southern Kurdistan's Incorporation Into The Iraqi State***

The three Ottoman *Wilayets* of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul shared no common political, economic or cultural identity under Turkish rule. All these three *Wilayets* (as chapter four illustrated) were distinct in terms of their ethnic-religious composition as well as their political, economic and cultural orientations. The effects of the First World War were to accentuate -rather than weaken- these contradictory economic, cultural, ethnic and religious features among the communities of the three *Wilayets* by the crystallisation of contradictory political aspirations. In Southern Kurdistan, for instance, the Kurdish nationalists opted for a separate Kurdish entity and were politically orientated towards their brethren in Eastern and Northern Kurdistan. In Arab Mesopotamia, the situation was totally different. On the one hand, sectarian-religious affiliations counted more for the Shi'i Arabs than their ethnic origins. The members of Shi'i elite, unlike the Sunnis, played no part in the so called Arab revolt led by Sharif Hussein. As Ireland argues, to the Shi'i clergy the term 'nationalism' meant the establishment of an Islamic state.<sup>36</sup> As a whole, the Shi'is put up notable resistance to the British invasion of Mesopotamia. Afterwards, they played a major part in opposing the imposed British rule, which led to the bloody 1920 rising. Other tiny ethnic-religious communities adopted a different position on the issue of their future. The Jewish community was suspicious of the establishment of an Arab state under a Sharifian ruler, whereas the Turkomans and Assyrian-Chaldeans opposed the establishment of both Kurdish and Arab states. The former desired absolutely the return of Turkish rule, while the latter sought British help to establish their own national state in Kurdi-

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<sup>35</sup>\* Al Iraq, No.89, 12 January 1923 -in- II R, No.3, 1 February 1923, FO371/7772, PRO.

<sup>36</sup>\*Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development*, p.246.

stan.

For their part, Sunni representatives in Baghdad and Basra did not want any political arrangement that would place them under the rule of the Shi'i majority. Instead, they preferred either the continuation of the British administration or the establishment of an Arab state under a Sunni ruler, regardless of his ethnic identity, such as Burhan al-Din, the son of Abdul Hamid.<sup>37</sup> The *Naqib* (Sunni religious leader) of Baghdad, Abdul Rahman al-Gaylani, represented the first alternative, whereas Said Talib of Basra represented the latter. Initially, these Sunnis were afraid of Sharifian rule because they mistakenly thought that the Sharifian family would tolerate Shi'i hegemony over the would-be Arab state.<sup>38</sup> According to Gertrude Bell, the *Naqib* of Baghdad said that

*I would never consent to the appointment of the Sharif or of his son as Amir. The Hejaz is one and Iraq is one; there is no connection but that of the faith... I would rather a thousand times have the Turks back in Iraq than see the Sharif or his sons installed here.*<sup>39</sup>

It was only a few Sunni officers, mostly Baghdadis, who helped to forge the pragmatic political link between the interests of the Sunnis and those of the Sharifians, on the one hand, and between the Feisal-Sunni bloc and British authorities in Baghdad, on the other. These Mesopotamian Sunnis had joined the Sharifian forces during and after the war and accompanied Feisal during his short-lived rule in Syria.<sup>40</sup> Henceforth, they had been advocating the Sharifian cause through the establishment of an Arab state under a Sharifian ruler. For them such a ruler enjoyed two essential virtues, firstly being Arab, and secondly, being Sunni. He would, therefore, maintain the continuation of the long Turkish tradition of Sunni domination over the country's destiny. Subsequent political developments in Mesopotamia from 1920 onward verified these conclusions, as the Sunni elite controlled all Iraqi Governments, the army and the civil service.

Such a promising prospect of continuing their old domination was the reason why the Sunni notables of Mesopotamia and those of the town of Mosul, in particular, embraced the Sharifian cause. Consequently, a political alliance emerged, which was based on mutual inter-

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37\* R.W. Bullard, Colonial Office Minute No.14659, 4 April 1921, Notes on MIR, No.6, 31 January 1921, CO730/1, PRO.

38\* Ibid.

39\* Elizabeth Burgoyne, *Gertrude Bell, From Her Personal Papers, 1914-1926*, (London: Ernest Benn, 1958), p.10.

40\* Ironically, apart from Nuri al-Sa'id, all *Baghdadi* officers fought alongside the Turks in the early stages of the war. For instance, Ja'fer Pasha joined the Sharifian side after being captured by the British.

ests between the British authorities, Feisal and the Sunnis. On the one hand, Feisal, who was not Mesopotamian and lacked a legitimate claim to the Iraqi throne, desperately needed -apart from the British- an internal political force through which he could maintain his rule. The Sunni Arabs assumed this role. They, in return for their loyalty and support, expected total domination over the new state's institutions, such as the government, the civil service and the army. The enthusiasm of the Sunni Arabs in Mesopotamia and in exile to participate in the transitional process from direct British control (which was characterised by the existence of British administration and the presence of imperial forces) to indirect control (which was characterised by the establishment of the Iraqi state under a British mandate) stemmed from their desire to influence British Mesopotamian policy in terms of filling the existing vacancies in the new native administration. Ja'fer Pasha, the first Acting Defence Minister after the establishment of the Iraqi state, looked on the issue of filling new posts created by the establishment of the native administration from a purely sectarian perspective. He called on the British to exclude the tribal Sheikhs (who were mostly Shi'is) from taking administrative posts in their localities, except in the holy towns of Najaf and Karbala, arguing that they were unqualified.<sup>41</sup> Most importantly, the Sunnis resisted the idea of establishing a separate representation for the tribes in the would-be National Assembly, for it would inevitably turn the Shi'is into a strong political force. Ireland reveals how the Shi'i politicians criticised the Arab Council of State because it contained no Shi'is among its members. Only after Cox's interference did the Sunni dominated Council allow one Shi'i to act as Minister for Education.<sup>42</sup> Ironically, this outright sectarian position on the political life of the new state by the Sunnis sharply contradicted their pan-Iraqi rhetoric, which they used to justify their demand for Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Arab Iraq.

Apart from some help, which was rendered by a few Sunni military and civilian elements, the establishment of the Iraqi state was exclusively a British undertaking and was carried out in the absence of any Mesopotamian-wide political movement or a solid material infrastructure.<sup>43</sup> This Sunni help coupled with the Shi'i resistance to the British during and follow-

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41\* Note on Mesopotamia..., op. cit. This was the origin of the myth that Shi'is were unsuitable to enter the most sensitive spheres such as the state bureaucracy, government and army, which has become the point of departure for some researches, such as Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development*, and Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, Vol.1, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978).

42\* Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development*, pp.297-298.

43\* See for example Liora Lukitz, *Iraq, the Search for National Identity*, (London: Frank Cass, 1995).

ing their occupation of the country, made the British authorities in Baghdad desire the establishment of a covert sectarian state by excluding the Shi'is from holding key governmental, civilian and military positions in line with the old Turkish tradition of Sunni domination over the Shi'is. Given this sectarian nature of the newly-established Iraqi state, the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq, with its substantial Sunni population, had additional political value, which was to redress the numerical balance between the Shi'is, who formed the majority of the population, and the Sunnis, who were the minority (See this page for the Sectarian-religious distribution in the three *Wilayets* of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra).

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(The population of Mesopotamia (including Southern Kurdistan))

The population of Mesopotamia was 2,849,282, according to a British census taken in 1920 and, in terms of religious and sectarian composition was made up as follows:

	<u>Sunni</u>	<u>Shi'i</u>	<u>Jewish</u>	<u>Christian</u>	<u>Other Religion</u>	<u>Total</u>
Basra	42,558	721,414	10,088	2,551	8,989	785,600
Baghdad	524,414	750,421	62,565	20,771	2,133	1,360,304
Mosul	579,713	22,180	14,835	55,470	31,180	703,378
Total	1,146,685	1,494,015	87,488	78,792	42,302	2,849,282

The Figures for Mosul include the population of the Kurdish area of Sulaimaniya, viz., 155,000 of whom all but 1,100 are Sunnis.<sup>44</sup>

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It suited Feisal to play the sectarian card in order to strengthen his position in the country where he lacked popular support, especially among the Shi'i majority, who were far more loyal to their traditional religious leaders than to the *Effendis* (intellectuals). He also used sectarianism as another argument for the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into his state.

Cox reported that Feisal:

*emphasised that the question of Kurdistan had further aspect for him as king of Iraq, which had probably not been fully considered by us [the British]. This was the question of preponderance of Sunnis or Shi'is with special reference to the question of constitutional assembly shortly to be convoked. As we aware, there was already technical and numerical preponderance of Shi'is and excision of a large slice of Sunni districts of Iraq out of state and exclusion of their representatives from national assembly, would place Shi'is in a very strong position and filled him with misgivings.*<sup>45</sup>

In reporting Feisal's views, Cox, who shared the idea of the importance of sectarian politics to

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<sup>44</sup>\* Colonial Office List (London: Waterlow & Sons Limited, 1921).

<sup>45</sup>\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 23 September 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

British political interests, urged Churchill to look into the political implications of any Kurdish participation in the future Iraqi National Assembly, which he considered as vital:

*It would be a reasonable course to work for the inclusion of the Kurdish districts [i.e. in Mosul, Kirkuk and Sulaimaniya division] and their participation in [the] National Assembly on conditions of local assent and special supervision by [the] British officers and, if necessary, by [the] High Commissioner.<sup>46</sup>*

The sectarian importance of Southern Kurdistan to Iraqi politics coincided with sharp tension between the Feisal-Sunni bloc and the traditional Shi'i leaders.<sup>47</sup> It resulted in the expulsion of the latter from the country, probably to weaken their influence during the coming elections for the new National Assembly. Ultimately, the British authorities and the Sunni elite played the same card in the game of maintaining their influence. On the one side, the British used the sectarian instrument to rule the country through the Sunni minority, who, because of their numerical weakness *vis-à-vis* the Shi'i majority, would depend on British support and thus would remain loyal. On the other side, the Sunnis would keep unchallenged their hegemony over the state and its institutions by playing off the Shi'is against the Kurds.

### **The Incorporation Of Southern Kurdistan Into The Newly Established Iraqi State: Oil-Economic Considerations**

For mainly strategic reasons, Britain began to expand its political and economic influence to territories, where oil was known or believed to exist and, if possible, to exclude other Powers from having any political or economic influence in such areas. Between 1900 and 1914, as chapter one showed, Britain was deeply involved in intensifying international rivalries with other Powers in order to obtain oil-related concessions in the Asiatic territories of the Ottoman Empire. The effect of the outbreak of the First World War was to underline more than ever Britain's need to obtain oil, by controlling either the sources or suppliers of oil. In order to have formal control over the whole of the Mosul *Wilayet*, where oil was known to exist, British forces occupied Mosul. From then onward, the British Government worked diplomatically towards preparing conditions for turning their *de facto* control over Mosul into a *de jure* one. The first step in the direction of finalising British control over the Mosul *Wilayet*, as chapter five illustrated, was the success of the British Government in altering the terms of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement. This enabled Britain to take over the French sphere of influence in the Mosul *Wilayet* in return for a 25% French share in the TPC. To forestall any American support for

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<sup>46</sup>\* Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>\* It is worth noting that the same Shi'i leaders were mobilising the Persian people against Britain's growing political and economic control over Persia following the First World War.

Turkish claims to Mosul, Britain also granted America a 25% share in the TPC. Allowing the Americans and the French to have a share in the TPC would help Iraq to exploit the oil fields of the Mosul *Wilayet* as early as possible, without facing international complications.

The issue of oil took on another important dimension after 1918 as a consequence of the need to create a financially self-sufficient British -and later native- administration in Mesopotamia. Col. Wilson first raised the issue of the importance of oil when seeking to persuade the British Government to immediately deal with the issue of oil concessions in the *Wilayets* of Mosul and Baghdad. He was particularly concerned with the prosperity of the existing British administration. As oil resources were Mesopotamia's main asset, he argued, they should be treated as its only guarantee for obtaining the loans necessary to materially develop the country.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, he wanted his administration, rather than commercial companies, to control this asset. The creation of a solid material infrastructure, while establishing an Arab state in Mesopotamia, was still an important issue faced by the British Government. In the absence of other material resources, and due to the prevailing economic backwardness of Mesopotamia, oil became important politically for the viability and long-term survival of the newly emerging Iraq state. The establishment of this state once more brought to the fore the question of developing the potential oil resources of the Mosul and Baghdad *Wilayets* for the benefit of the native Government in Baghdad.

The material security of the Iraqi state was of special concern for British officials in Mesopotamia, notably Cox, who, like Col. Wilson, linked the survival of the local administration to a speedy exploitation of the potential oil wealth of the country:

*An Iraqi Government has been established, which though not yet able to stand alone, is rapidly consolidating and requires that the resources of that country be developed... Oil has been struck at Naft Khanh<sup>49</sup> and though not yet in paying quantity, prospects are bright. If this oil could be worked to the benefit of the Iraqi state, the effect would be excellent politically and economically... The provision of cheap fuel would undoubtedly change the face of the railway problem and give a great impetus to agricultural development and the purchase of machinery.<sup>50</sup>*

The need for the speedy strengthening of the new state so as to enable it to stand on its own feet added a new economic dimension to Cox's and his subordinates' argument that the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan, with its potential oil resources, was an economic necessity for Iraq. The concerns of British officials on the ground about the need to make Iraq into a

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48\* India Office Conference, No.56571 & 27792, 8 April 1919, FO371/2095, PRO.

49\* Naft Khanh was a Kurdish area, which had been part of ~~part of~~ Persia, before being transferred to British administered-Mesopotamia after the end of the War.

