

**THE CRYSTALLISATION OF THE IRAQI STATE:  
GEOPOLITICAL FUNCTION AND FORM**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

In 1921 the State of Iraq was established in the Middle East, under a British-held mandate from the League of Nations. It took until 1926 for the final geographical extent of the new State to be decided.

This thesis analyses the geographical and historical factors which shaped the new Iraqi State. Historically, the region that became the Iraqi State lay in the heart of an ethnically, religiously and geographically complex area, a fundamental shatterbelt zone between rival regional and colonial powers. Iraq's geostrategic location was the key to its political and cultural developments, lying as it did at the frontier of clashing geostrategic powers and political ideologies. Many resultant features were to filter into the State that was created in 1921, and seriously affect Iraq's geopolitical function and form.

This thesis examines the fundamental factors that impacted upon the geopolitical crystallisation of the Iraqi State in the 1920s. The international political climate of the post-First World War era filtered into Iraq. The thesis argues that the complexities and clashes between the various communal identities, themselves a reflection of Iraq's geopolitical position, presented severe challenges to the new State's consolidation and geopolitical function. Also fundamental was Iraq's geostrategic location as this invited the attentions and ambitions of competing world powers.

Immediately after the First World War, Wilsonian principles of ethnic self-determination and nationalism came to the forefront of international politics. Iraq was born out of this international political climate, but its mandatory was Britain, an established imperial power. Whilst trying to retain the mandate for Iraq by an outward display of agreement with the idealism of nationalism, Britain was principally trying to secure its interests in the Middle East and, more importantly, India. Thus, the British backed a narrow strand of nationalism within Iraq, which was Sunni and Arab

in essence. With such a limited support base, this Arab administration remained militarily, economically and politically dependent upon Britain.

Ethnic and religious divisions were deep-rooted within the Iraqi region, as they had been tolerated for centuries under the Ottomans. After the First World War and the establishment of the State of Iraq, many of these social divides remained, or were even strengthened by resentments from many sides, in particular what was seen as the favouring of the Sunni Arab elite and the subsequent neglect of other main ethno-religious groups. Such unequal access to power was reinforced by the geographic distribution of the major ethnic and religious groups, as they tended to be spatially clustered.



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### **Notes on Maps**

The original sources for the maps are given with each map. I owe a great deal to Catherine Lawrence for drawing or scanning in all of the maps used, which was a huge amount of work.

On those maps drawn for this thesis, place names follow the Times Atlas conventions. Other maps show the names as on the originals, so differ in spelling, depending on the author and period. Usually, in the maps used, such differences are slight, such as the use of *Basrah* rather than Basra. For Arabic and Persian names I use commonly recognised spellings for ease.

### **Notes on Transliteration, Spellings and Names**

I have applied the transliteration system as used by the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, which is a modified version of the Encyclopaedia of Islam system, where *qaf* =q not k; *jim* =j not dj; roman double –letter equivalents are not underlined; the *l* of *al* is not assimilated to the following consonant. All words found in the concise Oxford English Dictionary are used with that spelling.

## GLOSSARY

**Agha:** Kurdish chieftain of tribe or tribal section, landlord, *khan*

**Ahd al-Iraqi:** Mesopotamian political society formed in Baghdad in 1913. Means literally, 'People of Iraq'

**Ahl-il-ibl:** Tribesmen known as 'people of the camel'

**Caliph:** civil and religious leader of the Muslim community, successor of the Prophet Mohammed

**Dira:** a tribal territory

**Elayat:** the largest Ottoman administrative province which predated the 'vilayet'

**Emir:** ruler of an emirate

**Emirate:** a semi-independent principality

**Fatwa:** religious (Islamic) edict

**Filih:** peasantry

**Haram:** forbidden

**Jihad:** a religiously sanctioned, possibly armed, struggle

**Khan:** Kurdish chieftain of tribe or tribal section, landlord, *agha*

**Kiles:** Ottoman unit of volume. One *kile* is the equivalent of 36.37 metric litres



***Ma'dan:*** marshdwellers

***Madrasa:*** school

***Mahallah:*** city quarter/district

***Mahalle:*** religious Shi'i school

***Metruk:*** communal or public land

***Mevat:*** idle or barren land

***Millah:*** officially recognised religious community or ethnic group, the basis of an Ottoman system of administration. Also called '*millet*'

***Miri:*** land that was state property

***Mulk:*** land that was private property

***Nahiyes:*** the extent of a village district

***Pasha:*** Turkish feudal title

***Qadha/caza:*** district of Ottoman regional administration

***Salyane:*** Ottoman tax system in which revenues were split between the provincial governors

***Sancaks:*** Ottoman administrative sub-province, (also known as '*liwa*')

***Shaikh:*** Arab or Kurdish tribal leader

***Shawiyah:*** People of the sheep

**Sherif:** Arab aristocratic title

**Shi'ite:** Muslims who follow the 'party' of Ali, those who believe that Ali, the Prophet Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law should have succeeded the Prophet as the leader of the Muslims

**Sufi:** Muslim mystic, most common in Kurdish regions

**Sunni:** the majority of Muslims, who accepted Abu Bakr as the first **Caliph**

**Tanzimat:** Reform era of the Ottoman Empire. In Iraq this covered the time period 1844-1872

**Tapu saned:** title deeds for land rights

**Timar:** Ottoman tax system, allowing cavalry officers to collect and keep taxes on certain agricultural lands, in return for military services in time of need

**Ulama:** holy men and religious leaders. Politically significant in traditional Middle Eastern politics

**Vali:** Governor-general of a *vilayet*

**Vilayet:** the largest province of Ottoman regional administration

**Waqf:** religious endowment lands. Also used for religious taxes and payments

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

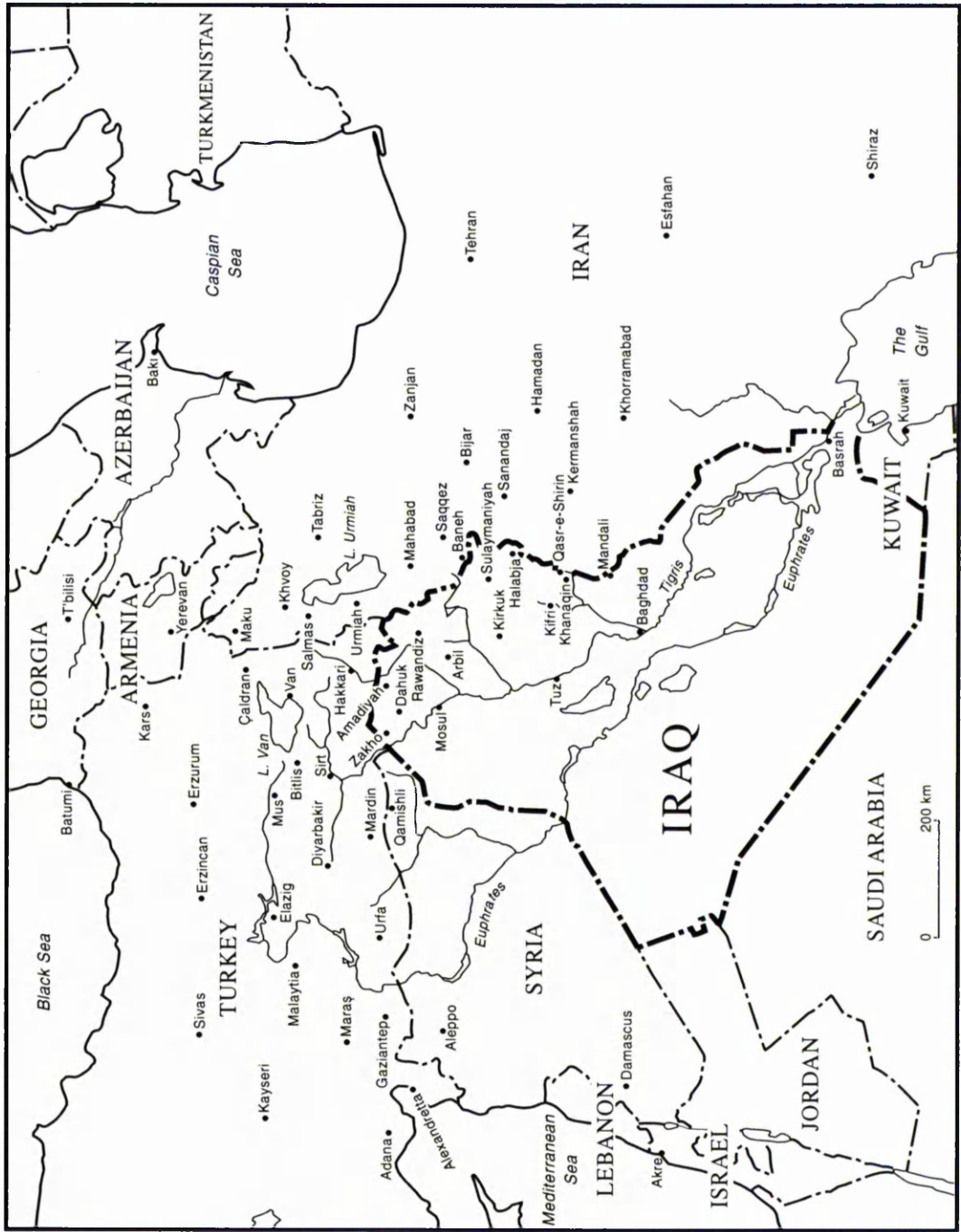
I am indebted to many people for their help with the production of this thesis. Many people informed my research, made suggestions, discussed issues with me and pointed me towards many valuable sources and materials. I owe a great deal to Mr Richard Schofield, who was very generous with his time and ideas, as well as being a great source of literary material and suggestions for further reading. I am also grateful to Mr Peter Hinchcliffe for his comments and input, and for sharing his substantial experience of the Middle East.

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my brother, Alex Duncan, who was killed in Kuwait in October 1990. I hope that the standard of this thesis does him credit. He still inspires me.