50\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 25 December 1921, CO730/8, PRO.



self-sufficient new state was shared by the Colonial Office, as it became unmistakable that the entire policy of indirect British control depended on the ability of the new state to maintain a strong and a viable material infrastructure. Shuckburgh, for instance, recognised the importance of finding new sources of revenue for the Iraqi state, which were, unlike land taxes, "*the least likely to be affected by political changes and disorder*", such as customs and tobacco excise.<sup>51</sup>

It should be remembered that the policy of replacing direct British control with indirect control, as it was embodied in the establishment of an Arab state, did not only aim to end British financial commitments, but also to retrieve as much of Britain's expenses to date in Mesopotamia as was possible. In other words, the British hoped that the Iraqis would pay for the cost of railways, ports, roads, bridges, telegraphs and other modern facilities, which they had constructed during and after the First World War. The terms of the 1924 British-Iraqi financial agreement, which were based on the October 1922 agreement, required the Iraqi Government to pay by instalment the cost of public improvements undertaken by the British occupation authorities during the period 1914-1921. This amounted to about £7,000,000. London refused to turn these facilities over to the Iraqi Government without payment, though it waived its claims to 94,009,540 Indian Rupees due in payment for public works and utilities. In this context, William Stivers highlights the paradox in British policy towards the financial affairs of the new Iraqi state.<sup>52</sup> On the one hand, Britain wanted the Iraqi Government to pay the cost of various projects undertaken by the British, which formed a heavy financial burden, while, on the other, Britain wanted Iraq to be an economically self-sustaining unit, which was the cornerstone of the new policy of indirect control. According to these considerations, the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq would help the latter to sustain itself without depending on any British financial assistance. Britain even helped the Iraqi Government to obtain satisfactory deals from the issue of oil concessions in the autumn of 1923. The new Colonial Secretary, Leo Amery, referred to Britain's dual concern, namely to maintain both the private oil interests of the British and to make the Iraqi state benefit adequately from the oil concessions.<sup>53</sup>

The need to pay the British for the public works and the need to finance the Iraqi state

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51\* Shuckburgh, Colonial Office, 15 July 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

52\* Stivers, *Supremacy and Oil: Iraq, Turkey and the Anglo-American World Order, 1918-1930*, p.88.

53\* Colonial Office to High Commissioner, Baghdad, 4 August 1923 & Memorandum of Meeting Held at the Colonial Office 7 September 1923, in Stivers, p.88.

without depending on British financial assistance were the early heavy tasks facing Feisal and his Arab Government. The 1922 agreement between Britain and Feisal stated that the Iraqi Government should accept full responsibility for the maintenance of internal order and the defence of the country from foreign aggression.<sup>54</sup> The Iraqi Government was required to devote 25% of its annual revenue to the maintenance of the native army and reserves. From the start, Feisal and his Arab Government urgently needed to find new financial sources to increase the young state's revenue so that it could adequately develop its principal institutions, such as the army and the police. In these circumstances, it was natural that they focused their attention on the exploitation of the potential oil wealth of Southern Kurdistan. As early as December 1922, the Iraqi Council of Ministers began to discuss the question of the Mesopotamian oil fields and the disposition of oil shares. It eventually adopted a resolution, which stated with implicit reference to the oil of Southern Kurdistan that:

*the Iraq Government is unable to agree to any ex parte negotiations, which may take place in connection with the natural resources of the country, or to recognise any decision taken without its consent.*<sup>55</sup>

Feisal and his Government informed London of their intention to seize the existing opportunity for an early development of the potential oil fields to secure for Iraq "a substantial revenue".<sup>56</sup> In his response to the issue of exploiting oil resources, Churchill made clear that he did not object to the granting of concessions by the Iraqi Government, except for those which were based on "pre-war claims".<sup>57</sup> This meant that Iraq could not count on the oil of the Mosul *Wilayet*. The growing need for money forced the Ministry of Finance to urge the Iraqi Government to allow the development of the oil bearing regions of the country by the TPC.<sup>58</sup> Against this background, Feisal endeavoured to persuade Britain to open a discussion on the question of the old and new oil concessions in the Mosul *Wilayet*. But Britain viewed the present time as inappropriate, given the uncertainty of the future of the Mosul *Wilayet*.<sup>59</sup> It feared that any British exploitation of the oil of the Mosul *Wilayet* might give America and France the impression that its rejection of the Turkish territorial claims was motivated by oil considerations.

It was clear to Feisal and his Arab Government, on the one side, and Cox and other British officials on the other side, that the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan would bring

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54\* Ernest Main, *Iraq from Mandate to Independence*, p.60.

55\* IIR, No.24, 13 December 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

56\* Weakley, Minute No.12708, 13 December 1921, FO371/6364, PRO.

57\* S/S for the Colonies to High Commissioner for Iraq, 30 January 1922, FO371/7782, PRO.

58\* IIR, No.3, 1 February 1923, FO371/7772, PRO.

59\* Ibid.

economic advantages for the Iraqi state. Cox supported the Iraqi Government's position on the imposition of excise on Kurdish tobacco, which he considered to be a "staple crop" and "an important source of revenue capable of expansion".<sup>60</sup> Accordingly, Cox asked London to protect Kurdish tobacco by prohibiting the import of foreign tobacco. He hoped that this would lead to the creation of a local tobacco industry and bring in "large revenue" to the Iraqi Government. His successor, Henry Dobbs, who was described by Bell as having a "mature experience in fiscal matters" due to his involvement in the financial affairs of the new state,<sup>61</sup> re-asserted the importance of Southern Kurdistan's tobacco for the Iraqi economy. The necessity of finding new financial sources for the Iraqi treasury was clearly demonstrated by the short-lived rivalry between the Kurdish Government of Mahmud and the Arab Government for control of the land revenue in Southern Kurdistan, as well as the excise on Kurdish tobacco. Many Kurdish regions refused to pay taxes to the Iraqi Government, as they rejected Arab rule. The question of exploiting oil and taxation gave the incorporation argument another important dimension, in that the inclusion of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq was an economic necessity if Britain sought an economically stable Iraqi state in the long run. Indeed, from 1927 onward, the Iraqi economy increasingly depended on the oil of Southern Kurdistan as the country's main source of income.

### **The Incorporation Of Southern Kurdistan Into The Newly Established Iraqi State: Strategic Considerations**

The British occupation of the three *Wilayets* of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul in the period 1914-1918 was largely motivated by two strategic considerations. Firstly, in order to maintain the security of the sea-route to India against hostile Powers, Britain needed to further consolidate its position in the Gulf region by controlling Mesopotamia. Secondly, the occupation of the three *Wilayets* would enable Britain to control the strategic land-route to India, i.e. London, Constantinople, Mosul Baghdad, Kum or Isfahan to Quette. Following the First World War, by virtue of becoming part of the Empire air-route:

*It is understood that Baghdad is regarded as a vital point in the air route to the East. Already, a regular air service runs between Baghdad and Egypt. The fortnight air mail, which has been in existence for over a year, has reduced the distance between Baghdad and London to 10 or 11 days.<sup>62</sup>*

The air force was gradually becoming another effective method of protecting India. The impor-

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60\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 22 June 1921, CO730/2, PRO.

61\* Lady Gertrude, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, Vol.I, (London: Ernest Benn, 1927) pp.508-509.

62\* Cabinet Committee On Iraq, No. I.R.O. 3, 11 December 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

tance of strategy insofar as Mesopotamia was concerned was repeatedly emphasised by the British military and civilian circles in London and Baghdad when the Iraqi state was formed. Now British strategic interests became inevitably interconnected with the military viability of the new Iraqi state. Furthermore, new factors came into play to underline that interconnection, most notably the Kemalist accession to power in Turkey. The question of the growing Kemalist threat and unceasing Turkish claims to Southern Kurdistan constantly raised the issue of re-defining British objectives in Mesopotamia and the ideal way to achieve them under the circumstances. The ultimate aim of Britain was to find a political formula which would enable it to fortify its long-term position in Mesopotamia, without entailing unwanted financial and military commitments. The subsequent replacement of direct British control by an Arab administration depended on how Britain would provide for the security of its client state in Iraq.

Under these conditions, the need to consolidate Iraq's security *vis-à-vis* a revisionist Turkey helped to accentuate the strategic importance of Southern Kurdistan. The latter formed, with its high mountains and deep valleys, a natural defensive zone that was inexpensive to defend. These distinctive features would dramatically minimise Britain's military commitments as well as Iraq's defence cost. Southern Kurdistan could also offer other facilities, notably the replacement of the imperial forces with local Kurdish recruits to defend the country. The strategic dimension of the British problem in Mesopotamia, as chapter six illustrated, was the driving force behind Churchill's idea of establishing Southern Kurdistan as a separate zone, with a view to consolidating the security of the Iraqi state. At his meeting with Feisal, Hubert Young expressed the Colonial Office's views in relation to the way in which the security and interests of Iraq could be maintained, without bringing Southern Kurdistan under Arab rule:

*To Iraq, friendly Kurdistan was vital as being potential shield against Turkey and partner with Iraq in common interest or, alternatively, only menace in itself but screen for the channel of external aggression. To Kurdistan, the friendship of Iraq was vital as containing chief, if not only outside market and being only outlet to the sea. Without considering outside factor, community of interests alone should lead to close cooperation and friendly relations between these two areas, each of which was at the mercy of the other.<sup>63</sup>*

By the time the Lausanne conference was under way, it became clear that the option of Southern Kurdistan's separation should be abandoned, not only because of Feisal's opposition, but most importantly, because of its unwelcome political effects on Britain's long-term relations with Turkey and Persia (detailed in chapter eight). This brought to the fore other alternatives, such as giving all Southern Kurdistan to Turkey, partitioning it between Arab Iraq

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<sup>63</sup>\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 25 October 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

and Turkey or incorporating it as a whole into the Arab state of Iraq. The decisions of the 1921 Cairo Conference in relation to the transitional process from direct British administration to Arab government were based on the assumption that Mesopotamia would not encounter any external threat during and immediately after this period. It was thought that neither the Royal Air Force (RAF) nor the remaining British garrison in Mesopotamia would be in a position to deal effectively with any external attack.<sup>64</sup> In view of its urgent need to cut down its military expenditure, London was, every time Feisal raised this question, extremely reluctant to guarantee Iraq's security from external attack. The task of the remaining British garrison was the maintenance of internal order in Arab Mesopotamia, whereas the RAF, with the help of Assyrian and possibly Kurdish levies, was entrusted with the same task in the Kurdish areas. The levies were expected to replace the evacuated British posts in Southern Kurdistan. The period after the Cairo conference, however, showed no sign which might suggest that Mesopotamia was free from external threat, as the Kemalists zealously continued their military and propaganda activities in Southern Kurdistan. The implementation of the withdrawal decision, before making a peace treaty with Kemalist Turkey, caused considerable uneasiness among the British military and civilian personnel in Mesopotamia.<sup>65</sup> Cox argued that *"the evacuation of Tel Afar, Aqra and Zakho would render impossible the retention of Mosul and the rest of the Wilayet"*.<sup>66</sup> Hence, the military vulnerability of Iraq could only be eliminated if Southern Kurdistan was incorporated into Iraq. Thus, Cox, like Feisal who wanted Britain to establish a strategic frontier for his state in the north, added a strategic dimension to his argument that the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq was vital.

As Britain was not in a military position to make Turkey accept a peace agreement, and because it also lacked diplomatic leverage (such as the support of its Allies for its position), Curzon raised among British civil and military circles the idea of a compromise with Kemalist Turkey. This would entail a modest rectification of the old boundaries of the Mosul *Wilayet* in favour of Kemalist Turkey. It was hoped that the resulting peace with that country would be an ideal means to maintain Iraq's long-term security while evacuating the British garrison. The trouble with this alternative was that territorial concessions in Southern Kurdistan (apart from inviting the Kemalist Turks to press for more territorial concessions) would place Turkey in a

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64\* Colonial Office, Middle Eastern Committee, Fourth Minute by Shuckburgh, 4 November 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

65\* Colonial Office, Middle Eastern Committee, First Minute by Shuckburgh, 5 May 1921, FO371/6344, PRO.

66\* Ibid.

strategically strong position *vis-à-vis* Iraq. In other words, if Britain returned the Zakho and Amadia districts to the Turks, the latter would always pose a direct threat to the remainder of Southern Kurdistan where oil existed. If it was decided to surrender the whole of Southern Kurdistan, with its considerable size of 88,000 Sq. Km. and population of 700,000, the Kemalist Turks would be placed within 150 miles of Baghdad. The Chief of the Air Staff pointed to several potential military and political consequences if Britain gave up the Mosul *Wilayet*. Firstly, the Arabs would consider the surrender of that *Wilayet* as a “*British defeat*” and thus Britain’s political credibility in Mesopotamia as a whole would be weakened. Secondly, Feisal would feel that his position was compromised by the British in proportion to the undermining of the security of his state. Thirdly, the British would be forced into increasing their garrison in Baghdad,<sup>67</sup> as Turkish control over Southern Kurdistan and Mosul meant depriving Iraq of “*a portion of the buffer zone*”.<sup>68</sup> Like the Chief of Air Staff, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and the Colonial Office were unanimously against withdrawal from Southern Kurdistan before making peace with Kemalist Turkey:

*Sooner or later, we should be bound to admit Turkish influence up to edge of plains and should, thus, be cut off from national line of communications between Mosul and Baghdad, which runs via Kifri-Kirkuk-Altun Kupri and Arbil.. Whole length of our Baghdad-Mosul communications for some 200 Miles, would be flanked by turbulent hill country. Our Communications could be out at any time and in fact retention of Mosul from a military point of view, would be rendered impossible.. Cession of Kurdish country would similarly endanger important line of communication between Baghdad and Persia via Qizil Robat and Khaniqin.. Considerable reinforcements to existing garrison would become necessary, if position was to be maintained.. If accepted by the Turks, it would be merely as a first step towards further expansion, which would inevitably lead to our abandonment of the whole of Mosul with all the consequences which that would entail.*<sup>69</sup>

The failure of the Mesopotamian policy, the British feared, might lead to other consequences, such as ending a British presence at the head of the Gulf, which in turn would represent a threat to India and imperial trade,<sup>70</sup> as well as incurring Arab hostility and strengthening Bolshevik influence in Persia.<sup>71</sup>

The new Turkish peace settlement at Lausanne in 1923 ended all British worries about a Kemalist invasion of Mesopotamia, at least in the foreseeable future. What remained unresolved was the way in which Britain could keep a stable Southern Kurdistan within Iraq.

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67\* Cabinet Committee On Iraq, No. I.R.O. 1st, 8 December 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

68\* Annexure i, Lord Curzon’s Tentative Proposals Regarding Cession of Portion of Kurdistan, Lausanne, 6 December 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

69\* Annexure ii, Lord Curzon, Lausanne, 8 December, FO371/7772, PRO.