Map 1. Present Day Iraq and the Surrounding Countries

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1.Introduction

For nearly sixty years, “*Iraq’s drive for national unity has been impeded by ethnic, sectarian and ideological feuds*”.<sup>1</sup> There has been a continual tension between the Iraqi State, representing the central authority governing within defined boundaries, and the Iraqi ‘nation’, consisting of a number of smaller autonomous social groups. This thesis explores the extent to which these obstacles to national unity were embedded in the character of the state as its form crystallised in the 1920s. It is a study of the geopolitical factors that were at play at the precise time that the geographical area of Iraq became a sovereign state and its inhabitants became ‘citizens’. This focus raises many important issues. Why did Iraq assume the particular form of state that it did, and what international and regional factors affected the nature of the new state in the 1920s? What impact did the presence of various ideals of statehood, held by Britain and by the many different ethnic and cultural groups of the region, have on the structure of the new state? Why did Britain’s vision of statehood win out over the other possibilities, and what effect may this have had upon the subsequent state?

The period immediately following the First World War is the key focus of this thesis, as Iraq was born out of the international political upheavals that followed the War. It was at that time that national self-determination came to be championed as an important war aim of the Allies, due to their desire to placate an America that had decried pre-war European balance of power pragmatism.<sup>2</sup> The immediate post-First World War period represents the peak of recognition of nationalism as a valid force in international politics, yet such nations were harder to define in reality than they were in theory. Because of this intangibility, the principle of nationalism was vulnerable to being manipulated by Britain to secure their own interests within Iraq.

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<sup>1</sup> Kelidar, Abbas, ‘Iraq: The Search for Stability’, in *Conflict Studies*, 59, July 1975, p.3

<sup>2</sup> See Kissinger, H. ‘Diplomacy’ (Touchstone, New York, 1994) especially chapters 1, 2, and 7.

The State of Iraq was established in 1921, under a British mandate. It was formed from the three previous Ottoman *vilayets*<sup>3</sup> of Baghdad, Basra, and, most controversially, Mosul.<sup>4</sup> The *vilayets* of Baghdad and Basra had been under British administration for a significant part of the First World War, a situation that greatly aided the British claim to the Mesopotamian mandate after the War. Control over Iraq was of prime strategic importance to Britain, as it provided a crucial link in the British network that served to protect British India. However, due to the influence of the United States after the First World War, and especially President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Point Plan, Britain could not openly turn Iraq into another imperial territory. Thus, Britain was forced to establish the apparatus for self-determination within the country, and Feisal was enthroned as king of Iraq in 1921. Despite this, Britain's ambitions in the area strongly coloured the nation-state that was constructed, and the Anglo-Iraq Treaty of 1922 served to safe-guard British influence within the state.

No proper understanding of the nature and characteristics of Iraq at its inception can be obtained without reference to the dual legacies of Ottoman administration, and colonial state-building. The Ottoman legacy was one of parochialism and the retention of local loyalties and allegiances. Ethnic and religious minorities such as Kurds, Shi'i Arabs, Sunni Arabs, Jews, Turkomen and Christians, were allowed to retain their unique characteristics and cultural values, leading to a mosaic of strong, distinctive community groups throughout the Mesopotamian region. Such "*bonds of cultural affinity have a durability that remain.*"<sup>5</sup>

The British mandate period was instrumental in delimiting the new geographical entity of Iraq, in a form that persists largely unchanged today. France and Britain, under sanction from the League of Nations, defined, often very artificially, the units that were to be seen as distinct states. The result was "*the institutionalization and consolidation of territorial states in the image of the European pattern.*"<sup>6</sup> As such a political paradigm was being imposed by foreign powers, over a region containing the

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<sup>3</sup> A *vilayet* was the largest unit of Ottoman regional administration

<sup>4</sup> See chapter 5

<sup>5</sup> Helms, C.M. 'Iraq: Eastern Flank of the Arab World.' (Brookings Institute, Washington, 1984), p.20

<sup>6</sup> Korany, B. 'Alien and Besieged Yet Here to Stay: The Contradictions of the Arab Territorial State', in Salame, G. (ed.), 'The Foundations of the Arab State.' (Croom Helm, London 1987), p.47

distinct populations that the Ottoman system had allowed to flourish, so the State of Iraq was established with an immediate internal challenge to its authority and legitimacy. The country was formed with an inherent tension between the state as a political authority exercising control within prescribed territorial limits, and the presence of smaller, autonomous and competing social units.

This thesis analyses the crystallisation of the Iraqi State in the 1920s. Such a study necessitates an in-depth critique of all the factors that contributed to the emergence of Iraq as a modern state, and the ways in which they bore on its subsequent geopolitical development in its formative phase. The geographical and historical elements of the region are therefore fundamental, as they explain the nature of the area before its transition to statehood, and also determine how change would have been accepted. For example, the composition of the local population, and the existing links with external groups, clearly had immense repercussions on the form and identity of the resulting political unit.

An insight into the geographical elements that differentiate one space from another, also provides answers into the specific geopolitical 'place' of one particular area, and highlights the geopolitical pressures that may be hampering political consolidation. Therefore, Iraq's position on the world map helps to explain the intense foreign interest in the area at the start of the century. Many scholars believe that the impact of geography on the political sphere is of paramount importance.<sup>7</sup> The geographical and historical factors at work in the region at the start of the century need to be fully understood before it can be seen how they may have affected the geopolitical crystallisation of the Iraqi State. Iraq was an important buffer for the Ottomans, between their core areas, and the tribal unrest of southern Arabia, and between their empire and European encroachment into the Gulf region. The location of Iraq also shaped the British interest, and thus contributed to the great changes that the country was to experience.

Geography, and resource and water availability, helped to shape the development of different regional economies and distinct cultural and ethnic divisions within Iraq.

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<sup>7</sup> See chapter 2



Before the delineation of the Iraqi nation-state, the inhabitants of Mosul were culturally and economically closer to the Arabs of Syria than to those of southern Iraq. Basra was historically orientated towards the Gulf region and India, due to its role as a port city. Such underlying patterns posed great challenges to the political structure set up by the British in Iraq after the First World War: *“Political behaviour in Iraq, like that in any other country, is shaped by geography, by the availability of natural resources, and by the human adaptation to the environment. In Iraq these factors have influenced the interaction between rural and urban society, the ability of a central government to extend its control, and the territorial aspirations of ruling elites relative to regional political forces and the strategic position of the state.”*<sup>8</sup>

This thesis demonstrates how specific geographies of power at global, regional and local levels fundamentally fashioned the crystallisation of the Iraqi State after the First World War. Iraq’s geographic location in a vital strategic region for several major global powers determined the level of foreign involvement and interest in the area. Regional and local geographies of power also fashioned the society and various cultural identities of Mesopotamia. Such factors fed into the Iraqi State that was established by the British in 1921. Access to power was increasingly polarised under the British mandate, with Sunni Arabs elevated to a dominant position by virtue of the greater educational and employment opportunities they had enjoyed under the Sunni Ottoman Empire. In contrast, the other major communities of Iraq, such as the Kurds and the Shi’is, found themselves increasingly politically disenfranchised. As Sunni Arab authority consolidated under British protection, access to power for other ethnic and religious groups was curtailed. This led to a volatile and unhappy majority lying beneath an unstable minority, a situation only maintained by British military force. Thus geography, at all levels, informs our examination into the structure of the Iraqi state in the 1920s.

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<sup>8</sup> Helms, C.M. 1984, p.7

## **1.2. Geographical and Historical Characteristics of Mesopotamia: Factors Impacting on the Iraqi State**

### **1.2.1. Defining the Region**

In broad terms the area known today as the State of Iraq is approximately coterminous with the ancient realm of Mesopotamia, although the two are by no means always the same. Mesopotamia, the 'land between the rivers', is the name given by the Greek scholars, the historian Polybius (second century B. C.) and the geographer Strabo (first century B.C.-A. D.) to a part of the region enclosed between the Euphrates and Tigris.<sup>9</sup> While the term 'Mesopotamia' has not always applied to the same area, it has always applied to some portion of this region traversed by the Tigris-Euphrates river system and lying between the mountains of Kurdistan and the Persian Gulf. The ancient Greeks confined the name to an area stretching from the edge of the highlands in the north, where the rivers enter the plain, to what is now Baghdad, where the two rivers approach each other closely. This corresponded roughly to the ancient kingdom of Assyria and to part of the modern Turkish *vilayet* of Mosul.<sup>10</sup> Not until much later did the name acquire a wider significance than that intended by the Greeks, and it came to include southern 'Chaldaeae'. In common use, the term Mesopotamia today refers to the whole of the area between the great rivers, covering a variety of regions between the mountains of Kurdistan in the north and the marshes of the river delta in the south, between the steppes and deserts in the west and the mountain slopes of Iran in the east. Virtually the whole of this area is now encompassed by the Republic of Iraq.

### **1.2.2. 'Al-Iraq', and 'Al-Jazirah'.**

The term 'Iraq' also has its own history. It is an Arabic term, possibly meaning 'cliff', or 'shore', suggesting that the heights that faced the traveller who approached from

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<sup>9</sup> Rowley, H. (ed.) Translated by Welsh, D. R. 'The Atlas of Mesopotamia: A Survey of the History and Civilization of Mesopotamia from the Stone Age to the Fall of Babylon.' (Nelson Publishing, London 1962), p.9. See also Simon, Mattar and Bulliet, (eds.), 'The Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East. II.' (The Middle East Institute of Columbia University, 1996), p. 881.