70\* Cabinet Committee On Iraq, No. I.R.O. 2nd Conclusion, 12 December 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

71\* Foreign Office Memorandum on the Political Consequences of British Withdrawal from Iraq, 15 December 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

British experiences in Kurdish areas showed that resorting to ground action was very costly, both in terms of men and money. The intensive use of the RAF through what was known as *the Scheme of Air Control*, emerged as the most effective way to pacify Southern Kurdistan. The air force, as Ernest Main points out, represented the cheapest and quickest means of re-imposing British or Iraqi control over Southern Kurdistan,<sup>72</sup> which suited its geographical realities and social characteristics, i.e. being mountainous country and having a population that was accustomed to guerrilla warfare. It also allowed Britain to dispense with the stationing of a large garrison in Mesopotamia to maintain internal order. *The Scheme of Air Control* was based on previous British experiences in the period 1919-1920, when the RAF had raided several rebellious Kurdish areas. Under this scheme the general practice was to constantly bomb civilian targets such as villages and towns. The ensuing disruption to social and economic life would break Kurdish resistance. In 1921, the Air Ministry representative reminded the Colonial Office that *"the suppression of disorder, in conjunction with levies, was already one of the functions of the Air Force in Kurdistan, as in Iraq proper"*.<sup>73</sup> After 1922, the role of the RAF took on an important political aspect during the process of implementing the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq against Kurdish will.<sup>74</sup> At one point, Churchill had opposed the bombardment of civilian Kurdish targets by the RAF. Yet, such actions not only continued but actually escalated, when the RAF resorted to gas bombs. Such bombs had never been used before by any Power against local rebellions, let alone civilian targets. The history of the Kurdish question in Iraq between 1923 and 1943 shows that without the use of RAF in suppressing Kurdish rebellions, Southern Kurdistan's incorporation into Iraq would have not been imposed nor could it have lasted, as Britain was determined not to use its ground forces to keep order. Even though the effective use of the RAF against Kurdish rebellions gave the Iraqi state time to build its own ground and air forces, it remained incapable of controlling Southern Kurdistan on its own. Thus, the emerging dual British-Arab military control -in the form of an Arab ground force and a British air force- was the only arrangement capable of keeping political stability in Southern Kurdistan after 1923.

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72\* Ernest Main, *Iraq from Mandate to Independence*, 114.

73\* Shuckburgh, Middle Eastern Committee, Fourth Minute, 4 November 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

74\* David E. Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: the Royal Air Force, 1919-1939*, (Manchester: 1990). This work thoroughly examines the role of the RAF in keeping Southern Kurdistan under British and Iraqi control by suppressing successive Kurdish revolts in the Twenties and the Thirties.

## Conclusion

When the British Government decided to establish an Arab state in 1920, it was not in its plans to incorporate Southern Kurdistan into Iraq. The formation process of the Iraqi state, which started in late 1920 and continued for the next three years, was not as straightforward and smooth as the British initially thought it would be. From the very beginning, it raised issues vital to the military, economic and political viability of the new Iraqi state. The growing Kemalist threat to the British position in Mesopotamia compellingly drew Britain's attention to the need not to overlook the necessity of constructing Iraq as a viable military unit. By underlining the issue of Iraq's short and long-term security among British officials in London and Mesopotamia, the Kemalist threat was the most important factor influencing the ultimate decision to place Southern Kurdistan under direct Arab rule, rather than establishing it as a separate political entity. In other words, in view of Britain's irrevocable decision to withdraw its imperial garrison and the frailty of the newly-established Arab army, the inclusion of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq became necessary, as the former constituted a natural defensive belt for the latter against foreign invasion.

Southern Kurdistan was as important to Britain as it was to its client state of Iraq. From the economic point of view, the value of Southern Kurdistan was two fold. Firstly, Britain sought to impose its control through its client state over the potential oil fields of Southern Kurdistan. This would enable Britain to secure valuable oil supplies for the British navy, especially under war conditions. A separate Southern Kurdistan or its return to Turkish control would probably mean that Britain could no longer control the oil fields on a secure and long-term basis. Secondly, the British were aware of the vital importance of establishing an Arab state that would be financially self-sufficient, if they were to realise their main aim of ending their heavy financial burdens in Mesopotamia. Feisal and his Arab Government were also alive to the importance of potential Kurdish oil as a valuable and reliable source of income to the Iraqi state which could pay for the rapid development of its military and civilian institutions. It was natural then that British economic concerns converged with those of Feisal and his Government, which were to merge Southern Kurdistan's economic life with Iraq's.

The political importance of Southern Kurdistan to the newly-established Iraqi state reflected, in the eyes of British officials in Mesopotamia, their desire to perpetuate the traditional policy of divide and rule. Such a desire was a direct consequence of past British experience in Mesopotamia between 1918 and 1923, when the Shi'is under their religious leader-



ship resisted British direct rule and refused to participate in the formation process of the Iraqi state under British supervision. Therefore, it did not suit British interests to see the Shi'is forming the overwhelming majority in the new Iraqi state, while the Sunni Arabs constituted a small minority. From the British point of view, placing the Sunni Kurds under Arab rule would help to reduce this critical sectarian imbalance in the political life of the new Iraqi state. Moreover, it was in the British interest to have social and cultural diversity and the emergence of a disharmonious society based on powerful communal identities, which would prevent the emergence of an Iraq-wide nationalist movement capable of challenging British influence in the country. At the same time, Feisal, who lacked popular support and only enjoyed the backing of the Sunni military and political elites, also valued the Southern Kurds as an important means of reducing considerably the Shi'i majority which did not support him. It was natural then that the political concerns of Feisal and his Sunni entourage converged with those of the British officials in Baghdad. In retrospect, the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into the Iraqi state was imposed on the Southern Kurds, who refused to participate in the formation process of the Iraqi state or consent to Feisal's rule. The Kurdish opposition to the imposition of Arab rule over Southern Kurdistan never ceased, and expressed itself in a number of armed revolts during the twenties, thirties and forties.

## Chapter Eight

### British Kurdish Policy: Post-Sèvres And The Lausanne Conference

The Sèvres treaty was a still born. Its terms were not implemented largely, because of the growing strength of the Turkish nationalists led by Mustafa Kemal who firmly opposed the imposed Turkish peace settlement. Their on-going revolt in Anatolia against foreign control over Turkey offered an opening for the spread of Bolshevik influence in the Middle East, especially when Russian Armenia was Sovietised by the Red Army in December 1920. In the meantime, France and Italy, Britain's principal Allies, gradually changed their attitudes towards the Kemalists and began to advocate accommodation with them instead of confrontation.

This chapter focuses on these regional and international developments and analyses the extent to which they affected Britain's Kurdish policy between summer 1920 and summer 1923. It must be remembered that without reaching a peace agreement with Kemalist Turkey, either by force or by peaceful means, a successful implementation of the new policy of indirect control was widely judged as unrealistic by British policy-makers at the Foreign Office and at the Colonial Office. As this chapter explains, resorting to peaceful means or force by the British would have direct effects on their approach to the Kurdish situation, given the existence of political instability in Northern and Southern Kurdistan. This chapter illustrates how Britain and Kemalist Turkey took into consideration the existence of this state of affairs in Kurdistan, when attempting to achieve their main objective, i.e. controlling Southern Kurdistan. Meanwhile, the Kurdish nationalists unsuccessfully endeavoured to exploit the unresolved difference between the British and the Kemalists to achieve their political aspirations.

### **Kurdish Nationalists, Britain And The Kurdish Situation Immediately After Sèvres**

#### ***i- Post-Sèvres Activities Of The Kurdish Nationalist Movement***

The Kurdish nationalists expressed unfavourable reactions to the Sèvres treaty because they did not consider its terms on Kurdistan to be either satisfactory or applicable. Said Taha was one of those Kurds who was "sceptical" about a successful implementation of the Sèvres terms, especially when the proposed Allied commission was not supported with force to do its task in Kurdistan.<sup>1</sup> Instead of awaiting the application of the Sèvres treaty, the Kurdish nationalists took several initiatives to achieve their political aspirations. Apart from a minority that did

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<sup>1</sup>\* Shuckburgh, India Office, Urgent, 15 December 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

not trust the Allies and believed that the safest option was to co-operate with the Kemalists to obtain local autonomy for the Kurds, the majority of Kurdish nationalists still considered British support, either material or moral, to be an important factor in the success of their efforts. The latter believed that British support could be obtained only if the Kurds were capable of exploiting the differences between Britain and Kemalist Turkey.

In Diyarbekir, Kurdish notables, former army officers and civil servants were engaged in organising an armed movement for an independent Kurdistan. They established connections among Kurdish nationalist circles in Constantinople, Kharput, Bitlis and Diyarbekir. The organisers of the movement were very anxious to establish direct contacts with the British authorities in Mesopotamia.<sup>2</sup> To approach London with a united front, the two Kurdish nationalist factions in Constantinople, the moderates and the extremists, came together and established a new political organisation, with Abdul Qadir as President and Emin Bey Bedirkhan as Vice President.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Said Taha, Simko and other Kurdish leaders decided, after a series of meetings, to establish a Kurdish confederation along the old Ottoman-Persian frontier, while soliciting British support.<sup>4</sup> The idea of establishing a Kurdish confederation, so it was thought, would be appealing to Britain, given its concern about future Kemalist and Bolshevik offensives against Mesopotamia through Northern, Eastern and Southern Kurdistan.<sup>5</sup> Similar suggestions were presented by other Kurds such as Hamdi Pasha, the former Ottoman Minister of Marine.<sup>6</sup> What encouraged such hopes among these Kurdish nationalists seems to have been the Bolsheviks' occupation of Baku and their advance towards the Turkish-Persian frontiers. Indeed, in the wake of these developments, Simko approached the British in Mesopotamia, arguing again that because Persia was powerless in Eastern Kurdistan, British support for his movement would help to contain any Bolshevik advance and Kemalist threat to Southern Kurdistan.<sup>7</sup>

Little is known about the attitudes of the Bolsheviks towards the Kurdish question for the period 1920-1923. It can, however, be said that they paid some attention to Kurdish

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2\* High Commission, Mesopotamia, 17 November 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

3\* Ryan, Memorandum, Constantinople, 23 December 1920, FO371/6346, PRO.

4\* Kurdish tribal confederations and tribes involved in this scheme were from Northern and Eastern Kurdistan such as Shikak, Hakari, Haidarani, Herki, Begzadah, Atrushi. Memorandum from Civil Commission, Baghdad, to Under S/S for India, 8 October 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

5\* Shuckburgh, IO (No.8580, Urgent) 15 December 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

6\* Ryan, Memorandum, Constantinople, 23 December 1920, FO371/6346, PRO.

7\* Memorandum from Assistant Political Officer, Rania, to Political Officer, 20 July 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

affairs in line with their Middle Eastern strategy of influencing the political movements of the new nationalities, with a view to using them against British imperial interests in the region. Despite the fact that British sources made direct references to the constant Bolshevik propaganda against Britain in Kurdistan, no pro-Bolshevik grouping or Bolshevik-orientated leaders emerged inside the Kurdish nationalist movement. This might be attributed to the anti-religious stance of the Bolsheviks, which the British extensively publicised in Persia and the former Ottoman *Wilayets*. It is known that at the First Conference of Peoples of the East, which the Bolsheviks organised in Baku on 1 September 1920, eight Kurdish delegates attended.<sup>8</sup> However, there is no information recorded about these Kurds, that is to say, whether they were mere nationalists or pro-Bolsheviks. Given the existence of Kurdish communities in Russian Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, these Kurds probably came from these regions. The Bolsheviks probably thought of turning such Kurds into a socialist or a pro-Bolshevik nationalist party if circumstances required, as they did in Persia and Turkey. After the Sèvres treaty, an autonomous Kurdish entity was established in the Caucasus in accordance with Lenin's instructions. But, the most important means through which the Bolsheviks attempted to influence the Kurdish situation was by their encouragement of the Kemalists to grant the right of self-determination to the non-Turkish nationalities, such as the Kurds and the Arabs. They hoped to pre-empt British attempts to use the nationality question as a means of consolidating their position in regions surrounding Russia's southern frontiers. Generally, the Kurdish nationalist movement remained politically and ideologically unsusceptible to Bolshevism.

Western -and especially British support- whether it was material or moral, was still viewed by the Kurdish nationalists as essential for the success of their efforts to mobilise the Kurds around the idea of Kurdish independence and to defeat stronger opponents, i.e. the Turks and the Persians. Despite that, many Kurdish revolts, varying in scale and intensity, broke out without receiving outside material or moral support. An anti-Kemalist revolt broke out in the Kurdish areas to the east of Sivas.<sup>9</sup> In Dersim, local Kurds had openly been in a state of revolt for a year. Other local revolts had occurred in Diyarbekir, Nisibin, Hakari and Mardin for some time, while the Kurds of Mush controlled their town.<sup>10</sup> The most important development was the Kurdish uprising in the autumn of 1921, which embraced Diyarbekir, Dersim, Van and

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8\* Edward H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, Vol.III [London: Penguin Books, 1971], p.262.

9\* Rumbold to Curzon, Confidential, 18 May 1921, FO371/6346, PRO.

10\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 8 August 1921, FO371/6346, PRO.

Bitlis. Apart from asking for a British mandate, the leaders of the uprising informed Britain that if they were assisted, they would turn Northern Kurdistan into a buffer against Bolshevism and Kemalism. Beside needing one or two British officers such as Maj. Noel, the Kurds asked for two mountain guns, a few machine guns, 5,000 rifles, some ammunition and most importantly, a passage for supplies through Southern Kurdistan.

In the same period, Greece promised the nationalist Kurds military aid, if Britain allowed its passage through Mesopotamia.<sup>11</sup> According to Olson, the Greek High Commissioner in Constantinople provided Emin Ali Bedirkhan and Abdul al-Rahman with fund when the two visited Cairo, and that Emin's son drafted proclamations in Kurdish in collaboration with the Greeks. Olson also names Kurd Mustafa Pasha as one of those Kurdish nationalists who established contacts with the Greeks and the Armenian nationalists.<sup>12</sup> Kurd Mustafa Pasha sought to win British support for an independent Southern Kurdistan that could help mobilise local Kurds against the Kemalists. The Kurdish nationalists increasingly paid attention to the Greeks, who seemed to be serious in their intention to support all efforts as a means of weakening their Kemalist enemy. Probably the Kurdish nationalists hoped that their action would persuade Britain to give aid and political support, once its ally, Greece, was involved in Kurdish affairs. This could be the reason why Emin Ali Bedirkhan informed the British of the existing Kurdish contacts with the Greeks, with a view to organising a Kurdish movement against the Kemalists. Andrew Ryan of the British High Commission in Constantinople reported that Emin Ali asked if Britain would allow him and other Kurds to go to Mosul in order to set up a Kurdish organisation in the British-controlled Southern Kurdistan as a prelude to the Kurdish revolt. As London still hoped that it could make peace with Kemalist Turkey, it not only refused to grant either military assistance or to allow the Greeks to send their aid to the Kurdish nationalists through Southern Kurdistan, but also hoped that the Kurds would not submit to such suggestions.<sup>13</sup> Yet Kurdish appeals for British help did not stop, and continued until the conclusion of the 1923 Lausanne treaty. These appeals often warned against future Kemalist massacres of the Kurds, if the latter were left to their own devices.

After Sèvres, the intention of British officials in London, as in Mesopotamia and Constantinople, focused on the growing Kemalist and Bolshevik threats. These threats made it very difficult for Britain not to reconsider their Kurdish policy, especially in Southern Kurdistan;

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11\* Cox to Churchill, Very Secret, 28 October 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

12\* Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, p.64.

13\* Rumbold to Curzon, 31 May 1921, FO371/6346, PRO.

otherwise, it would face the prospect of losing not only Southern Kurdistan but also Mesopotamia. The need to take new initiatives in Kurdistan was first felt by the India Office, which raised the question of the appointment of a Kurdish governor for Southern Kurdistan, in response to what was perceived as an anti-British alliance between the Kemalists and the Bolsheviks.<sup>14</sup> As the political situation became more alarming, the India Office raised the question of undertaking a new, broader initiative, based on the formation of a British-sponsored Kurdish confederation in the Kurdish areas along the old Ottoman-Persian frontier in Northern and Eastern Kurdistan.<sup>15</sup> Montagu urged London to respond to Said Taha's overtures for the establishment of a Kurdish confederation under its auspices, and to ignore the unfeasible terms of the Sèvres treaty. He suggested that

*as a preliminary step, Major Noel should be instructed to proceed at once to Mesopotamia and place himself at the disposal of the High Commissioner, with a view to open communication with the leading Kurdish chieftains on the Northern frontiers of the occupied territory and reporting at once to Mesopotamia on the general trend of local feeling in these regions and, in particular, the prospect of carrying to a successful issue the policy advocated by Said Taha of forming a Kurdish confederation under British auspices.<sup>16</sup>*

This did not mean, however, that Montagu was willing to involve Britain in serious military commitments, which was why he rejected the idea of giving British ammunition to Said Taha.<sup>17</sup> His idea of using Maj. Noel was preconditioned by the degree of intimacy in Kemalist-Bolshevik relations and the Armenian situation, both of which considerably affected the British strategic position in Southern Kurdistan and Mesopotamia.<sup>18</sup> The only voices in favour of the Said Taha project and all that it entailed were those British officials serving in the Kurdish areas.<sup>19</sup>

## ***ii- Britain's Attempts To Implement A Modified Version Of The Terms Of The Sèvres Treaty On Kurdistan***

The idea of reaching an agreement with Kemalist Turkey on implementing the Sèvres terms on Kurdistan to the letter -as Hubert Young once suggested- was inconceivable to London because the prospects of an independent or an autonomous Kurdistan would considerably undermine Britain's position in Mesopotamia. Young's suggestion consisted of one year temporary Turkish rule over Northern and Southern Kurdistan, during which the Kurds would

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<sup>14</sup>\*S/S [for India] to High Commission, Baghdad, 27 October 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

<sup>15</sup>\* S/S to High Commission, Baghdad, 26 November 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

<sup>16</sup>\* Shuckburgh, India Office, Urgent, 15 December 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

<sup>17</sup>\* Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>\* Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>\* Political Officer, Mosul, to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, Confidential, 21 September 1920, FO371/5069, PRO.

decide on whether to establish an independent Kurdistan or an autonomous Kurdistan within Turkey.<sup>20</sup> Instead, London sought to finalise the partition of Kurdistan, whose basis was laid down in 1920 when Southern Kurdistan was included in Britain's Mesopotamian mandate and Western Kurdistan in France's Syrian mandate. At the London conference (21 February-12 March 1921), apart from Britain and its Allies, two Turkish delegations participated, one representing the Ottoman Government, the other the Turkish rebels led by Mustafa Kemal. At this first post-Sèvres conference, which dealt with the Turkish settlement, Britain made the first adjustment in the Sèvres terms concerning the idea of Kurdish self-determination. The Kemalists were presented with a compromise scheme, which stated that

*in regard to Kurdistan, the Allies will be prepared on condition of facilities for local autonomies and adequate protection of Kurdish and Assyrian-Chaldean interests, to consider a modification of the Treaty in a sense in conformity with the existing facts of the situation.*<sup>21</sup>

This meant the abandonment of Kurdish self-determination, unlike the position of the Armenians, who would still have such a right to establish their own national state.<sup>22</sup> The idea of involving the League of Nations and an Allied High Commissioner to supervise the implementation of Kurdish autonomy was dropped because of French and Italian opposition.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, as the Kurdish proposals applied only to the Kurdish territory to the north of British-controlled Southern Kurdistan,<sup>24</sup> the idea of a united Ottoman Kurdistan, whether under British or Turkish control, was disregarded altogether. These sudden concessions reflected notable political changes in the regional situation, stemming from firstly the growing strength of the Kemalists; secondly, disagreement among the Allies over the question of how to deal with the Kemalists; thirdly, the pressing need to prevent the formation of a Kemalist-Bolshevik alliance against British interests; and finally, the failure of the scheme for a united Armenian state.

The compromise scheme, which was eventually rejected by the Kemalist delegation, meant that Britain would lose its political influence in Northern Kurdistan, an area which was still of some importance for the security of its position in Southern Kurdistan. This might explain why Montagu criticised the London conference's position on the nationality question. He demanded a declaration that would show the Kemalists and the concerned nationalities

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20\* Young, Colonial Office Minute No.21102, 29 April 1921, CO730/1, PRO.

21\* Shuckburgh to Churchill, Cairo, 15 March 1921, CO730/1, PRO.

22\* Foreign Office to Rumbold, Constantinople, 11 March 1921, FO371/6467, PRO.

23\* Curzon, Paris, 23 March 1922, FO371/7858, PRO.

24\* S/S for the Colonies to Cox, Cairo & Acting High Commissioner, Baghdad, 17 March 1921, CO730/1, PRO.

the determination of the Allies to do what was in their power to implement the minority provisions.<sup>25</sup> In spite of the Foreign Office's acceptance of Montagu's views on the need for an Allied declaration on the execution of the new scheme's provisions concerning the national minorities -such as the Northern Kurds-<sup>26</sup> nothing of the sort materialised. Neither the League of Nations nor Britain's former Allies were willing to take any political responsibility. The effect of the failure of the London conference was to make the British approach to the Kurdish situation even more cautious and defensive, and it did not result in greater British support for the efforts of the Kurdish nationalists in Northern Kurdistan, contrary to Olson's argument.<sup>27</sup> Thus, from 1921 onwards, the Kurdish question began to lose its international dimension and take on an ever more internal one.

### **Defensive Versus Offensive Approach To Northern Kurdistan: Britain And The Containment Of The Kemalist Threat**

#### ***i- The Attitudes Of The British High Commissions In Baghdad And Constantinople***

Following the Cairo conference of March 1921, the protracted and covert military activities of the Kemalists against Mesopotamia, coupled with political instability in Southern Kurdistan, caused considerable anxiety among British civilian and military personnel in Baghdad. They feared that any British withdrawal under such conditions would encourage the Kemalists to invade Mesopotamia through Southern Kurdistan. Accordingly, while asking London to intensify its efforts to make peace with Kemalist Turkey as early as possible, Cox advocated that if Britain failed in its efforts, it should resort to an offensive approach to force the Kemalists to stop their hostilities, and agree to a new peace treaty that would recognise Southern Kurdistan as part of the new Iraq. Cox's offensive approach, which enjoyed the backing of British civilian and military personnel in Mesopotamia as well as Feisal,<sup>28</sup> was largely based on the idea of giving British support to Northern Kurdish nationalists in their struggle with the Kemalists. Cox reminded the Colonial Office that in autumn 1920, the British Government carefully considered the idea of an "*active stimulation*" of a Kurdish revolt in Northern Kurdistan.<sup>29</sup> This idea, Cox pointed out, was abandoned because of the non-existence of vital preconditions

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25\* Memorandum from Montagu to Curzon, 23 April 1921, FO371/6469,PRO.

26\* Adam, Foreign Office Minute on Montagu's Memorandum, 26 April & Foreign Office to Montagu, 29 April 1921, FO371/6469,PRO.

27\* Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, p.65.

28\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 21 November 1921, CO730/7,PRO.

29\* High Commissioner for Mesopotamia to S/S for the Colonies, 21 June 1921, FO371/6346,PRO.



for a successful Kurdish revolt such as a temporary British occupation of Jezirah-ibn-Omar. Moreover, the India Office opposed the idea of arming the Kurds, fearing far deeper British involvement in Kurdish affairs. The conditions seemed different in Cox's eyes in June 1921. He argued that if the London conference led to the outbreak of "*open hostility*" with Kemalist Turkey, Britain would be in a position to support the Kurds, who should be informed about the nature and the extent of British help.<sup>30</sup> He did not elaborate, however, on how Britain could help the Kurds.

In August, Cox seemed more determined to persuade London to take the initiative as the movement for Kurdish independence, which was favourably disposed towards Britain, was gathering momentum:

*If proposition develops along these lines, it must sooner or later involve a breaking away of Kurdish districts from Persia and Turkey respectively. Altered attitude[s] of the Persian Government towards Great Britain and recent Turkish defeats in Anatolia suggest that considerations, which would formerly have prompted us to discourage such a movement, have lost for the time being much of their importance... Unless instructed to contrary, therefore, I propose, while refusing formal intercourse with Kurdish chiefs beyond our borders to use opportunities of ascertaining their intentions and to take promptly such actions [as] may be necessary to ensure the safety of frontier of Iraq.* <sup>31</sup>

To reinforce his argument for an active British role in the affairs of Northern Kurdistan, Cox argued that, whether Britain intervened or not, it would be accused of "*complicity*", in any anti-Kemalist revolt among the Kurds.<sup>32</sup> The increasing toughness of Cox's line was in proportion to the intensity of the Kemalist threat. The more the Kemalists seemed to increase their threat to the British position in Southern Kurdistan and Mesopotamia, the more Cox favoured an offensive approach. It should be emphasised that Cox presented his idea of using Northern Kurdish nationalists as an alternative to Churchill's idea of using Southern Kurdish nationalists as a means of defeating any potential Kemalist advance across Southern Kurdistan. Cox also wanted to use Simko to check Kemalist influence in Eastern Kurdistan, and to carry through the repatriation of Christians to Urmia.<sup>33</sup> A number of British officials serving in Southern Kurdistan shared Cox's opinion. The Political Officer of Sulaimaniya, H.A. Goldsmith, considered Simko's influence "*an effective barrier*" between Kemalist-controlled areas in Northern Kurdistan and British-controlled Southern Kurdistan. He thus advocated a British agreement or

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30\* Ibid.

31\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 26 August 1921, FO371/6347,PRO.

32\* Ibid.

33\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 26 August 1921, FO371/6347,PRO.

alliance with Simko,<sup>34</sup> as the latter established his control over vast Kurdish areas along the Old Ottoman-Persian frontiers.

Against the background of Greece's willingness to offer the Kurdish nationalists material support and the outbreak of Kurdish revolts in Diyarbekir, Dersim, Van and Bitlis in autumn 1921, Cox suggested to Churchill the dispatch of British volunteers and free passage of supplies -other than weapons- to the Kurds. London rejected Cox's suggestion, emphasising the need to avoid any British involvement in Northern Kurdistan's affairs which might aggravate an already tense situation. Accordingly, the British High Commission in Baghdad informed the Kurdish nationalist leaders that Britain would not support their revolt because it sought peace with the Kemalists. Khalil Bedirkhan, one of the Kurdish nationalists, was told to leave Baghdad, lest his presence roused the suspicion of the Kemalists about British involvement in Northern Kurdistan's affairs.<sup>35</sup> In the face of continuing intransigence from the Kemalists, and the prospect of a backlash which might result from Kurdish disillusionment with British attitudes, Cox again asked Churchill in December to re-examine the idea of giving British support to the Northern Kurds. He feared that if Britain continued to adopt a neutral stance towards the Kurdish situation while the Kemalists had no desire to stop their hostile activities in Southern Kurdistan, it would not only lose its prestige among the Kurds, but also incur their anger:

*While we are, thus, restrained by [the] prospect of negotiations for peace from taking active measures to combat the Kemalist menace, [the] same cause is producing an entirely opposite effect on [the] Kemalist policy, with [the] result that at a time when our attitude of passivity offered them every opportunity of successfully so doing, [the] Kemalists are redoubling their efforts against us. It is my duty, I feel, to draw attention to danger, lest our present policy of withholding all encouragement from Kurds, at a time when [the] Kemalists are making a strong bid to win them over, may notwithstanding all our efforts result in antagonising Kurds and virtually throwing them into arms of Kemalists.<sup>36</sup>*

In Cox's view, as long as that peace treaty was out of Britain's reach, then it could not afford to lose the Northern Kurds to the Kemalists, who would definitely use them as a means of achieving their original aim of controlling Southern Kurdistan and possibly Mesopotamia. Cox's attempts to persuade London to exploit the anti-Kemalist attitudes among Northern Kurdish nationalists continued until early 1923, when the Lausanne conference was well underway.