<sup>10</sup> Foster, Henry. *The Making of Modern Iraq: a Product of World Forces.* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1935), p. 2.

the south-western plains have given their name to the whole country.<sup>11</sup> However, it remains doubtful how this term came into use, and it possibly represents an ancient name now lost, or was perhaps originally used in a different sense. What is known is that this term only came into use after the Arab conquest of the area in the seventh century, A. D. Since then it has been applied to the same portion of the valley formerly known as Babylonia or Chaldaea. Indeed, the old Arabic name of Chaldaea is thought to have been "Iraq ul 'Arab", or the Arab's mudbank.<sup>12</sup> Al-Iraq was approximately the region from Opis on the Tigris, at the mouth of Shatt-el-Adhem, to the locale of Ramadiya on the Euphrates; that is, from nearly latitude 34° to the Persian Gulf, and from the Syrian desert to the Persian mountains.<sup>13</sup> This area covered the rich alluvial plain, where date palms flourished. The Arabs named the northern area of present-day Iraq, which corresponded closely to the ancient kingdom of Assyria, 'Al-Jazirah', or the 'island'. This contained the pasture lands of the north that lay over a stony plain. The frontier between ancient Iraq and ancient Jazirah varied throughout different ages, but later Arab geographers made the line travel almost due west from Takrit, so as to include in Iraq many of the towns on the Euphrates to the north of Anbar.<sup>14</sup>

In the struggle between the Turks and the British over Mosul in the early parts of this century, the latter attempted to prove that Iraq included this portion of the two rivers country. The commission set up to enquire into the matter, came down against the British claim. The Arabs had not predominated in Mosul as they had further south, and they had not used the term Mesopotamia: that was a European construct. It was as the Arab aspiration to statehood developed, that the Arabs themselves sought (with the British) to extend the name of Iraq to cover Mosul.<sup>15</sup> With this joint ambition of Britain and the Iraqis having been attained, we now use the name 'Iraq' as applying, as does modern Mesopotamia, to the modern State of Iraq that exists in that part of

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<sup>11</sup> Rowley, H. (ed.) 1962, p.9.

<sup>12</sup> Chardin, F. W. "Iraq-Mosul", *The English Review*, 1928, XLI, p.486.

<sup>13</sup> See: Coke, Richard. 'Baghdad: The City of Peace,' (Butterworth, London 1927)

<sup>14</sup> Le Strange, 'The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate.' (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1930), pp.8-22.

<sup>15</sup> Foster, Henry. 1935, p.3.

western Asia approximately covered by the former Turkish vilayets of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.2.3. Geography of the Region

The low-lying Mesopotamian plain is about 400 miles long from Samarra to the Persian Gulf, and 125 miles across. Around the district of Samarra are river terraces, rising to 33 feet above the plain.<sup>17</sup> To the south of these terraces is the start of the true river plain, the structure of which has been determined by the behaviour of the rivers. Both rivers have been known to have changed their courses, sometimes influencing the entire rise or fall of ancient cities.<sup>18</sup>

The Mesopotamian climate is generally dry, with the south-west of the country merging into desert. However, when heavy rainfall in the north coincides with snowmelt in the Zagros and Taurus mountains, the rivers are capable of inflicting serious damage downstream, though in recent times this risk has been reduced by the construction of major dam systems in the area.

Dust-storms can arise in spring and summer, which cause dune formation in the region east of the ancient site of Babylon. Generally however, the plain is wide and bare, relieved somewhat in the region south of Baghdad by lush groves of date palms and citrus trees. Moving south again, from the river plain to the delta, there is a distinctly different landscape. The delta is the cumulative product of the rivers having frequently formed new branches and changed course, until the region of swamps is reached, where there are no fixed boundaries between the water and the land. It is in these marshes that the rivers deposit the bulk of their silt, and also an estimated 90% of their water.<sup>19</sup>

A perennial problem in Mesopotamian agriculture has been the salinisation of the cultivable soil. The irrigation water from the rivers is slightly saline, and if it has been

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<sup>16</sup> Throughout this thesis, I will refer to the pre-First World War region of the modern Iraqi State as Mesopotamia. I shall only use the name 'Iraq' as it referred to the new state established in 1921

<sup>17</sup> Rowley, H. (ed.) 1962, p.12

<sup>18</sup> Le Strange. 1930, pp.28-52.

<sup>19</sup> Rowley, H. (ed.) 1962, p.13.

used on the land for irrigation for century after century, the cumulative effect can be substantial. Even more significant is the salt that is left by evaporation when the water table is close to the surface.

In the more northerly regions the rainfall is greater and salinisation is not a problem. However, the inhabitable area is limited to strips in the vicinity of rivers. The country is mountainous, with a markedly continental climate. The red-brown loam deposited by the rivers makes a fertile soil, but despite this, the highland area appears as a heavily eroded plateau, with a thin covering of vegetation in the winter.

A glance at the soil map of Mesopotamia may thus help explain a feature of the region's ancient history. This history is one of campaigns and conquest, with the goal always being to extend authority in the west, so that the caravan routes to the rich and fertile lands on the shores of the Mediterranean could be kept under strict control. The territory included within the present state of Iraq historically has been a frontier in the sense that the region's unique geographic features and location have attracted a succession of invaders. Over the centuries, Iraq has therefore functioned as a military, economic, cultural and strategic cross-roads, which has greatly contributed to the cultural diversity within the country.

#### **1.2.4. The Impact on the Iraqi State of the 1920s**

This region's inherent strategic position on communications routes within the Middle East and between Europe and Asia have made it the object of successive invasions for centuries. The British interest in the region leading up to the First World War was simply the most recent of these. Britain's primary concern before, during and immediately after the First World War, was to secure economic and strategic interests that revolved primarily around India and Egypt. The British Government had a vested interest in the delineation of any Iraqi state, and the state's boundaries were strongly shaped by British imperatives to safe-guard potential railway, pipeline, and air routes between Palestine and Mesopotamia. Iraq and Transjordan together were to form a British-controlled, strategic corridor linking the Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. Decisions regarding border positions in respect to Iraq therefore, were simply

*“Western attempts to impose boundaries as political solutions for Western problems.”<sup>20</sup>*

This thesis demonstrates that Iraq’s pluralism, a result of its geographic location and turbulent history, as well as Ottoman practices of religious and ethnic tolerance, severely challenged British-imposed concepts of nation-statehood, citizenship and rigid territorial delimitations. Britain ignored the problems inherent in establishing an ideal that pre-supposed the existence of a national unit, where none had previously existed. British interests dictated that the territorial integrity of Iraq must be defended, and under British influence. This meant accepting the League of Nations mandate for the territory, and agreeing to establish a coherent nation-state within Iraq. However, the British decision to back the Sunni Arab elite of the country, to the exclusion of the other ethnic and religious groups highlighted the fact that their motivations within Iraq were always seen through the prism of British strategic interest. This left Iraq with a dangerous legacy. Immediately from its inception, the state’s authority was challenged, and the government had unrelentingly to seek political legitimacy.

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<sup>20</sup> Helms, C.M. 1984, p.44

### 1.3. Methodology

The study of the establishment of Iraq presents many practical difficulties. The country itself contains several languages and dialects. Furthermore, the period under examination produced a substantial volume of literature in the languages of the various parties interested in Iraq, such as the British, French, and the Russians. Also problematic are the Ottoman archives that can help to reveal the condition of the Iraqi provinces before the First World War. These documents are in Turkish, and are only recently being discovered and made available for public examination.

As this thesis is set firmly in the period in which Iraq was set up as a state, the most useful sources of information are the archives and documents written at, or relating to, that particular time. Therefore my research was overwhelmingly historical and archival. Without a full grasp of not only French, but Arabic, Russian, Italian, German and Turkish, my research concentrated mainly upon the British archives relating to Iraq, especially those of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the India Office, and the army and airforce at the Public Record Office in Kew.

However, such archives, and personal narratives from European personnel and travellers in the region, are subject to methodological limitations, as they are not representative of the attitudes and realities of the resident populations. This bias is justified, as the thesis is mainly examining the British experience within Iraq. It explores British motives, their perceived interests and the basis of their policies. It was these documents, with all their limitations and inherent biases which informed the most important period of decision-making in Iraq, following the First World War. They are indicative of the mainstream cultural and political values amongst the administrators who would be the major decision-makers in Iraq. It was how *they* saw Iraq and its population that is important for this study, as such British self-interest largely determined the crystallisation of the Iraqi State as it was in the 1920s. The local and regional states and power bases were not party to the negotiations over the creation of Iraq beyond that recorded in these colonial archives. Therefore, these archives render a full account of the major decisions that affected the geopolitical form and function of the new Iraqi State. The gap between the British perception, and

the reality, is filled by reference to studies that have examined the Ottoman archives and locally produced narratives.

To some degree, reliance on secondary sources for research in Iraq is merited as its fate was caught up in the conflict between so many competing foreign powers, and so many divided local powers. Very few studies of the region have cross-analysed these eclectic sources, and British policy in Iraq was certainly not created in a vacuum.

Secondary sources are used to provide the highly geographical angle that this thesis applies to the examination of the Iraqi State. Such a framework brings a novel, and highly informative perspective to the Iraqi predicament. The crystallisation of the State was hugely influenced by its relative location, the geographical spread of its populations, the new geographical boundaries imposed after the First World War, and the geopolitical perspectives of Britain. Thus such a geographical approach can reveal a great deal more about the factors impacting on Iraq in the 1920s, than a non-geographical historiography of the region could provide alone.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE CRYSTALLISATION OF THE IRAQI STATE: THEORETICAL FIELDS

#### 2.1. Introduction

Many theoretical fields are relevant to the attempt to unravel the reasons why the nation-state paradigm of the post-World War One international consensus so greatly affected the coherence of Iraq's geopolitical identity, function and place in the world. Such a study necessitates an in-depth analysis of all the factors that contributed to the emergence of Iraq as a modern state, and the ways in which they bore on its subsequent geopolitical development. In this thesis, this analysis shall be limited to interpreting the international and regional context within which Iraq entered its formative phase. We must understand the exact elements that interacted to produce the form of the state as it underwent its transformation, and find bodies of theory that can shed light on the state's geopolitical characteristics as it crystallised.

The limitations of certain territorially based nationalisms, encompassing many different ethnic and cultural groups, are already being realised – not least within the heart of Europe. The creation of a new state brings up many issues: who is creating this state, what is the intrinsic purpose of the creation, who benefits from the creation, and, most importantly – can such an entity be successfully created without the unified will of the entire resident population? The theory of state-building prevailing globally today evolved in Europe, and implied the consolidation of a strong political presence taking control of a defined territorial unit. In the case of Iraq, we must throw in the dynamic of the strong political presence being a foreign power, and not a local one. Could the Iraqi State ever function as a coherent entity when its design was imposed from outside, rather than evolving from internal catalysts? Other important issues surround the composition of the Iraqi population, and links with external groups. Elements of geographical theory can be helpful here in explaining the cultural

'crossroads' nature of the area that became Iraq, as well as highlighting the reasons for foreign interest in the region.