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34\* Secret Memorandum from Political Officer, Sulaimaniya, to High Commissioner, 29 July 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

35\* News Summary, Baghdad for Period Ended 25th November 1921, CO730, PRO

36\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 20 December 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

In contrast to its counterpart in Baghdad, the British High Commission in Constantinople supported the conciliatory approach of the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office towards the Kemalists, hoping to achieve peace as soon as possible. It, therefore, opposed any escalation in British-Kemalist tension through British involvement in the affairs of Northern Kurdistan. Like his predecessor De Robeck, Adm. H. Rumbold and the British General Staff Intelligence in Constantinople were in agreement that in order to use the Kemalist forces as an instrument for containing the growing Bolshevik influence, Britain should be willing to adopt a conciliatory policy towards Turkey by radically modifying the terms of the Sèvres treaty.<sup>37</sup> Otherwise, it was argued, any change in Britain's neutral stance towards the Kurdish-Kemalist conflict would pre-empt successful British-Kemalist negotiations.<sup>38</sup> Rumbold, who reported the excitement that the holding of the London conference created among Kurdish nationalist circles, discouraged requests made by Kurdish leaders to forward their telegram to the conference in order to explain their position on the Kurdish question.<sup>39</sup> Having said that, the British officials in Constantinople did not totally ignore the Kurds as a potential political card. If Britain continued to face intransigent Kemalist attitudes or was forced to respond to the anti-British activities of the Kemalists and the Bolsheviks in Kurdistan, it would still be able to use the Kurdish nationalists as a means of containment.<sup>40</sup> This policy would be executed without committing Britain either politically or militarily to the Kurdish cause.

#### ***ii- Churchill's Defensive Approach To The Affairs Of Northern Kurdistan***

In contrast to Cox, Winston Churchill, the Colonial Secretary, was in favour of a conciliatory policy towards the Kemalists. His approach required no British support for, or association with, the Kurdish nationalists and their anti-Kemalist efforts to end Turkish rule in Northern Kurdistan. Churchill feared that the adoption of hostile attitudes towards the Kemalists in support of national minorities such as the Kurds, would have unfavourable strategic consequences for Britain in the Middle East. He warned that the idea of supporting the Kurds or the Greeks against the Kemalist forces would result in a Kemalist-Bolshevik alliance directed against Britain. Churchill's position on the affairs of Northern Kurdistan, which can be termed as defensive, should be considered as an extension of his views on the future of Southern Kurdistan.

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37\* Rumbold, Constantinople, 4 January 1921 & Cabinet Meeting, 20 January 1921, FO371/6464, PRO.

38\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 20 December 1921, FO371/6481, PRO.

39\* Rumbold, Constantinople, 2 March 1921, FO371/6346, PRO.

40\* Rumbold, to Curzon, 29 December 1920 & Ryan, Constantinople, 23 December 1920, FO371/6346, PRO

Here, he advocated a separate Kurdish entity to protect the newly-emerging Iraqi state from Kemalist and possibly Bolshevik threats. By contrast, Cox's offensive approach sought to transfer the sphere of containment of the Kemalist threat from Southern Kurdistan to Northern Kurdistan. The former approach would expose Kemalist Turkey, not Britain, as the aggressor for violating the terms of the 1918 Mudros armistice, which had placed the Mosul *Wilayet* under British control. Moreover, it would prevent Britain from risking both a major military involvement outside its mandatory areas in Kurdistan and turning Kemalist Turkey into a permanent threat to the British position in Mesopotamia.

The origins of Churchill's views on the rising Kemalist movement go back to the period when he had been the Secretary of State for War (until February 1921). As far back as October 1919 he had argued that the anti-Turkish policy would lead to the spread of pan-Islamic feelings in India, fresh disturbances in Egypt, an increase in Arab unrest and a new round of Armenian massacres. Moreover, Britain would not be able to use "*Mustafa Kemal and a reconciled Turkey as a barrier against the Bolsheviks*".<sup>41</sup> The War Office under Churchill's leadership considered Bolshevism the greatest danger in the Middle East and felt that Britain should therefore forestall any development that might lead to a Kemalist-Bolshevik alliance directed against British imperial interests in the region. The Kemalist nationalists, he stated, were not hostile to Britain, but to the partition of Turkey. So why should Britain antagonise them "*solely for the benefit of alien and predatory races?*".<sup>42</sup> After becoming the Colonial Secretary and, therefore, responsible for administering mandated territories in the Middle East, Churchill pronounced the same views, which he shared with Lord Curzon and Edwin Montagu. Both Churchill and Curzon consistently opposed Lloyd George's policy of supporting the Greeks at the expense of the Kemalist Turks. Lloyd George's policy, they and the General Staff feared,<sup>43</sup> would throw the Kemalists into the arms of the Bolsheviks. Neither the growing signs of moderation in France's Turkish policy nor the arguments of his Cabinet colleagues persuaded Lloyd George to change his anti-Kemalist stance.

The existence of these contradictory views after the Cairo conference expressed an uncertainty common among the British officials at home and abroad as to the way in which Britain could fit in its attitudes towards the Kurdish situation with its broader policy in the Middle East, where the peace with Turkey and the containment of Bolshevism occupied a central

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41\* Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill*, Vol.IV, 1917-1922, (London: Heinmann, 1977), p.501.

42\* Churchill, Memorandum on Military Policy In Asia Minor, 9 October 1919, CAB24/89, PRO.

43\* Kent, *Moguls and Mandarins*, p.103.

place. At the Foreign Office, C.J. Edmonds advocated a *modus vivendi* with Turkey, whereas Forbes Adam argued in favour of a policy of physical force towards the Kemalists.<sup>44</sup> The staff of the Colonial Office were generally in favour of Churchill's position of non-intervention in the affairs of Northern Kurdistan. Some officials at the Colonial Office even suggested a rectification of the frontier between Southern and Northern Kurdistan "as an *inducement*" to the Kemalists to stop their anti-British attitudes,<sup>45</sup> which hindered the implementation of the new policy of indirect British control in Mesopotamia. Shuckburgh criticised Cox's suggestion that Britain should back the anti-Kemalist efforts of the Northern Kurdish nationalists for fear that it would turn Turkey into an *"eternal enemy"* of Britain, while the success of the new British policy towards Iraq required *"a friendly Turkey"*. He argued that an anti-Kemalist revolt in Northern Kurdistan would be a *"a fiasco"* and consequently worsen the Iraqi situation, rather than improving it.<sup>46</sup> To him, Britain was neither in a position to adequately support the revolt of the Northern Kurds, nor able to accommodate Kurdish refugees if it failed.

The political situation in Northern Kurdistan and the state of the Kurdish nationalist movement were among the reasons why the British Government was unwilling to become embroiled in the affairs of Northern Kurdistan. It was convinced that the Kurdish nationalists were incapable of successfully leading an anti-Turkish revolt. A Colonial Office minute noted that *"the lessons of the last few years are overwhelmingly against employing weak friends against powerful enemies, when we are not in a position to give them adequate support"*.<sup>47</sup> Any British involvement in Kurdish revolts was considered a dangerous gamble, and should only be adopted reluctantly and as a last resort, when other diplomatic options were totally exhausted. The idea of using the Kurds as a last resort was contained in Shuckburgh's comments on Churchill's reply to Cox on the issue of supporting the Northern Kurds. He made clear that the Lausanne conference was the last chance for Britain to persuade the Kemalists to sign a new peace treaty. Otherwise, Britain would have to consider *"whether advantage should be taken of the opportunity offered by the present temper of the [Northern] Kurds to obtain their co-operation against possible Turkish aggression"*.<sup>48</sup> The success of the Lausanne conference in achieving a new Turkish peace agreement ruled out the question of British sponsorship of anti-Kemalist revolts in Northern Kurdistan, even though Southern Kurdi-

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44\* Edmonds & Adam, Foreign Office minutes No.4766, 25/26 April 1921, FO371/6346, PRO.

45\* Second Minute Middle Eastern Committee, Colonial Office, 12 May 1921, FO371/6344, PRO.

46\* Shuckburgh, Colonial Office Minute of 10 November 1921, CO730/6, PRO.

47\* Colonial Office Minute, 11 November 1921, CO730/6, PRO.

48\* Shuckburgh, 21 February 1922, FO371/7781, PRO.

stan's future remained an unresolved matter between the two concerned parties: Britain and Turkey.

### ***iii- The Conclusion Of The Lausanne Agreement And Its Implications For The Kurdish Question***

The history of the British position on the Kurdish question following Sèvres is one of a steady retreat from both the principle of self-determination and the consideration of the question as an international one. The 1921 London conference was the first step towards relegating the Kurdish question to the background. A year later, the Kurdish question was again ignored during the course of the Allies' negotiations on the Turkish settlement. Britain complained about the lack of Allied support for its position on the question of non-Turkish minorities.<sup>49</sup> At the second meeting, the Allies agreed, insofar as the position of minorities was concerned, that the League should appoint Commissioners to visit regions where ethnic and religious tensions were at their peak, such as Smyrna, Potus, Angora and Cilicia.<sup>50</sup> In none of the nine Allies' meetings was there any direct or indirect reference to the Kurdish regions or the Kurdish question. Curzon's idea of extending the Commissioners' power of supervision to non-Turkish Muslims, which would include the Northern Kurds, was not adopted.<sup>51</sup> His speech in the House of Lords confirmed the Allies' intention to exclude the Kurds from their discussion of the minorities question in Asiatic Turkey.<sup>52</sup> Soon after, Christian minorities such as the Assyrian-Chaldeans were also excluded from Point 6 of the final draft on the minorities question because of French objections:

*They [Allies] desire to provide for the protection and security of the various minorities whether Muslim or Christian or other races and creeds, who whether in Europe or Asia, find themselves placed in the midst of larger political or ethnic aggressions.*<sup>53</sup>

What the Allies agreed on in their meetings became the basis for their approach to the question of the national minorities at the forthcoming peace conference in Lausanne.

Lausanne was chosen for being a town in a neutral country, i.e. Switzerland. The conference was, as Busch points out, the only post-war one in which the victorious Allies met with

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49\* Hardinge, Paris, 24 March 1922, FO371/7858, PRO.

50\* A high commissioner was already appointed by the League Council, which passed a resolution in early 1922 in which it drew the Allies' attention to the urgent need to secure the protection of minorities. It expressed its readiness to co-operate with the Powers to secure the objects of Sèvres.

51\* Curzon to Foreign Office, Paris, 23 March 1922, FO371/7858, PRO.

52\* Parliamentary Debate in the House of the Lords, 30 March 1922, FO371/7859, PRO.

53\* Foreign Office Minute of the 9th Meeting of Allied Foreign Ministers in Paris, 26 March 1922, FO371/7858, PRO.

the defeated Turks on almost equal terms.<sup>54</sup> The agenda of the conference revolved around three major issues: the future of Thrace, Mosul and capitulations. Three Commissions were formed, and Curzon assumed charge of the important Territorial and Military Commission. Apart from the conciliatory attitudes of its former Allies towards Kemalist Turkey, Britain's diplomatic activities at Lausanne were influenced by several ominous developments. September 1922 witnessed the collapse of the Greek front in Asia Minor, which was followed by the advance of the Kemalist forces into Smyrna and the neutral zone around the Straits. The latter development was of special importance because the Kemalists directly challenged Britain. The ensuing Chanak crisis exposed the diplomatic and military weakness of Britain, when neither its former Allies nor its white Dominions wanted to fight the Turks.<sup>55</sup> This crisis even played some part in the fall of Lloyd George's coalition Government on 19 October 1922. The accession of the Conservatives to power on 23 October had immediate effects on the Kurdish question, as they were in favour of a conciliatory policy towards Kemalist Turkey and had a totally indifferent attitudes towards the issue of the non-Turkish minorities. Lloyd George accused the Conservatives of having always been pro-Turk. Indeed, the new Conservative Government was determined to normalise British relations with Kemalist Turkey, hoping to direct the latter, if possible, against Bolshevik Russia. One of the ways to improve bilateral relations with the Kemalists was to put no emphasis on the problematic question of the non-Turkish minorities. In the new Government, Curzon was the only British policy-maker who retained his old job as Foreign Secretary. This was important because, as previously mentioned, he firmly supported the policy of improving relations with the Kemalists. In the absence of Lloyd George, who used to take independent initiatives behind his Foreign Secretary's back,<sup>56</sup> Curzon was freely able to pursue the new policy, which required Britain to pay much less attention to Greek interests, and most importantly, to the minority question in Asiatic Turkey. Indeed, Curzon, who favoured the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq, conducted the most important rounds of the talks on the new Turkish peace settlement.

In the very early stages of the Lausanne conference in December 1922, the Allies granted the Kemalist delegation, according to Curzon, "*a great concession*" insofar as the Kurdish question was concerned. From then onward, it was to be considered as an internal question and not as a political or international one:

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54\* Busch, *Mudros to Lausanne*, p.365.

55\* Kent, *Moguls and Mandarins*, p. 100.

56\* Busch, *Mudros to Lausanne*, p.360.

*Departing from precedent of all European minority treaties... to the extent of excluding Muslim minorities from all articles of minority section of treaty, including that article, which places guarantee for execution in [the] hands of [the] League of Nations.<sup>57</sup>*

The Allies expected Kemalist Turkey to adhere to a general declaration regarding the protection and freedom of all non-Turkish nationalities without distinction of birth, race, language or religion. There was no direct reference to the minorities, apart from the Armenians. No role would be played by the League of Nations in implementing the “*protection of minorities*” terms, which entirely depended on the Kemalists’ good will. These concessions were accepted immediately by the Kemalist delegation. It is important to point out that the terms of the Lausanne agreement on the protection of the national minorities were only concerned with Christian minorities,<sup>58</sup> and did not really affect the Northern Kurds. The inclusion of the national minorities terms in the new Turkish peace settlement had, in effect, no real value, given the Kemalists’ determination to impose pan-Turkish cultural and political hegemony over all non-Turkish nationalities. These terms were little more than a sly attempt by the British and their former Allies to save face, having failed to force the Kemalists to accept a modified version of the Sèvres treaty. One of the most important aspects of the Lausanne negotiations was the agreement between Britain and Kemalist Turkey that the Turkish-Mesopotamian frontier should be determined by “*friendly*” talks within a period of nine months. If both parties failed to reach a frontier agreement, the dispute would be referred to the League Council. Meanwhile, Britain and Kemalist Turkey undertook not to use force or other means to change the existing status of the concerned territories, i.e. the Mosul *Wilayet*.<sup>59</sup>

From the very outset, the Lausanne conference had immediate effects on British Kurdish policy. With the inauguration of peace negotiations between the Allies and Kemalist Turkey, British policy makers -such as Curzon- began to question the wisdom behind the idea of sponsoring Kurdish nationalism in Southern Kurdistan as a way of containing the Kemalist threat. Supporting the Kurdish nationalists in Southern Kurdistan, let alone in Northern Kurdistan, became a dangerous card to play, since it would rouse Turkish fears about British intentions and thus jeopardise the course of the peace negotiations:

*Is it advisable at the moment, when we are negotiating with the Turks [at Lausanne] and when the position of the Mosul Wilayet may come into question, to take action such as is suggested by the Colonial Office in the direction of consolidating a Kurdish national movement? In view of*

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57\* Curzon, Lausanne, 30 December 1922, FO371/9058, PRO.