## 2.2. The Role of Geography

Scholars differ in the amount of importance they attach to the impact of geography on the political sphere, but many argue that it is fundamental. Could such an approach add to our analysis of the crystallisation of the Iraqi State? Mackinder claimed that geography answers two vital questions; answers that may be instrumental in this particular thesis.

*"I have ventured to define geography...by saying that it answers two questions. It answers the question Where? And it then proceeds to answer the question Why there?"<sup>1</sup>*

Could such an approach be utilised to answer not only where Iraq lies in relation to other powers, but also why, given this relative location, Iraq was subjected to such great change at the beginning of this century? In doing so, it could perhaps also help to explain the failure of the nation-state paradigm in producing an enduring geopolitical identity and function for the new state. Is the history and condition of Iraq fundamentally bound up with its geography? This approach could indeed provide some answers. For example, for the Ottomans, Iraq provided a buffer between the hub of its empire, the nomadic threat from the deserts to the south, and the might of the Iranian kingdom to the east. It lay on the major overland trade routes between Asia, Europe and the Arab Middle East, whilst also benefiting from access to the Arabian Gulf. In this, these Iraqi districts provided the Ottomans with unique strategic, economic and cultural advantages that other *vilayets* could not provide.

An understanding of the geographical elements that differentiate one space from another, is thus important for any research into the specific geopolitical place of one particular area, and any geopolitical pressures that are at work to prevent an area from consolidating into a coherent nation-state. Therefore, "*Geography in this expanded*

*sense is not confined to any one discipline, it travels instead through social practices at large and is implicated in myriad topographies of power and knowledge. We routinely make sense of places, spaces and landscapes in our everyday lives – in different ways and for different purposes – and these ‘popular geographies’ are as important to the conduct of social life as are our understandings of (say) biography and history”.*<sup>2</sup>

Newman too, calls for a renewed appreciation of the ‘geo’ dimension of global, regional and state politics when using geopolitics to study the changing world political map.<sup>3</sup> In other words, he sees the geographical element as vital to the study of the relationship between politics and space – as statecraft is not conducted in homogenous space but in geographically differentiated areas. Such thoughts could be productively applied to the crystallisation of the Iraqi State. By its very nature, such a geopolitical approach is multi-disciplinary, but this is where its strength lies as it clearly interprets the complexity of reality, and allows a greater analytical insight. Although closely related to political geography, it does not deal solely with the spatial dimensions of the political process at all levels, as political geography is prone to do. Rather, it focuses on the changing role of the State at global and regional levels. Some view it as little more than an alternative way of looking at International Relations, with a stronger emphasis on the ‘geo’ than is apparent in many of the traditional political and I.R. analyses – from which the territorial and spatial dimensions are frequently lacking. However, it does emphasise vital factors that should not be underestimated. The contemporary study of Geopolitics contains several themes that can be drawn upon to inform any examination into the factors affecting the geopolitical development of Iraq at the time it became a state.

Most relevant of these themes is the ‘geopolitical imagination.’<sup>4</sup> The relative location of a state in the global system is a function of the position accorded it by other states within the system, as well as the imagined preferences of its own citizens.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Mackinder, 1904. Quoted in Parker, W.H. ‘Mackinder: Geography as an Aid to Statecraft.’ (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1982), p.141.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory, Derek, ‘Geographical Imaginations’. (Blackwells, Oxford, 1994), p.11.

<sup>3</sup> Newman, David. ‘Geopolitics Renaissance: Territory, Sovereignty and the World Political Map.’ *Geopolitics* Vol.3, No.1 Summer 1998, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Term used by Newman, D. 1998, p.4

<sup>5</sup> Newman, D. 1998, p.6.

geopolitical imagination follows on from such ideas as 'imagined communities' (which shall be examined in depth further into this chapter) – which relate to the communal imaginings (or lack of) held by citizens of the state, which reflect the preferred geopolitical location of these groups within a global system.

The second theme in Geopolitics that proves of use in this study of Iraq is the present-day dual process of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation. De-territorialisation refers to the erosion of state-based ties due to globalisation, the developments in communications, and cultural, economic and political interchanges that transcend state boundaries. However, this is offset by the emergence of new states, and new ethnic, national and territorial identities, with the associated creation of new boundaries. Although such processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation are largely located within the discourse of post-modernism, it is not hard to see how equally contradictory dual processes may have been fashioning the world earlier this century. For example, whilst the imposition of a state over the region of Iraq might at first glance seem to necessitate a narrowing down of the population's territorial perspective, because the new entity was much smaller than the Empire of which it was previously a part, - it actually demanded an expansion in people's views of the community in which they lived. This was because the centre of state power was now far closer to their everyday lives than it had ever been before, and therefore had a much stronger impact and centripetal power than that of the former disorganised and inconsistent Ottoman administration. The new state also implied a loyalty beyond the local, which was not necessary under the Ottomans. Thus, a smaller territorial limit actually served better than a vast Empire in eroding the parochialism and tribalism of early twentieth century Iraq, as it allowed for a far greater *actual* control over the lives of the population by a Central Government. By this, I am referring to the strengthening of the relationship between population and state. The obligations of the population to the state, such as tax payments, were more readily enforced, just as the state held new responsibilities to its inhabitants. Such reciprocal ties became far more tangible to the local population under the new state structure, than they had been under Ottoman tutelage.

### **2.2.1. The Impact of Geographical Location on the Geopolitical Status of a Territory**

The fundamental impact of geography on the world political map, and the nation building process was central to the ideas of Halford Mackinder (1861-1947). His ideas may also be of use in unravelling the forces at work at the time that Iraq was re-fashioned as an international state. Mackinder's human geography sought to emphasise man's relationship with his varying environment, an environment where places differed due to individual kinds of community inhabiting distinctive localities. That is, space is not homogenous, both by virtue of its inherently diverse resource character and because of its relative location.

*"Man in society forms local communities and the natural environment may be marked off into natural regions; natural regions influence the development of the communities inhabiting them; the communities modify the regions they inhabit; the regions, so modified, influence the communities differently than before, and so the interaction continues."*<sup>6</sup>

Mackinder also strove to underline the significance of the geographical location of an area.

*"The great wars of history...are the outcome, direct or indirect, of the unequal growth of nations, and that unequal growth is not wholly due to the greater genius and energy of some nations as compared with others; in large measure it is the result of the uneven distribution of fertility and strategical opportunity upon the face of our Globe. In other words, there is in nature no such thing as equality of opportunity for the nations."*<sup>7</sup>

Mackinder held a unifying imperial philosophy, which was expressed in a logical theorem intended to prove that Britain's only salvation as a great power lay in consolidating around the mother country, and reinforcing a strong, united Empire. In 1910 he wrote that *"only by gathering together the several nations of the Empire can we cope in the international balance of power with the newly-organised continental states"*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Parker, W.H. 1982, p.115

<sup>7</sup> Mackinder, H.J. 'Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction,' (Constable, London; Holt, New York, 1919), p.2

<sup>8</sup> *The Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> October 1910.

Such geographical positioning impacting on a nation's power and potential on the world scene was first seen in his book 'Britain and the British Seas' (1902), when he accepted that although practicality required a regional treatment, "*there is no complete geographical region either less than or greater than the whole of the earth's surface*".<sup>9</sup> As he saw it, advances in communications, and in infrastructure, were leading to an increase in the volume and extent of inter-regional movements of men, materials and ideas. Such developments reinforced the need to set regions within a global context. It was this global context that fundamentally affected the position in the world order that one region was accorded at the expense of another.

Added to this, he recognised another potent geographical factor – that of ideology. Indeed Mackinder introduced the term 'psychosphere' as one of the six global spheres within which man existed. As part of this, he understood that man possessed other territorial drives than the mere desire for food and security: "*ideas and ambitions were powerful forces which must find a place in a comprehensive human geography*".<sup>10</sup>

Since all other parts of the earth had already been discovered, the interplay of the forces of the psychosphere had now become a closed system – thus their action in any part of the world would now have repercussions throughout the whole. It followed then, that future international tensions would tend to become global rather than simply regional. This is a crucial key to understanding Britain's interest in the Iraqi region.

The history and development of any one region was also a crucial element that was often overlooked in spatial models of political geography. Mackinder used the term 'genetic' to imply not only a study of the origin and development of features, but also that momentum which carries them from the past into the present. He saw this *vis inertiae* as vital to geographical explanation, and recognised that the facts of human geography would always be the result of the conflict between two elements, the dynamic and the genetic.<sup>11</sup> Cohen too recognises this conflict, and relates it directly to the Middle Eastern arena: "*Middle Eastern diversities are heightened by the fiercely*

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<sup>9</sup> Mackinder, H.J. 'The Music of the Spheres', *Proc. R. Philos. Soc. Glasgow* lxiii, 1937, p.179.

<sup>10</sup> Parker, W.H. 1982, p.135

*competitive drives of modern nationalism and by the centrifugal pressures that outside interests bring to bear upon the region.*"<sup>12</sup>

### **2.2.2. Mackinder's Heartland Theory**<sup>13</sup>

Mackinder outlined his ground-breaking Heartland theory in 1904,<sup>14</sup> and called on people to stop regarding European history as the only history that mattered, and rather to look upon it as subordinate to Asiatic history.<sup>15</sup> His theory developed from the belief that the physical geography of Russia had encouraged a high level of mobility amongst the nomadic horsemen, and those who lived along the banks of the great central rivers that ran north to south. These mobile forces were then able to bring great pressure to bear on Europe, to the extent that: "*Europe acquired much of its character from its forced response*".<sup>16</sup>

Thus the vast Eurasian landmass became the 'Heartland', and pivoting around this – forming an outer and inner crescent – were marginal coastlands, peninsulas and islands, which supported dense populations. (See Map 2). Europe was just one of these 'satellite' regions, but developed 'ship-men' to counter the mobility of the heartland nomads. Through dominance at sea, Europeans became able to control the marginal coastlands and encircle the Euro-Asiatic land power that had for so long been a threat. In this way, the traditional core-periphery antithesis also became a land-

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<sup>11</sup> Mackinder, H.J. (1895). 'Modern geography, German and English', presidential address to Section E (Geography), *Report 65<sup>th</sup> Mtg Brit. Assoc. Adv. Sci.* (Ipswich 1895), *Trans. Section E*, p.8.

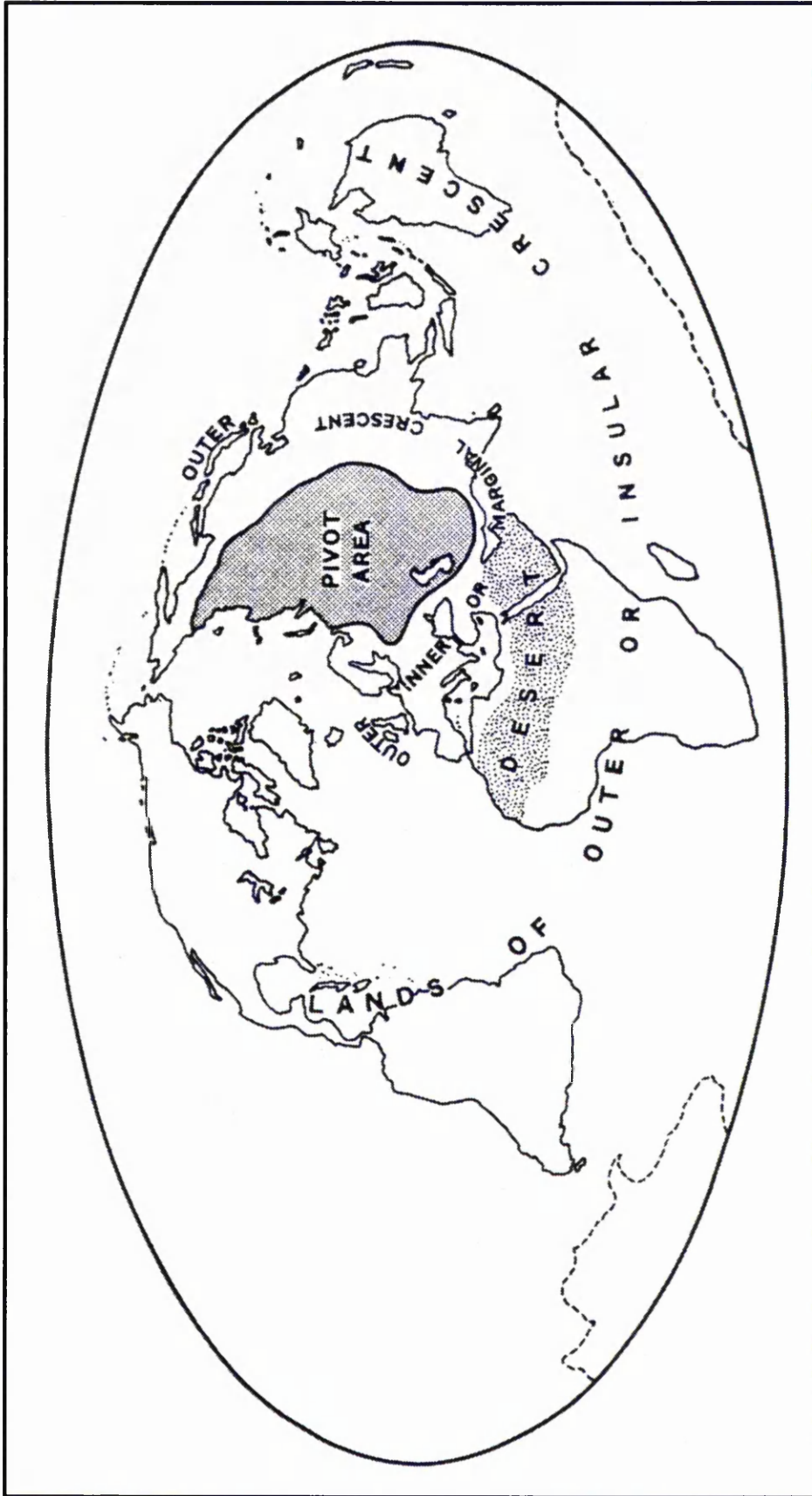
<sup>12</sup> Cohen, Saul. 'Geography and Politics in a World Divided.' (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1975), p.255

<sup>13</sup> Ideas such as these helped Mackinder become one of the most influential geographical thinkers of modern times. His geographical views helped to build his geopolitical theories, which went on to impact upon the external policies of Germany before the First World War, and of the United States after it. His concepts of the 'Heartland' and the 'Rimland' in the 'World Island' were hugely influential, especially through the geopolitical thinking of successors such as Spykman. (Nicholas Spykman (1893-1943), Professor of International Relations at Yale University). He made important contributions to the discipline of Geopolitics, and believed that the 'Rimland' of peripheral maritime states could successfully contain the Eurasian 'Heartland' power.

<sup>14</sup> Although the Heartland theory was introduced in 1904, it lay largely neglected by English-speakers until the Second World War, when it became "*one of the most intensively debated geographical ideas of all time.*" (De Blij, H.J. 'Systematic Political Geography,' Wiley, New York, 1967). The theory has, however, attracted much criticism since then, and Mackinder's views are certainly not universally accepted.

<sup>15</sup> Mackinder, H.J. 'The Geographical Pivot of History', *Geographical Journal* xxiii, 1904, pp.421-37.

<sup>16</sup> Parker, W.H. 1982, p.150.



**Map 2. Mackinder's World - 1904**  
Source: Cohen S.B., 'Geography and Politics in a World Divided', (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975)



power / sea-power antithesis. Whilst Europe had risen to the challenge and indeed become a great sea-power, Mackinder argued that the potential of the Eurasian landmass could never be exceeded, and that the opening up of its vast spaces due to new technology and transport systems would release her true economic power.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, “*does not a certain persistence of geographical relationship become evident?*”<sup>18</sup> Mackinder was convinced that this immense area of Euro-Asia was the pivot region of the world’s politics, and such a view reveals much about the position of Iraq, caught in the ‘marginal crescent’, in the global political manoeuvrings after the First World War.

The theory’s power lay in the way Mackinder had managed to relate the fact of the world having become a closed system of states to technological advances in communications, with the balance of advantage and disadvantage oscillating between land power and sea power, - or centre and periphery. “*It thus reduced the complex interplay of historical event and geographical fact to an astonishing simplicity*”.<sup>19</sup> Mackinder argued that whoever had control of the Heartland, with all of its strategic advantages and huge economic potential, would hold the key to control of the ‘world island’, and by then adding sea power to its supremacy on land – it could control the world.<sup>20</sup> Mackinder claimed that the only way to prevent such a process was by using the great power of the present victors to see that super-states did not develop, and rather that the old continental empires were broken up into autonomous, economically balanced and viable nations.<sup>21</sup> Here again can be seen possible explanations into the British interest in Iraq, and perhaps the decision to set up Iraq as just such an ‘autonomous, economically balanced and viable nation’. Indeed, Mackinder himself actually considered the Middle East as the most vital part of the Inner Crescent due to its oil reserves and its strategic positioning. It was also a final region of political and territorial possibilities within an otherwise closed global system.

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<sup>17</sup> He envisaged that this landmass could itself become a vast economic world that would be largely inaccessible to oceanic commerce. If and when the time came for this to happen, the Eurasian heartland would again make its power felt in the surrounding lands.

<sup>18</sup> Mackinder, H.J. 1904, p.434.

<sup>19</sup> Parker, W.H. 1982, p.162.

<sup>20</sup> At the time of the Allied triumph in Europe at the end of the First World War, Mackinder published *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, published in 1919 in New York and London. This book was not intended to be a deterministic account, but more of a practical warning to statesmen of the need to follow a specific course of action to avert a crisis within the global political sphere.

<sup>21</sup> In a sense this Mackinder view is a justification of Britain’s nineteenth century balance of power strategic world view.

Some writers simply deny geography any significant place in power politics. For example, Malin insisted that "*the idea that geographical position is the basis of power*" was now discredited and should be considered obsolete.<sup>22</sup> However, such claims were countered by certain scholars, like Hooson, who supported the Heartland theory by declaring that "*the most fundamental of all the elements of national power is sheer location on the globe.*"<sup>23</sup> Even those who agreed with this in principle however, raised concerns about the uncertainty of the heartland's boundaries.<sup>24</sup> Gyorgy commented that "*this extremely vague outline of so vital a geographical area seems unacceptable*".<sup>25</sup>

Another main contention surrounding the Heartland theory was the determinism that many critics read into it. Many critics believed that economic and technological factors were of greater importance than geostrategic considerations.<sup>26</sup> Yet Mackinder had always maintained in his own writings that the potential of the heartland could only be tapped via technical advancement and manpower organisation, so enabling the population to fully exploit the geostrategic position.

*"The actual balance of political power at any given time is...the product, on the one hand, of the geographic conditions, both economic and strategic, and on the other hand, of the relative number, virility, equipment and organisation of the competing peoples"*.<sup>27</sup>

This then, could also bend in favour of the Rimland areas, in that *their* development could outstrip that of Eurasia, and thus rise above such 'fatalism' of the deterministic claims. Mackinder argued therefore, that although the Rimland could be dominant in such a scenario, the population should at least be aware of the geographical realities

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<sup>22</sup> Malin, J.C. 'The contriving brain as the pivot of history. Sea, landmass and air power: some bearings of cultural technology upon the geography of international relations', in Anderson, G.L. (ed.) 'Issues and Conflicts' (Univ. of Kansas Press, Lawrence, Kansas, 1959), p.340

<sup>23</sup> Hooson, D.J.M. 'A New Soviet Heartland?' (Van Nostrand, Princeton, New Jersey, 1964), p.117.

<sup>24</sup> For example, see Teggart, E.T. 'Geography as an Aid to Statecraft: An Appreciation of Mackinder's *Democratic Ideals and Reality*', *Geographical Review* viii, 1919, pp.227-42; Chisholm, G.C. 'The Geographical Prerequisites of a League of Nations', *Scottish Geographical Magazine* xxxv, 1919, pp.248-56; Gyorgy, A. 'Geopolitics: the New German Science'. (Univ. of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1944); Kristof, L.K.D. 'Mackinder's Concept of Heartland and the Russians', preprint, XXIII Int. Geogr. Congr., Symposium K5: History of Geographical Thought. (Leningrad, 22-6 July 1976); Meinig, D.W. 'Heartland and Rimland in Eurasian History', *Western Political Quarterly* ix, 1956, pp.553-69.