58\* See Appendix: Section III: Lausanne Treaty of Peace with Turkey and Accompanying Straits Convention and Declaration on the Administration of Justice, Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, 1923, Treaty Series No.16, Cmd, 1929.

59\* Section 1, Article 3, *ibid*.



*this situation and of the fact that the situation at Lausanne changes from day to day, it is rather difficult for the [Foreign Office] department to make any definite recommendations on the question.*<sup>60</sup>

The political conditions surrounding the Lausanne conference turned Mahmud and his nationalist followers into a political liability for the British in Southern Kurdistan. Encouraging Kurdish nationalism, the British found out, would weaken their efforts in keeping Southern Kurdistan out of Turkish control, since it would make the Kemalists even more determined to preempt the emergence of a separate Kurdish entity, which would always pose a serious threat to their territorial unity. By contrast, the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into Iraq would make it politically much easier for the British to dismiss Kemalist accusations that keeping Southern Kurdistan outside Turkish control would endanger the security and territorial integrity of Turkey. It was far easier for Curzon to present the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into the newly-emerging Iraqi state as a logical outcome, given the inclusion of Southern Kurdistan in Britain's Mesopotamian mandate. Indeed, to support his argument that Southern Kurdistan formed a natural part of Iraq, Curzon always maintained that the British occupied a "*judicial position*" in Iraq "*qua mandatory*".<sup>61</sup> In other words, as Southern Kurdistan was part of the Mesopotamian mandate, the British had a moral obligation to ensure its inclusion in the successor state, i.e. Iraq. According to Rumbold, Lord Curzon stated at the Lausanne conference that:

*the whole of [the] Mosul Wilayet should properly be included in [the] Iraqi state and ever since the armistice, HMG have regarded the northern frontier of the Wilayet as the de facto administrative frontier of the Iraqi state.*<sup>62</sup>

In these circumstances, the temporary withholding of British withdrawal from Southern Kurdistan pending the conclusion of peace with Turkey, was designed, in Dobbs' words, to provide Britain with a "*valuable diplomatic weapon of fait accompli*".<sup>63</sup> This was fundamental to the implementation of the merging process of Southern Kurdistan with the Iraqi state.

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60\* R.C. Lindsay, Foreign Office Minute No.130941, 24 November 1922, FO371/7782, PRO.

61\* Curzon to Foreign Office, 19 January 1923, FO371/9060, PRO.

62\* Rumbold, Lausanne, 2 May 1923, FO371/9005, PRO.

63\* Acting High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 14 May 1923, FO371/9005, PRO.

## International And Regional Considerations Influencing British Attitudes Towards The Kurdish Question, 1921-1923

### *i- The Attitudes Of Britain's Former Allies*

From the early 1921 onwards, the Middle Eastern situation witnessed a series of developments that posed direct threats to the British position in Southern Kurdistan and Mesopotamia. In the space of one week, Kemalist Turkey concluded two agreements with Britain's former Allies, Italy and France, on 13 and 17 March 1921 respectively, coupled with a treaty with Bolshevik Russia on 16 March 1921. The importance of the first two agreements, from the British perspective, lay in the fact that France and Italy violated the terms of the Allied Tripartite agreement of 10 August 1920. The latter was an arrangement for facilitating the re-organisation of the defeated Ottoman Empire by eliminating international rivalries. It provided for (1) international commissions on control, (2) obtaining commercial and transport facilities and concessions, (3) diplomatic assistance, (4) supervising railways, (5) defining the boundaries of French and Italian zones of interest, (6) mandatory powers of territories detached from Turkey, (7) the Heracles coal-field, (8) the withdrawal of French and Italian forces and (9) the protection of minorities. The implementation or the non-implementation of the first six points and Point 9 affected both Britain's position in Southern Kurdistan and its attitudes towards the remainder of the Kurdish areas.

Given direct French involvement in all post-war political and territorial rearrangements of the former Ottoman *Wilayets*, the Kemalist-French agreement was bound to have political and military implications for the British position in Southern Kurdistan and Mesopotamia. Firstly, by unilaterally ending the state of war between France and Kemalist Turkey, the agreement amounted to a French recognition of the Angora Government, with whom Britain was still technically at war. Thus, Britain felt isolated and defensive *vis-à-vis* Kemalist Turkey, a country that was determined to restore Turkish rule to as many Ottoman territories as it could. Secondly, by giving back to Turkey certain Kurdish areas such as Jezirah and Nisibin, France practically abdicated from its responsibilities towards the protection of the non-Turkish minorities under the terms of the 1920 Sèvres treaty.<sup>64</sup> Finally, France abandoned its old obligations under the same agreement of 10 August 1920 -namely, to maintain troops in its zone of interests until the peace terms were executed by Turkey.<sup>65</sup> In other words, Britain sensed that it had become both militarily and diplomatically weaker *vis-à-vis* Kemalist Turkey. This meant that an

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<sup>64</sup>\* Curzon to the Count de Saint-Aulain, 5 November 1921, CO730/7, PRO.

<sup>65</sup>\* Ibid.

early peace with Kemalist Turkey became much harder to achieve, given the intransigent attitudes of the Kemalists, whose confidence was boosted enormously by their diplomatic successes in March 1921.

British military personnel in Mesopotamia quickly voiced their concern about the unforeseen Kemalist-French agreement. They, when interpreting the effects of that agreement on the British position in Mesopotamia, went so far as to suspect an anti-British conspiracy. According to them, the French, with Kemalist help, were plotting to expand their influence among the Kurds by establishing a great Kurdish confederacy under their patronage:

*To begin with, the members are to be Barazi, between the Belikh and the Euphrates, the Mili, between the Belikh and the Jajagahg Su. Later, the Kocher, Hajan. Miran and Kurds of Mardin are to be roped in and the final object to be aimed at is to extend French influence as far as Sulaimaniya. The movement is... directed against the British.<sup>66</sup>*

This explained, according to this interpretation, why the French “*deliberately abandoned*” most of their obligations towards Turkey under the terms of the Sèvres treaty. This interpretation was inaccurate insofar as France’s intentions in Ottoman Kurdistan were concerned. France showed on every occasion its opposition to Kurdish nationalist aspirations, mistakenly believing that Britain sought a British-orientated Kurdistan in the form of an independent or autonomous state. Through its good relations with the Kemalists, France sought to consolidate its economic influence, and to weaken what it perceived as Britain’s national minorities card as a means of maintaining its influence. Accordingly, during the London conference in 1921, France opposed League of Nations’ intervention in the question of the national minorities and proposals to appoint a High Commissioner to supervise the interests of minorities such as the Kurds.<sup>67</sup> France suspected British involvement in all anti-Kemalist efforts by the Kurdish nationalists. This might explain, for example, why the French authorities refused permission for Akram Bey, a Kurdish nationalist leader who was involved in the preparation of an anti-Kemalist revolt, to go to Diyarbekir via Beirut.<sup>68</sup>

The British thought that, from the strategic viewpoint, the transfer of the Kurdish areas of Nisibin and Jezirah-ibn-Omar from French to Kemalist control had immediate implications. These two Kurdish areas were of “*great strategic importance in relation to Mosul and Mesopotamia*” and that similar strategic importance applied to “*the handing back to Turkey of the track of the Baghdad Railway between Tchoban-Bey and Nisibin*”.<sup>69</sup> Against this back-

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66\* General Headquarter, Mes.EX.Force, 26 September 1921, FO371/6369, PRO.

67\* Curzon, Paris, 23 March 1922, FO371/7858, PRO.

68\* Rumbold, Constantinople, to High Commissioner, Baghdad, November 1920, FO371/6346, PRO.

69\* Ibid.

ground, Curzon informed the French that, because of the threat to their position in Mesopotamia, the British would not remain indifferent towards the handing over of the track of the Baghdad railway and the Kurdish areas of Jezirah-ibn-Omar and Nisibin to Turkey.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, both of these developments strengthened the military position of the Kemalists in areas close to the frontiers and thus made an imminent Turkish invasion of Southern Kurdistan an ever more likely prospect. In these circumstances, Britain understandably decided to keep its imperial forces in the out-posts in Southern Kurdistan, and to retain its responsibility for the defence of Mesopotamia, until peace with Turkey was established. The French-Kemalist agreement had, in the British view, other political implications for Southern Kurdistan. The British feared that French territorial concessions in Western Kurdistan would encourage the Kemalists to bring more pressure on them to give similar territorial concessions in Southern Kurdistan.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, French recognition of Turkish rule over the Kurdish areas of Jezirah and Nisibin would lend legitimacy to Turkish claims to all Kurdish areas under British control. Despite all Paris's assurances to London that no facilities would be given to Kemalists against Mesopotamia, and that there would be no war materials supplied to the Kemalists,<sup>72</sup> the impact of the Kemalist-French agreement evidently accentuated the cautious British approach to the Kurdish situation.

The period immediately before the holding of the Lausanne conference, from September to October 1922, witnessed increasing Kemalist determination to undo all the national minorities' terms for Kurdistan and Armenia under the Sèvres treaty. There were increasing rumours about a bilateral Kemalist-French understanding, involving French encouragement of the Kemalists in their efforts to control the Mosul *Wilayet*. The early Lausanne meetings between the Allies and Kemalist Turkey were held concurrently with the Paris negotiations over the question of German reparations. As Marian Kent points out, the ensuing sharp differences between British and French policies over that question -which subsequently led to the French-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr in January 1923- had enormous repercussions at the Lausanne conference, where the French (and the Italians) expressed conciliatory attitudes towards the Kemalist delegation.<sup>73</sup> This virtually put an end to Curzon's strategy at the conference, which was mainly based on confronting the Kemalist delegation with a united Allied

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70\* Curzon to M. de Montille, 25 November 1921, CO730/7, PRO.

71\* Curzon to the Count de Saint-Aulain, 5 November 1921, CO730/7, PRO.

72\* S/S for the Colonies to High Commissioner, 30 November 1921, CO730/7, PRO.

73\* Kent, *Moguls and Mandarins*, p113.

front.<sup>74</sup>

Against the background of potential French (and even American) support for the Kemalist position on Mosul, and an urgent need to implement the new policy of indirect British control, Curzon raised the question of granting the Kemalist side some territorial concessions during the Lausanne negotiations. In his view, if Britain decided to give territorial concessions, it had to choose between firstly, the cession of the whole or part of the Mosul *Wilayet*, including Southern Kurdistan, and secondly, the cession of part or whole of Southern Kurdistan.<sup>75</sup> It must be remembered that Curzon's definition of Southern Kurdistan in this context was confined to a portion of it. This territorial concession would arguably not affect Britain's strategic position in Mesopotamia because it was "*a long narrow strip of country, which would be most difficult for Turks to administer and [of] little value to them*".<sup>76</sup> The idea of granting the Kemalists limited territorial concessions was unanimously rejected by the Colonial Office Committee, as well as the Chief of the General Staff and Chief of the Air Staff. They feared that from the military viewpoint, the Kemalist threat to Mesopotamia would be enormously increased by the weakening the latter's strategic defences in Southern Kurdistan. From the political viewpoint, the Kurds and Arabs alike would oppose this idea, and consequently, turn against Britain. Furthermore, Turkish interests were concentrated in areas situated on the southern edges of Southern Kurdistan, where the Turkoman elements lived, such as Arbil, Kifri and Kirkuk. Therefore, limited territorial concessions by Britain would not satisfy the Kemalists.<sup>77</sup> This debate shows how increasingly vulnerable the British position was in the post-Sèvres period, and that even limited French territorial concessions in Kurdistan to Kemalist Turkey forced British civilian and military circles to re-examine their entire policy in Southern Kurdistan and Mesopotamia.

#### ***ii- Kemalist Turkey, Britain And The Kurdish Situation***

As previously mentioned, Kemalist diplomatic victories in signing agreements with France and Italy, and a treaty with Bolshevik Russia, had immediate military implications for the British position in Southern Kurdistan and Mesopotamia. It led to the growing belief among British military

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<sup>74</sup>\* Busch, *Mudros to Lausanne*, p.121.

<sup>75</sup>\* Annexure I, 7 December 1922 -in- Cabinet Committee On Iraq (I.R.O. 1st) 8 December 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

<sup>76</sup>\*Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>\* Annexure ii, Curzon, Lausanne, 8 December 1922 -in- Cabinet Committee On Iraq (I.R.O. 1st) 8 December 1922, FO371/7772, PRO.

officials both in London and Baghdad that a Kemalist invasion across the northern frontiers of Mesopotamia was a strong possibility. This belief was reinforced by the Greeks' defeat at the hands of the Kemalists. Now that the forces of the Kemalists were no longer distracted by the Greeks and the Bolsheviks, they were in a far stronger position to devote their military efforts outwards to projects such as regaining the Mosul *Wilayet*. The Kemalists, according to a War Office memorandum, were emboldened by "the process of reducing" British forces in Iraq, following the ending of a British military presence in neighbouring Persia.<sup>78</sup> Britain was aware that all its former Allies, let alone Bolshevik Russia, desired a British defeat over the Mosul question because of their belief that if the Turks recovered Mosul -or preferably the whole of Mesopotamia- they would stand a good chance of exploiting the valuable oil-bearing potential of the country.<sup>79</sup> To forestall any French and American support for the Turkish position on the Mosul issue during the Lausanne negotiations, Britain generously offered them each a 25% share in TPC. Curzon offered the Kemalists a similar share during the Lausanne negotiations. This offer was, according to Busch, part of Curzon's strategy of trading off oil for Mosul.<sup>80</sup> The Kemalists rejected the offer and, as part of their strategy at the conference, attempted to persuade Britain to accept their control over Mosul, in return for breaking relations with the Bolsheviks.<sup>81</sup> Mustafa Kemal used his close relations with the Bolsheviks as a lever against the Allies, particularly Britain.<sup>82</sup> He also made the most of the inter-Allied disagreement both before and during the Lausanne conference,<sup>83</sup> with the aim of strengthening Turkey's diplomatic position.