<sup>25</sup> Gyorgy, A. 1944, p.168.

<sup>26</sup> See, Amery, L.S. 'In Discussion of Mackinder, H.J. 'The Geographical Pivot of History'', *Geographical Journal* xxiii, 1904, pp.293-307; Crone, G.R. 'Modern Geographers'. RGS, London, 1951; and East, W.G. 'How Strong is the Heartland?' *Foreign Affairs* xxix, 1950, pp.78-93.

and historical forces which would have to be contended with. To him, whether overcome or not, geography would remain the fundamental element to be dealt with when it came to statecraft. In this way, the geography of Iraq would remain a crucial element within the new state constructed by the British after the First World War. Was such a geographical legacy dealt with adequately in Iraqi statecraft?

Some writers argued that Mackinder had greatly over-emphasised the strategic importance of the heartland, and indeed, that its very centrality meant it was vulnerable to attack from all sides. Spykman and Cressey<sup>28</sup> both held that the Rimland was in fact more important than the Heartland, and that whoever controlled the Rimland would rule Eurasia. Therefore, the question is posed: who is more likely to control the Rimland? A sea power emanating from the outer continents and islands, or a land power based centrally in Eurasia? By way of evidence it may prove valuable to look at the case of East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia, who were all more developed and advanced than the Soviet Union, yet were still absorbed within the Soviet orbit.<sup>29</sup>

Spykman drew different geostrategic conclusions from Mackinder's Heartland model. Although he was writing about the global post-World War Two geostrategic situation, many of his ideas can be usefully related back to the post-World War One global political arena. He felt that the 'Marginal Crescent', or 'Rimland' was the key to world control, and he rejected Mackinder's land power doctrine to argue: "*who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world.*"<sup>30</sup> To Spykman, the Rimland, and not the Heartland, was the key to the struggle for the world. In such a scenario, Mesopotamia, located squarely in the middle of the Rimland region, was of prime strategic interest to ambitious world

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<sup>27</sup> Mackinder, H.J. 1904, p.437.

<sup>28</sup> see Spykman, N.J. 'The Geography of the Peace'. (Harcourt Brace, New York, 1944); and Cressey, G.B. 'The Basis of Soviet Strength'. (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1945)

<sup>29</sup> Other criticisms were levelled at the belief that the geographical nature of the heartland made it an area difficult for human habitation, therefore making economic development seem improbable at the time that Mackinder was writing. However, Mackinder had mentioned that the main power of the heartland lay in its potential, which could be tapped when the area did finally benefit from the technological advances of the age. He never claimed that the heartland would dominate the world island, only that it was in a very favourable position to do so, should the area manage to develop its material and human resources. The more fundamental point, was that the sheer scale of the land mass ensured a sufficient range of resources to enhance the power of whoever controlled them.

<sup>30</sup> Spykman, N. 1944, p.43

powers. (See Map 3). Control of an area such as this provided a 'gateway' into the Heartland. (See Map 4).

Cohen developed these debates further,<sup>31</sup> in a way that directly highlighted the Mesopotamian region. Cohen believed that there was a logic to the ordering of the patterns of the relations among states. The major tensions of international relations occur when geostrategic powers or blocs clash with one another as they interact in areas that are common ground. In this way therefore, the world is arranged politically in rational, not random fashion. *"It can therefore be likened to a diamond, not a pane of glass, in the sense that its cleavages can be anticipated along specific lines, rather than haphazardly."*<sup>32</sup> From such a belief, he developed the idea of a 'Shatterbelt', defined as *"a large, strategically located region that is occupied by a number of conflicting states and is caught between the conflicting interests of adjoining Great Powers."*<sup>33</sup> Cohen's 'shatterbelt' was a volatile region that marked the borders of two geostrategic power blocs, combined with a marked ideological frontier.

The impact of geographical location can thus be far-reaching. Although Cohen was analysing the Cold War situation throughout the 1960s and 1970s, in which he recognised the Middle East as one of the world's two main shatterbelts, his ideas also directly relate to the position of Mesopotamia on the eve of the First World War. Mackinder had recognised that the Iraqi region was firmly in his 'marginal crescent', and was thus likely to be contested over by greater powers, but Cohen took this further. Caught between two great geostrategic regions, and offering various political, strategic and economic benefits to competing powers, Iraq can be seen as the archetypal shatterbelt region. (See Map 5). Indeed, it can be argued that the Iraqi region had been a 'shatterbelt' for many centuries, caught between the ambitions and interests of the Ottoman Empire and the Persians to the east. Such a history had created a politically, economically and culturally fractured region, a hallmark of Cohen's shatterbelt.<sup>34</sup>

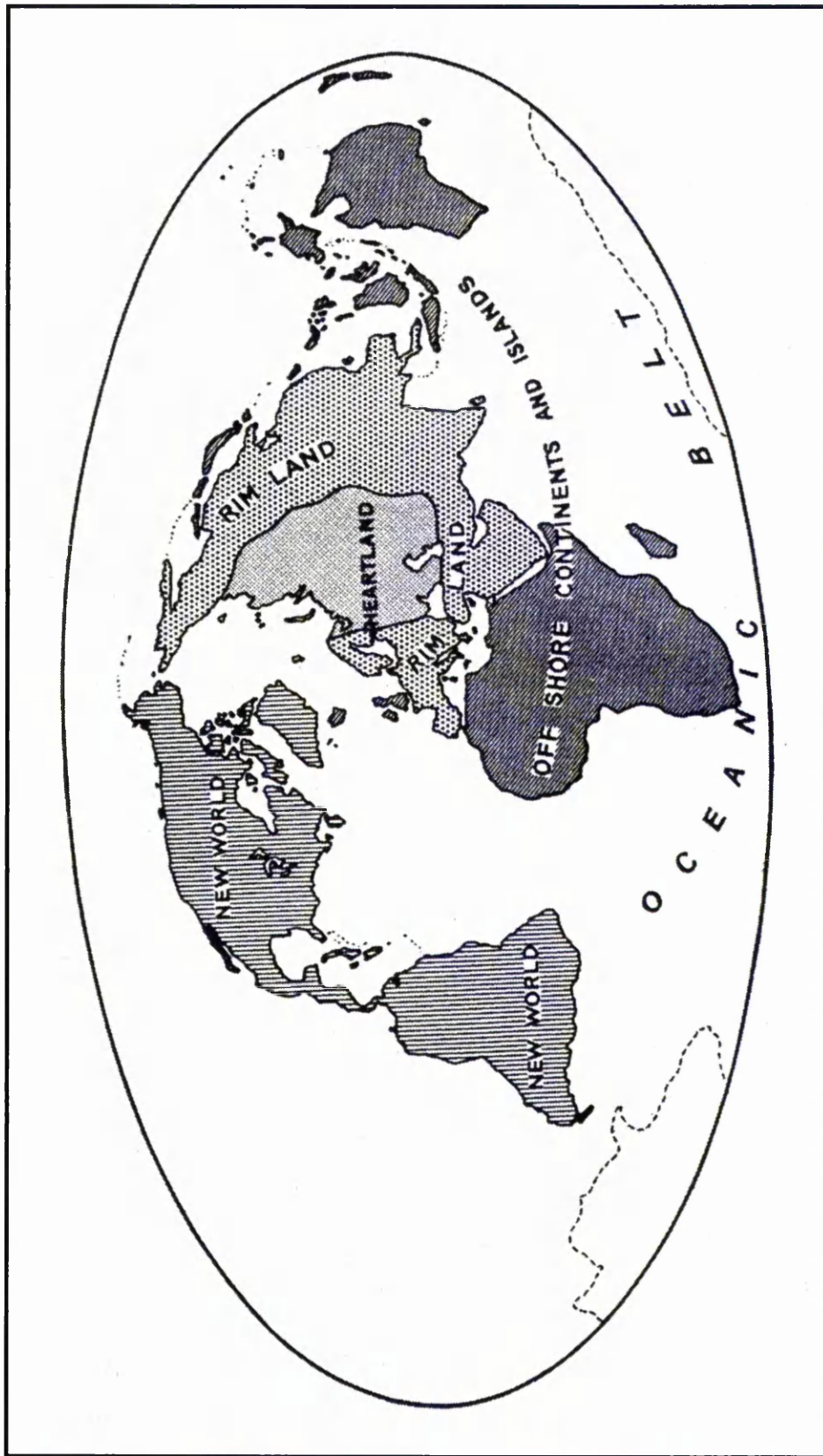
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<sup>31</sup> See Cohen, S. 1975

<sup>32</sup> Cohen, S. 1975, p.vi

<sup>33</sup> Cohen, S. 1975, p.85

<sup>34</sup> Cohen claims that shatterbelt regions are characterised by their fragmented political and economic nature. Shatterbelt areas also reflect the outside world in their cultures, races, languages, religions and economies. Iraq certainly displays these characteristics.