The Kemalists' own approach to the Kurdish situation also influenced Britain's Kurdish policy. The creation of pro-Turkish societies for co-ordinating anti-British propaganda, and the dispatch of Turkish irregulars to co-operate with Southern Kurdish rebels in their fight against the British presence were the principal tactics the Kemalists used to demonstrate that Britain was incapable of providing either a workable government or political stability in Southern Kurdistan. For this reason, and as the Southern Kurds had no desire to be ruled by the Arabs, the Kemalists would argue that their demand for the re-establishment of Turkish rule in Southern Kurdistan was justifiable. Apart from this argument, the Kemalists laid claim to

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78\* S/S for War, Memorandum, 21 November 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

79\* Cabinet (No. C.P.3566), 13 December 1921, FO371/6347, PRO.

80\* Busch, *Mudros to Lausanne*, p.244.

81\* *Ibid*,

82\* Kent, *Moguls and Mandarins*, p.103.

83\* *Ibid*, pp.114-115.

Southern Kurdistan on the grounds of the illegality of British control over Mosul. It must be remembered that the British forces captured Mosul a few days after the conclusion of the Mudros armistice on 31 October 1918, which ended the war between Turkey and the Allies. Clause 16 of the Mudros armistice provided for the surrender of the Turkish garrisons in *Mesopotamia* to the nearest Allied commander. From the Turkish viewpoint, this clause did not apply to the Mosul *Wilayet*, but to the Baghdad and Basra *Wilayets*. Turkish claims to Mosul were repeatedly made public whenever the Kemalists negotiated with the Allies. For instance, Jamil Bey, a senior member of the Kemalist delegation at the London conference, emphatically told Feisal that Turkey had no designs on its former Arab *Wilayets* and that it was willing to make a treaty on "*the most generous terms*".<sup>84</sup>

Promising the Kurds local autonomy within Turkey was one of the Kemalists' main tactics in consolidating their political influence in Kurdistan. This would also help them to mobilise the Kurds in Northern and Southern Kurdistan against the British. In other words, the Kurds - southerners and northerners alike - would have every reason to support Turkish territorial claims to the Mosul *Wilayet*, as this meant the re-unification of Ottoman Kurdistan in the form of an autonomous entity. London was aware of, and alarmed by, the Kemalists' Kurdish policy and, therefore, sought such a policy towards Southern Kurdistan that would foil all Kemalist attempts to win over the Southern Kurds.<sup>85</sup> Thus, in spite of Cox and Feisal's opposition, the Colonial Office decided on the re-establishment of another Kurdish government under the leadership of Mahmud in early autumn 1922, a step which was designed to frustrate the Kemalist efforts to consolidate their influence in Southern Kurdistan.

The Kemalists' rejection of partial British concessions in Kurdistan in 1921 reflected their firm belief that Britain would become increasingly amenable to their pressure, following their considerable diplomatic and political achievements at both the international and domestic levels. Indeed, in late 1921, the British told the Kemalists that they were willing to recognise their control over Northern Kurdistan in return for the protection of Christian minorities. Even though this constituted a major departure from the terms of the Sèvres treaty, the Kemalists rejected the proposal because it clearly implied that Southern Kurdistan would remain under the British mandate. The Kemalists optimistically awaited the right moment when the British would be forced to leave Southern Kurdistan, either due to financial problems or through Kurdish resistance, which they helped to stiffen by providing arms and officers. The

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84\* Cornwallis, 24 February 1921, FO371/6467, PRO.

85\* Message from Prime Minister to Mr. Churchill, 22 March 1921, FO371/6342, PRO

Kemalists also drew their confidence from the opposition of the Southern Kurds to the imposition of Arab rule over Southern Kurdistan. Given the inability of the Arabs to incorporate Southern Kurdistan into Iraq on their own, the Kemalists believed that they could easily step in to fill the political vacuum which would result from the withdrawal of both the British garrison and administration from the Kurdish areas.

Although the Kemalists were heartened by several military developments, such as their defeat of the Greeks and later the Armenians, they eventually signed a peace treaty with the British at Lausanne, without succeeding in extending their control to Southern Kurdistan. The future of the latter was to be settled through peaceful means, such as the intervention of the League of Nations. The question is why the Kemalists resorted to peaceful means to settle Southern Kurdistan's future, rather than forcing the British to go. There are two explanations. Firstly, the Kemalists feared that the continuation of instability in Southern Kurdistan might worsen further the political situation in the Kurdish areas under their control. Indeed, a series of local Kurdish revolts between 1920 and 1923 showed that the Northern Kurds formed the most difficult internal obstacle to the Kemalist consolidation of their authority. In view of the continuing British-Kemalist confrontation and political instability in both Southern and Northern Kurdistan, the Kemalists feared that a different solution for the Kurdish question might come to the fore by turning Ottoman Kurdistan into an independent state. At least, the Kemalists probably thought that Britain was in a position to declare an independent Southern Kurdistan as a means of permanently weakening the security of the young Kemalist state - a prospect which would inevitably encourage the Northern Kurds to free themselves from Turkish rule.

Under such conditions, it was natural that the return of Mahmud and the re-establishment of his autonomous Government considerably alarmed the Kemalists, who interpreted these developments as a clear message from Britain that if they did not end their hostile activities, Southern Kurdistan would be eventually established as an independent state. These Turkish fears were expressed in an intercepted telegram from the Kemalist Government to its representative at the Lausanne conference. The telegram drew the attention of the Kemalist representative, Ismet Pasha, to British plans to financially and politically strengthen the Kurds and to establish an independent Kurdistan, which would threaten Turkey's security.<sup>86</sup> Mustafa Kemal's five-day long speech in 1927 included details of Kurdish col-

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<sup>86</sup>\* Reof, Angora, to Ismet, Lausanne, 3 May 1923, FO371/9005, PRO.



laboration with the British to establish an independent Kurdistan, with a view to undermining his movement.<sup>87</sup> The seriousness of the Kemalists' fears manifested itself both in their decision to resort to peaceful means, immediately after the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish government in Sulaimaniya, and in their refusal to support Mahmud's subsequent revolt against Britain. Secondly, when a British counter offensive successfully began in Rowanduz - which was accompanied by heavy air bombardments of Kurdish rebellious areas- the Kurdish insurgents, who up to this point played an essential part in the Kemalist policy of destabilising Southern Kurdistan, stopped their activities and withheld their military co-operation with the Kemalists. As a consequence, the Kemalists lost their main instrument designed to exhaust the British militarily and financially, as well as undermining their political credibility not only in Southern Kurdistan but also in Iraq. In their interpretation of the British counter offensive, the Kemalists even suspected that the limited British offensive in Rowanduz was a prelude to a long-term policy of aggression in support of Kurdish nationalist aspirations. British reports from Constantinople show how the Kemalists were "*greatly preoccupied*" over the recent British military activities in the Rowanduz area, which was perceived to be "*calculated to render acute the whole question of Kurdistan*".<sup>88</sup>

### ***iii- Persia, Britain And The Kurdish Situation***

The Kemalist menace to Southern Kurdistan coincided with a tangible change in Persian attitudes towards British influence in their country. The new nationalist Persian Government of Siphdar, which was formed following Gen. Riza Shah's military coup on 21 February, wanted to end British political influence in Persia, especially in the south, where the British backed a semi-independent Arab entity in the province of Khuzistan. In the post-Sèvres period, Britain's political influence was considerably weakened by the withdrawal of its imperial forces from Persian territories under financial pressure and by the rejection of the *Majlis* (the Persian Parliament) of the British-Persian draft agreement, which would have granted Britain virtual political and economic control over Persia.<sup>89</sup> Britain became even more amenable to Persia's pressure as the latter concluded a friendship treaty with Bolshevik Russia on 26 February, five days after the military coup. Not only did this considerably improve the economic and diplo-

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87\* Mustafa Kemal, *A Speech Delivered by G. Mustafa Kemal*. op. cit.

88\* Mr. Henderson, Constantinople, 6 May 1923, FO371/9005, PRO.

89\* Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy of Iran: A Developing Nation in World Affairs, 1500-1941*, (The University Press of Virginia, 1966), pp.164-165.

matic relations between the two countries, but it also led to the withdrawal of Russian forces from northern Persia.<sup>90</sup> The Persian Government also dramatically improved its bilateral relations with its counterpart in Turkey, Persia's historical enemy. Britain was increasing anxious about the prospect of an alliance between Persia and Kemalist Turkey, or even between Persia and Bolshevik Russia, which would pose a direct threat to its position in India and the Middle East. Under these new circumstances, Britain could not run the risk of turning Southern Kurdistan into an autonomous entity because of the serious threat it would pose to Persian territorial integrity, especially Persian control over Eastern Kurdistan.

It was this Persian factor that always prevented Britain from entering into formal relations with Simko in Eastern Kurdistan. When, for instance, British officials in Mesopotamia contemplated the idea of using Simko's influence as a barrier against both the Kemalists and the Bolsheviks, Churchill instructed Cox not to make any political arrangements with Simko, apart from those which were connected with the question of the repatriation of the Christian refugees to Urmia.<sup>91</sup> The Persian Government, which had earlier protested against British contacts with Simko, was informed of Churchill's instruction.<sup>92</sup> Even the project of repatriating the Christian refugees to their own lands in Urmia became impossible for the British to carry out in co-operation with Simko because of Persian opposition. The Persians perceived any political deals between Simko and the British as amounting to recognition by the latter of the authority of the former in the mutinous parts of Eastern Kurdistan. These examples show how the political developments in the post-Sèvres Middle East made the British amenable to the political pressure of such a weak country as Persia.

At another level, Britain was aware that the Persian Government had its own expansionist agenda in Southern Kurdistan, especially in the Sulaimaniya, Rowanduz and Auraman regions. Like Kemalist Turkey, Persia considered the British decision to withdraw from Mesopotamia as an opportunity to obtain territory in Southern Kurdistan. This motive, along with Persian fears over the emergence of a separate Southern Kurdistan, could explain why the Persian Government granted logistical support for the military operations of the Kemalist irregulars in Southern Kurdistan. Cox frequently reported Persian complicity in Kemalist intrigues in Southern Kurdistan by providing Euzdemir, a local Kemalist commander, with officers and

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90\* Ibid, pp.186-188.

91\* S/S for the Colonies to High Commissioner of Iraq, 22 November 1922, FO371/7782, PRO. Said Taha was a Turkish subject and therefore Persia had no basis to complain about his dealing with Britain in Rowanduz.

92\* Shuckburgh to Foreign Office, 11 December 1922, FO371/7782, PRO.

ammunition to re-capture Southern Kurdistan from the British.<sup>93</sup> Through this co-operation, Persia hoped to grab a share in Southern Kurdistan. Indeed, there was information on a Persian-Turkish understanding that, in return for its support for Turkey, Persia would be territorially rewarded by the rectification of the Auraman frontier in its favour.<sup>94</sup> Although Persia stated that its co-operation with Turkey was limited to the suppression of the Simko movement, and that it was neutral in the existing Turkish-British conflict in Rowanduz,<sup>95</sup> the British were aware that Persian interest in the issue stemmed from territorial ambitions. In light of this Britain refused to allow the representatives of the Persian Government to attend the Lausanne conference, where the Persians hoped to achieve some territorial gains in Southern Kurdistan.<sup>96</sup> Ironically, the Kemalists had earlier supported Simko's anti-Persian revolt, hoping to extend their political control to Eastern Kurdistan. The Persians were aware of the Kemalists' desire to unite all parts of Kurdistan into one nominal autonomous entity under their rule.<sup>97</sup> British officials also reported that the Kemalists encouraged Eastern Kurds to declare independence from Mako to Kermanshah.<sup>98</sup> Kemalists policy in Eastern Kurdistan also sought to pressurise Persia into not co-operating with Britain, and to foil its plans for the annexation of certain Kurdish areas in Northern Kurdistan along the Turkish-Persian frontiers. It was under such conditions of intrigue and counter-intrigue and contradictory territorial ambitions that the British had to cautiously conduct their Kurdish policy in the post-Sèvres period.

## Conclusion

Several developments influenced Britain's position on Kurdish affairs after the conclusion of the Sèvres treaty in August 1920. Militarily, Britain's acute financial problems restricted the extent of its commitments in areas such as Mesopotamia and Southern Kurdistan. This constraint on military commitments had a direct political impact as Britain was no longer in a position to force Turkey to end either its territorial claims and its threat to Southern Kurdistan, or respect the political and cultural rights of the non-Turkish nationalities under the terms of the Sèvres treaty. Resorting to diplomacy was Britain's main option for bringing peace with Turk-

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93\* Foreign Office Minute No.3020, 11 April 1923, FO371/9004, PRO.

94\* S/S, 1 February 1923, FO371/9004, PRO.

95\* High Commissioner of Iraq to S/S for the Colonies, 12 January 1923, FO371/9039, PRO.

96\* RCC, Foreign Office Minute No.1, 26 January 1923, FO371/9061, PRO.

97\* According to the Persian Foreign Minister, the Kemalists aimed at establishing an independent Kurdistan out of Eastern and Northern Kurdistan. Norman to Curzon, 1 April 1921, FO371/6442, PRO.

98\* Britmilat, Tehran, to DMI, Baghdad & India, 24 August 1921, FO371/6442, PRO.

ey. This state of affairs and Britain's desire to pre-empt a Kemalist-Bolshevik alliance rendered insignificant, in the eyes of the new Conservative Government, such issues as those of the future of the non-Turkish nationalities. Thus at the Lausanne conference, Britain gave complete concessions to the Kemalists on the issue of the future of Armenia and Kurdistan for the sake of improving bilateral relations with Turkey. Pressures on Britain also came from other directions, such as the conflict of its interests with former Allies, the new disposition of the Persian Government to end British influence in Persia and the political, economic and strategic requirements of establishing a viable Arab state in Iraq.