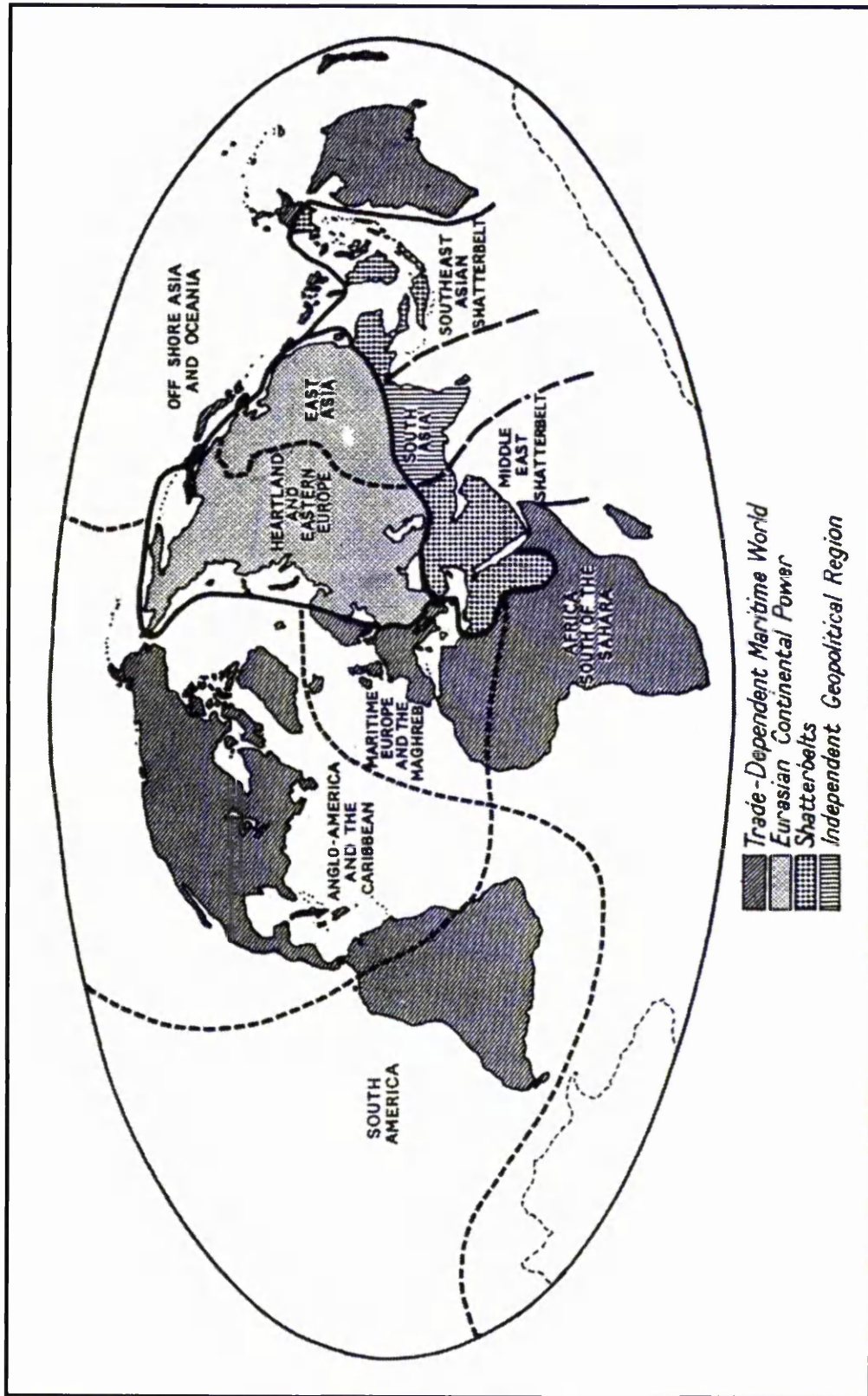
**Map 3. The World of Spykman**

Source: Cohen S.B., 'Geography and Politics in a World Divided', (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975)



**Map 4. Gates to the Heartland**  
*Source:* Spykman N.J., 'The Geography of Peace', (Harcourt, Bruce and World, New York, 1969)





**Map 5. The World's Geostategic Regions and their Geopolitical Subdivisions**  
 Source: Cohen S.B., 'Geography and Politics in a World Divided', (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975)

There is no question, according to Cohen, that the Middle East suffers due to its shatterbelt status, a result of ongoing shatterbelt designation and the legacy of past shatterbelt location. Although writing about the situation in the 1960s and 1970s, if we accept that the Mesopotamian region has long been a shatterbelt, Cohen's conclusions can be directly related to the Iraq of the First World War era: "*There is not a single Middle Eastern state that lives at complete ease with its neighbours, and almost every Middle Eastern state struggles with internal tensions that are the product of deep-rooted cultural clashes and geopolitical immaturity. Everywhere the struggle is to consolidate states in the face of internal divisions and external pressures.*"<sup>35</sup> Such struggles were therefore to confront the Iraqi State established after the First World War, and greatly affect its internal consolidation and geopolitical function. In this sense, geographical location can fundamentally affect the development and crystallisation of a nation-state.

Such views are potentially of great importance when examining the role that Britain came to play in Iraq after the First World War. Can Mackinder's geopolitical ideas shed more light on why that region in particular was of interest to Britain, and why the specific policies followed by the British administration there were chosen above others? Mackinder had called on the victors of the war to work towards undermining the strength of continental masses, and prevent super-states developing by breaking up old continental empires into autonomous and viable nations. Such a call can be seen to be clearly mirrored in the British stance towards Iraq.<sup>36</sup>

The perception of Iraq's geographical significance and role in 'Imperial space' by Mackinder is important, as it reveals a great deal about the motives and strategies that

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<sup>35</sup> Cohen, S. 1975, p.253

<sup>36</sup> Indeed, despite the criticisms levelled at the heartland theory, the reality was that many of Mackinder's practical suggestions emanating from these ideas, *were* closely listened to and followed after the war, due to the apparent relevance of the ideas in the global structure at that time. Mackinder saw Britain's future strength as very much tied up with the successful governance of her dominions. He viewed the Empire as an organic whole, which could supply British deficiencies, without intention of exploitation. The Empire should be, he argued, a free partnership of democracies united by common interest, forming a political organisation powerful enough to contend with the great continental realms. What was desired by Mackinder was an idea of 'trusteeship' rather than 'possession' to be spread amongst the people of Britain "*and with it the idea that we have to improve ourselves because we are the trustees, and must be worthy to rule*". (Mackinder, H.J. 'On Thinking Imperially' in Sadler, M.E. (ed.) 'Lectures on Empire,' London, 1907, p.41).



lay behind the British desire for control in that region. It is important to note that many British politicians felt the same at that time, and Mackinder's defence of the imperialist philosophy with intellectual argument pleased many in that camp. Many of his ideas of 'trusteeship' and the protection of British interests are more than evident in Britain's handling of affairs in Iraq, and help inform the analysis into why Iraq was set up as an autonomous political entity – an independent, sovereign state, but having to maintain certain privileges for Britain within its constitution. This in turn, along with other regional and local factors, sheds light onto the particular geopolitical identity and form that Iraq was left with after creation.

Cohen's ideas however, add a further layer of analysis. He highlights the 'shatterbelt' status of the Middle East, which was certainly an arena for Great Power confrontations before, during and after the First World War. Such a framework allows us a greater appreciation of how a region's geographical location can have immense political, cultural and economic consequences, all of which affected the consolidation of the new State of Iraq after the First World War.

### **2.3. British Interests in Mesopotamia**

*"After its occupation of Iraq during the First World War, Britain began to find that the country was not only important as a defence outpost but also vital for other purposes."*<sup>37</sup>

British interests in Iraq were manifold, involving economic, commercial, military and strategic considerations. Only the most major British interests in Iraq will be outlined briefly here, as they shall be examined in detail later in this thesis.

Before the occupation of Iraq during the First World War, Britain had already been the predominant power in the neighbouring Gulf area, although Iraq itself had been under Ottoman domination since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Britain had been largely satisfied with Ottoman control as a barrier to rival powers, as British commercial interests were not compromised by the Ottoman administration. However, this balance of power

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<sup>37</sup> Silverfarb, D. 'Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East. Case Study of Iraq, 1929-41'. (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1986), p.1.

began to shift in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the Ottoman Porte<sup>38</sup> was weak and rival powers – namely Russia and Germany – began to encroach. These states started to exert influence on the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire, which was seen as detrimental to British interests and prestige throughout the eastern Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Britain wished to retain its position within the region, and when the opportunity arose with the demise of Ottoman authority, Britain sought “*to ensure the security of its imperial communications*”.<sup>39</sup> Britain found itself in control of the three Ottoman districts of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul at the end of the First World War, and, “*as the victors, the British directed territorial design according to their own strategic concerns*”.<sup>40</sup>

There were many reasons why Britain did not simply withdraw from Iraq. Of fundamental importance was power, and the significance of ‘realist’ conceptions of power: military strength, communication networks, visual displays of dominance and control. One geopolitical point relevant to Iraq under Mackinder’s world view was that it became an important link in the maritime control of Britain’s trade and imperial, maritime-based, interests. They saw Iraq as a vital link in a chain of airfields connecting Egypt to India, an air route that would help to tie their empire together by facilitating trade, travel and communication, whilst also providing a very important military capability, enabling Britain to reinforce far-flung garrisons in an emergency.<sup>41</sup> They also wished to maintain a military presence near the large British-owned oilfields in south-west Iran, and the refinery at Abadan. They believed that if they withdrew from Iraq, Russia would increase its influence over Iran and eventually threaten these oilfields.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Britain also suspected that there were large

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<sup>38</sup> The Ottoman Sultan, supreme ruler of the Empire

<sup>39</sup> Silverfarb, D. 1986, p.2.

<sup>40</sup> Simon, R. ‘The Imposition of Nationalism on a Non-Nation State: The Case of Iraq During the Interwar Period, 1921-1941’. In Jankowski, J. and Gershoni, I. (eds.) ‘Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East’. (Columbia University Press, New York 1997), p.87

<sup>41</sup> See memoranda by Hugh Trenchard, Chief of Air Staff, and the Middle East department of the Colonial Office, 11<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1922, CAB 27/206; Higham, Robin, ‘Britain’s Imperial Air Routes 1918 to 1939: The Story of Britain’s Overseas Airlines’. (Dent & Son, London, 1960), pp.110, 122.

<sup>42</sup> Memoranda by the Middle East department of the Colonial Office, 11<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1922, the Foreign Office, 15<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1922, and Amery, L.S. (1<sup>st</sup> Lord of the Admiralty), 16<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1922, CAB 27/206; report of the cabinet committee on Iraq, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1923, CAB 27/206.

quantities of oil yet to be discovered in northern Iraq and therefore this provided an added impetus to keep this area under the British sphere of influence.<sup>43</sup>

Britain essentially wished to undermine the authority of any other major powers in the Gulf. Retaining a sphere of influence within the shatterbelt of the Middle East was of crucial strategic importance. For over a hundred years Britain had seen these waters as a vital outpost on the western approaches to India. Control of Mesopotamia would allow the British to have control of the land route between India and Europe. If Turkey were to regain power in Iraq, it would therefore threaten British shipping to India, and damage British prestige in the area, as it would look as if Turkey had won the war. This in itself was very important, as *"British leaders were very sensitive to the question of prestige"*.<sup>44</sup> One important reason for this was that Britain needed to maintain its authority throughout the colonies it still controlled. Any query over Britain's competency to rule in one region of its Empire, could lead to general destabilisation of other areas under British control. Above all, Britain feared the rise of a large bloc of anti-British states within the Muslim world, stretching from Egypt and Turkey to Iran and Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> *"It was especially concerned that anti-British agitation in these states would jeopardise its hold on the allegiance of the Muslim community in INDIA"*. (My emphasis).<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Iraq would prove a useful 'wedge', to weaken such a bloc, just as Mackinder's theory suggested. The Mesopotamian area was of specific interest to the British because of its strategic and commercial potential. The port city of Basra already had a highly developed structure of maritime trade with Asia and the Indian sub-continent, a system that the British wished to seize control over.