During the period 1920-1923, British policy was characterised by a gradual shift from the concept of Kurdish autonomy to that of maintaining the *status quo* by turning the *de facto* partition of Ottoman Kurdistan into *de jure* one. In other words, any modification or substitution of the Sèvres treaty with a new peace settlement would have to provide for the retention of British control over Southern Kurdistan in return for recognising Northern Kurdistan's status as part of the new Kemalist Turkey. In parallel with this, Britain changed its early position on the Kurdish question, in that it no longer considered the Kurdish situation as having an international dimension, and maintained further that the treatment of the Kurds was the concern of the states of the region. This dramatic change can be seen when contrasting the terms of the 1920 Sèvres treaty with those of the 1923 Lausanne agreement. The former had elevated the Kurdish question to an unprecedented international level whereas the latter, by deliberately omitting it, demoted it to an internal level.

The Lausanne conference constituted a watershed in British policy for the above mentioned reasons, and also tipped the balance in favour of the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan into the newly-emerging Iraqi state. The terms of the Lausanne agreement, insofar as they frustrated the political aspirations of the Kurdish nationalist movement, placed Britain in the same position as Turkey, Persia, Syria and Iraq. From then onward, these countries were to share similar worries about political instability in their respective Kurdish regions. Indeed, following the Lausanne conference, an explicit understanding emerged among these states, including Britain, that no party would take any step in its own respective Kurdish region, which might undermine the political stability or territorial integrity of other states. After settling the outstanding problem of the Iraqi-Turkish frontiers in 1926, Britain, Iraq, Turkey and Persia explicitly joined forces to vigorously contain the Kurdish nationalist movement whenever it manifested itself in armed revolts or secret political activities.

## Concluding Remarks

One of the key points which this study has sought to underline is that owing to Kurdistan's distinctive geopolitical position as a land-locked country situated among the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire and the Qajar Persia, the Kurdish question had an exceptionally important international aspect when compared with other contemporary questions such as the Arab one. The historical emergence of Kurdish nationalism, and its development as a new political force that sought to change the *status quo*, was not only conditioned by internal developments within Ottoman Turkey and Qajar Persia, but also by the Great Powers' policies and interests in these two countries. Indeed, as this study has illustrated, the reactions of British policy makers to the Kurdish situation were subjected to a general imperial strategy that covered a vast area stretching from the frontiers of India in the east to Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea in the west. Central to the success of that strategy was the maintenance of the British position in areas overlooking the sea and land routes to India. Every time Britain modified its general strategy, its position on the future of Kurdistan was accordingly affected. By dividing it into several historical phases, this study has made it possible to chart the evolution of Britain's interest in Kurdish affairs in line with its general imperial strategy in the Middle East between the middle of the Nineteenth Century and the early 1920's.

The first phase covered the Nineteenth Century, and was characterised by the incompatibility of the political aspirations of the Kurdish nationalists for a separate and an independent Kurdistan with Britain's strategic interests. In this phase, Britain became interested in Kurdish affairs because of its concern for the territorial unity of the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Persia. These two countries were perceived by Britain as bulwarks against Russian southward expansionism towards the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf. In these circumstances, it was natural that Britain watched closely the rise of Kurdish nationalism and the serious threat that it posed to the heartland of the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar Persia. Given this danger to its strategic interests, Britain reacted negatively to the outbreak of armed revolts in various parts of Kurdistan in the Nineteenth Century, and backed the endeavours of the Ottoman and Qajar authorities to defend their heartland from internal and external threats.

The second phase covered the period between the end of the Nineteenth Century and the outbreak of the First World War. During this time, Britain regarded the growing German political and economic influence in the Middle East, especially after the 1908 Young

Turks revolt, as the main threat to its strategic, political and economic interests in the Ottoman Empire, Qajar Persia and the Gulf region. This phase was characterised, insofar as British interests in Kurdistan were concerned, by efforts to extend British political and economic influence to Southern Kurdistan, and by agreeing to place the volatile area of Eastern Kurdistan under Russian political influence from 1907 onward, with a view to restoring political stability to the border areas that separated the Ottoman Empire from the Qajar Kingdom. In other words, Britain's interest in Kurdistan became more direct and explicit, and its decision to establish -in the manner of other Powers- several consulates in Ottoman and Qajar Kurdistan reflected the extent of its growing interest in Kurdish affairs. In spite of the fact that the Young Turk Government was generally well disposed towards Germany, British policy makers still adhered firmly to the principle of preserving the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, and accordingly opposed the political aspirations of any internal force that sought to alter the *status quo*, such as the Kurdish and the Armenian nationalist movements.

The third phase covered the first three years of the First World War, and witnessed an unprecedented shift in the British position on the future of the Ottoman Empire and particularly its non-Turkish *Wilayets* in Kurdistan, Mesopotamia and Greater Syria. This shift manifested itself in Britain's abandonment of its long-held principle of preserving the territorial unity of the Ottoman Empire. The secret terms of the 1916 Sykes-Picot (Tripartite) agreement, in which Britain played a leading role, divided Ottoman Kurdistan politically and economically into various spheres of influence and control among the Allied Powers: Britain, Russia and France. There was also a strong possibility that Russia would bring Eastern Kurdistan under its direct political and economic control. The outbreak of the war offered Britain unprecedented opportunity to establish and consolidate strategically, economically and politically its position in Southern Kurdistan, with a view to protecting the security of Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf. These two areas were vital to the security of India. Britain, however, remained, as before, unfavourably disposed towards the political aspirations of the Kurdish nationalists.

The fourth phase was characterised by the realisation by the British Government that many of the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement were no longer feasible as a basis for the new postwar order for the Middle East. Such British realisations reflected -apart from acute financial problems resulting from the long duration of the war- the changes in the international situation stemming from the Russian withdrawal from the war following the Bolshevik takeover in November 1917, and the entry of the United States into the war against Germany in April

1917. One of the principal ramifications of these unforeseen developments was the decision of the British Government to control the whole of Southern Kurdistan by preventing the French from having a share in that area. The British decision to control Southern Kurdistan was largely motivated by strategic considerations, and aimed to consolidate the security of the British position in Mesopotamia, the Persian Gulf and to command the strategic land-routes to northern Persia across Southern and Eastern Kurdistan. Economic considerations played a far smaller part in influencing the British decision, even though Britain was aware of the potential oil wealth of Southern Kurdistan.

The fifth phase covered the years between the end of the First World War in November 1918 and the conclusion of the August 1920 Sèvres treaty. Britain took the initiative in modifying the outdated terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement. As a result, Britain brought Southern Kurdistan into its Mesopotamian mandate, while France took Western Kurdistan. The would-be Armenian state was also to control a large portion of Ottoman Kurdistan. The remainder of the Kurdish areas were supposed to obtain autonomy, and then independence, if the Allies considered the local Kurds to be sufficiently qualified. Thus the main feature of this phase was that, although Britain partially recognised Kurdish nationalist aspirations, it still considered its interests to lie in the repartition of Kurdistan between British Mesopotamia, French Syria, and the would-be Armenian state. The most important factors influencing the British approach to the settlement of the Kurdish question at the Paris peace conference, were the containment of the growing Bolshevik threat, the holding back of France's political and economic influence in Ottoman Kurdistan, the consolidation of the British position in Mesopotamia and the safety of Persian territorial unity.

The final phase coincided with the formation process of the Iraqi state under Feisal's rule from 1920 to 1923, and was characterised by Britain's efforts to turn the partition of Ottoman Kurdistan into a *de jure* reality. Britain, even though it brought Southern Kurdistan under its mandate in 1920, did not decide whether to establish it as a separate entity from Arab Mesopotamia or to incorporate both countries into one state. This phase was ended with Britain's decision to incorporate Southern Kurdistan into the Iraqi state against the Kurds' will. This decision reflected a combination of British concerns for the strategic, political and economic viability of the young Iraqi state. The British, particularly those who served on the ground, were convinced that without the incorporation of Southern Kurdistan, the Iraqi state would not survive. From then on, Britain became explicitly opposed to the Kurdish nationalist move-

ment and worked alongside Persia, Turkey and Iraq -the countries which partitioned Kurdistan- towards frustrating Kurdish nationalist aspirations in favour of preserving the *status quo*.

Three major conclusions can be derived from the evolution of Britain's interest in Kurdish affairs and its position on the Kurdish question, especially in the period 1918-1923. The first is the supremacy of strategic considerations over economic ones as the principal driving force behind Britain's policy towards Kurdistan's future. Kurdistan enjoyed a distinctive geopolitical position, and this was always the most influential factor conditioning Britain's approach to the Kurdish situation. British reactions to the rising Kurdish nationalist movement must be seen within the context of a general strategy in the Middle East. This strategy revolved around Britain's concern for the security of its Indian Empire, which was perceived to depend on the preservation of political stability in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Persia and Persian Gulf. Kurdistan's economic value was always of secondary importance to British policymakers in comparison to its strategic value. The historical roots of Britain's interest in Kurdish oil go back to the turn of the Twentieth Century, when oil began to be increasingly used by the navies of the Great Powers. Ultimately, it became vital for important sea Powers such as Britain to have free and direct access to oil supplies and reserves at all times.

The evolution of British interests in Kurdistan was largely a response to the changes in the regional situation in the Middle East, resulting from the decay of the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar Kingdom, which in turn brought about growing external interferences in their political and economic affairs. From the mid-Nineteenth Century onwards, the Middle East had become the scene of a steady intensification in the rivalry among the main European Powers for the imposition of their political and economic control. Insofar as Kurdistan was concerned, Britain perceived Czarist Russia as the main danger that needed to be contained in the Nineteenth Century and the early Twentieth Century. Thereafter, Germany replaced Russia as the main political and economic rival to Britain in the heartland of the Ottoman Empire and Persia. Following the First World War, apart from France's imperial ambitions, the new Bolshevik Russia posed the most serious political and ideological threat to the British position in the Middle East, and accordingly, British policy makers reviewed British interests and objectives in the Turkish peace settlements of 1920 and 1923.

Secondly, the lack of a well-defined policy on the part of the British Government, and its noticeable unfamiliarity with the Kurdish situation after the end of the First World War, enabled certain British officials on the ground to play a far more important part in influencing



the future of Kurdistan than they could under ordinary conditions. Between 1918 and 1920, Col. Wilson, in his capacity as the Civil Commissioner, and Maj. Noel, in his capacity as the most important British expert on Kurdish affairs, played a crucial part in providing the British Government with much needed details about post-war Kurdish affairs. They not only coloured the views of the British Government on the Kurdish question, but also influenced the direction of political developments in British-controlled Southern Kurdistan between 1918 and 1920. In the period 1921-1923, Percy Cox, the new High Commissioner, played a similar -if not more crucial- political part in determining the future of British-controlled Southern Kurdistan when paving the way for its incorporation into the newly-emerging Iraqi state.

Lastly, this review of the evolution of British policy towards Kurdistan also reveals that in none of its historical phases were Britain's strategic interests partially compatible with the nationalist aspirations of the Kurds, unlike those of the Zionist, Sharifian or Armenian nationalist movements. There was always a clear contradiction between the requirements of a successful British policy towards the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Persia and the political objectives of the Kurdish nationalist movement in all parts of Kurdistan. In the Nineteenth Century and up until the outbreak of the First World War, Britain supported the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Persia and was, therefore, opposed to Kurdish nationalism, which was perceived to as being a destabilising force. Britain was unwilling to deal with the maltreatment of the Ottoman Kurds by the Turks at an international level, unlike the Armenians. When the war broke out Britain took the lead in the formulation of the secret terms of the Sykes-Picot (Tripartite) agreement, at the heart of which was the partitioning of Kurdistan between the principal European Allies: France, Russia and Britain. In the post-war period, Britain once more played an important part in translating the partitioning of Kurdistan into a reality under the terms of the 1920 Sèvres treaty and the 1923 Lausanne agreement. Britain's strategic and economic interests always concentrated on Southern Kurdistan because of its importance to Mesopotamia's security and also its potential oil fields.

Given the last conclusion and the extraordinary circumstances that surrounded the emergence of the modern Middle East, it seems logical to raise the following question: can one hold the Kurdish nationalists responsible for the non-materialisation of an independent Kurdistan or the policies of the Great Powers, particularly Britain? To answer this difficult question one must concentrate on the new political conditions resulting from the First World War. The end of the war marked the dawn of a new era in the history of the Middle East because of

the collapse of the old-fashioned Ottoman Empire and Qajar Kingdom, with their multi-ethnic structures. On one side, the victorious Allied Powers -notably Britain- began to re-draw the new political map of the Middle East, so as to consolidate their strategic and economic position in most of the former Ottoman territories such as Arabia, Syria, Mesopotamia and Ottoman Kurdistan, as well as Persia. On the other side, the political elites of the new nationalities such as the Kurds, the Arabs, the Zionist Jews and the Armenians, emerged to work towards the creation of national states for their respective nationalities by soliciting the support of the Allies.

In these exceptional circumstances, it was inevitable that the imperial interests of the Allied Powers, notably Britain, would have a decisive role in the political future of the new nationalities. Insofar as Kurdistan was concerned, Britain not only extended its control to southern Kurdish regions, but was also directly involved in all the treaties that led to the partition of Kurdistan among French Syria, British Mesopotamia and Turkey between 1920 and 1923. In other words, had the upholding of British interests required the the formation of a Kurdish state in the period 1918-1923, Britain would have been in a very strong position to take such a step, at least, in British-controlled Southern Kurdistan. There are a few notable examples, when the consolidation of British interests demanded the establishment of new states in the newly-emerging Middle East, such as Mesopotamia, Arabia and Trans-Jordan. Having said that, one cannot overlook the role of the Kurdish nationalist movement in the issue of the non-materialisation of a Kurdish state. This movement was politically divided largely because of the predominant tribal structure of the Kurdish society. Kurdistan, a country of mainly rough mountainous areas with a lack of sufficient roads, railways and other means of communications, tends itself to isolation and localism. What made matters worse was the implemented British policies on the ground, which focused on severing -rather than consolidating- all political links between British-controlled Southern Kurdistan and the remainder of the Kurdish areas. Under such social, geographical and political conditions, it was extremely difficult to politically organise a Kurdistan-wide nationalist organisation with a united leadership and a clear strategy and programme. Consequently, the Kurdish nationalists were unable to influence as much as they would have desired the course of political developments that affected Kurdistan's future.

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