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<sup>43</sup> Memoranda by the Middle East department of the Colonial Office, 11<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1922, and Amery, 16<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1922, CAB 27/206; Mejcher, H. 'Imperial Quest for Oil: Iraq 1910-1928'. (Ithaca Press, London 1976), pp.105-175; Longrigg, S. 'Oil in the Middle East: Its Discovery and Development'. (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1968), 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, p.71; Kent, M. 'Oil and Empire: British Policy and Mesopotamian Oil 1900-1920'. (London, 1976), pp.155-157; Stivers, W. 'International Politics and Iraqi Oil, 1918-1928: A Study in Anglo-American Diplomacy'. *Business History Review*, Vol.55, 1981, pp.519-521.

<sup>44</sup> Silverfarb, D. 1986, p.4.

<sup>45</sup> This was one of the main reasons why the British wanted to keep the developing Arab Revolt movement in the Hijaz friendly to British interests.

<sup>46</sup> Silverfarb, D. 1986, p.4. See also Memorandum by the Middle East department of the Colonial Office, 11<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1922, CAB 27/206.

It is interesting to note that even as early as 1914, when British officials were discussing the possibilities of engineering an Arab Revolt, it was already being suggested that Britain should retain control of the Iraqi districts *“to set up some stable authority strong enough to administer, but weak enough to be dependent upon us”*.

<sup>47</sup> Britain also wished to recoup some of the immense military and financial cost of the Mesopotamian campaign, by obtaining some long-term benefit from the country. Estimates suggest that the fighting on this front had cost the British Treasury £200 million.<sup>48</sup>

### **2.3.1. Constraints on British Ambitions in Mesopotamia**

However, Britain also faced many constraints in what they could actually do in Iraq. There was an obvious financial constraint, which was made all the more pressing by the dissatisfaction of the British public with their taxes being spent abroad with no clear benefits. Britain had also made promises to Arab leaders in return for local support that ruled out any possibilities of direct British dominance in the region. President Wilson’s 14-point peace plan also struck a blow against the old imperialist world order. Point 12 concentrated on Iraq, and stated that *“nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development”*.<sup>49</sup> Britain had to endorse this publication in order to avoid a breach with the United States, and also to encourage Germany to agree on an armistice.

Under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the British also became party to the covenant of the League of Nations. Article 22 stated that many former Ottoman-controlled communities were now provisionally recognised as independent nations *“subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone”*.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the future of the region was determined by western powers. It was to be an area of sovereign nation states within

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<sup>47</sup> Cohen, S.A. ‘The Genesis of the British Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914’. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 12, 1976, pp.119-133

<sup>48</sup> Brig. Gen. Moberly, F.J. ‘The Campaign in Mesopotamia: 1914-1918’, Vol.IV, (HMSO, London, 1923-1927), pp.i, 331; Ireland, P.W. ‘Iraq, a Study in Political Development’. (Jonathon Cape, London, 1937), p.60.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Silverfarb, D. 1986, p.6.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Silverfarb, D. 1986, p.6.

the international community – a fundamentally different territorial system than had been in place before in that region.

In 1920 at the San Remo Conference, Britain accepted the Mandate for Iraq under the provisions of Article 22, which implied a need to recognise Iraq as a quasi-independent state that required the aid of a mandatory power in order to prepare the country for self-rule. This gave Britain the opportunity to step into the Iraqi territory with some international legitimacy, but also ruled out the possibility of imposing a predominantly British administration on the country. This seemed to satisfy the British, as they could legitimise their military presence, preserve their economic and political interests, whilst also dramatically reduce military spending overseas and concentrate on the chronic problems closer to home. By 1920, Britain decided that only by creating an Arab government in Baghdad under close British supervision, - with its own local army and police to maintain internal order – could Britain withdraw enough of her troops to save money whilst still safe-guarding essential British interests.

*“This British approach was founded on the premise that the division of the Middle East into various countries should be preserved and the relations between Great Britain and each of these countries should be dealt with independently of one another”.*<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the state of Iraq was created by the international community of the 1920s, from the three Ottoman vilayets of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul that were in British control by the end of the First World War. It was created according to the territorial and political designs of not only that time, but of the powerful players in the world arena. The ascendancy of the United States in terms of world power, heralded an end to the age of imperialism that Britain had dominated for so long. A new paradigm was now being used to determine the world political map. The ideals of national self-determination were being championed, due to the perceived failure (by the United States) of European balance-of-power politics.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, Iraq was set up as a nation-state, under British tutelage until such time as it could rule itself, with clearly defined boundaries, and hence an included and an excluded population.

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<sup>51</sup> Porath, Y. ‘Britain and Arab Unity’. *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 15, 1980, pp.36-50

<sup>52</sup> See Kissinger, H. 1994

## 2.4. State and Nation Building Theory

Before examining any further the exact details of British nation-state building within Iraq, we must define what is meant by a 'nation-state'. The territorial areas set up in the Middle East by the western powers after the First World War, were given the status of international states, and were considered 'nations in formation' – "*in which all the different communities forming their heterogeneous populations rally around the idea of nation – as it is defined and diffused by a nationalistic doctrine*".<sup>53</sup> The theory was that such a doctrine would act like a 'glue' – assembling groups and persuading their members to work together in the process of building a state, which would then in turn further the process of forming a coherent nation. Thus, in the cultural, economic and political integration of the population lay the grounds for a common national identity.

*"This is not therefore a case of divide and rule just for the sake of colonial interests but rather a case of state-building and compulsory integration for the very same purposes"*.<sup>54</sup>

But why choose the nation-state paradigm as the pattern for Iraq and the other new territorially defined countries in the region? The reasons for this decision help to place the construction of Iraq, and its subsequent geopolitical identity, within the appropriate international context.

In 1648 the European Princes had signed the 'Treaty of Westphalia', essentially intended to end the great religious wars. Over the next 200 years, "*a system of state territory evolved in Europe which was based upon the separation of different ethnic and linguistic cultures. The nation-state system appears today as a universal feature*".<sup>55</sup> This system was then transplanted from Europe throughout the globe via colonialism and Western control. Wilson's 14 point plan ushered in a new age on the international arena, an age which had no place for imperialism and old empires. The emphasis was now on independence and self-rule, with respect for different nationalities and their wishes for self-determination. Such a system was underlined by

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<sup>53</sup> Lukitz, L. 'Iraq: The Search for National Identity' (Frank Cass, London 1995), p.2

<sup>54</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p.21.



the League of Nations, which Britain was a part of, and who issued the mandates for the newly independent Middle Eastern regions. What was originally intended by these concepts of 'state' and 'nation' must first be understood before we can examine where they succeeded, and where they failed in providing the new Iraq with a stable and coherent geopolitical identity and function. The ideals and realities of state-building prove invaluable in the analysis of the formation of the Iraqi State.

Ever since the interwar period of this century, "*every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms...and in doing so, has grounded itself firmly in a territorial and social space inherited from the prerevolutionary [sic] past*".<sup>56</sup> Indeed, nationhood is still a concept to aspire to, and remains the most "*universally legitimate value in the political life of our time*".<sup>57</sup>

Yet what exactly is this concept of 'nation' that the League of Nations wished to see fulfilled in the occupied Middle Eastern territories after the First World War? The concept unlocks a multitude of problems of definition and recognition, with many subjective and objective elements involved. The nation is simply one form of human association and communication that has risen to political dominance over the last two hundred years, but whilst it remains true that the nation is still something to aspire to, it remains an extremely hard phenomenon to define and hence, explain.

There is as yet no satisfactory criterion for deciding which of the many human collectivities should be labelled as nations, and thus, no way of telling an observer how to distinguish a nation from other entities *a priori*. So to Seton-Watson's admission that; "*I am driven to the conclusion that no 'scientific definition' of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists.*"<sup>58</sup> This is reinforced by Smith's similar recognition of the curiously simultaneous solidity and insubstantiality of nations – being seemingly so recognisable from a distance, and yet

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<sup>55</sup> Grundy-Warr, and Schofield, R. 'The Shifting Ground of Border Co-operation Between Nations'. *Geographical Magazine* June 1990, pp.10-17

<sup>56</sup> Anderson, B. 'Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.' (Verso, London 1991), p.2

<sup>57</sup> Anderson, B. 1991, p.3

<sup>58</sup> Seton-Watson, H. 'Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism.' (Methuen, London 1977), p.5

appearing to dissolve the closer we come.<sup>59</sup> It is therefore tempting to think that the 'nation' is in the eye of the beholder and thus is entirely situational: shifting, fleeting, even illusory. Anderson also notes this insubstantiality by describing nationalism – the driving force behind creating nations – as the 'pathology' of modern developmental history, "*as inescapable as neurosis in the individual*".<sup>60</sup> He is tempted to see the nation as little more than a cultural artifact of a particular kind.

What then, is this phenomenon that supposedly surrounds us, and yet defies precise explanation, even by the most respected scholars of the subject? This section will attempt to unweave a few of the complexities surrounding nationalism and nations by trying to ascertain their true origins and foundations, as well as any notable catalysts along the way. These discussions will then be applied more specifically to Iraq. It is only in understanding these origins that the real ambivalence, direction and, most importantly, the peculiar strength of nationalism and nations can be grasped. The world today is undeniably trying to present itself politically as a world of nations (in which the cultural and political units are as one), yet without a fixed notion of what exactly constitutes a 'nation'. The claim to nationhood is the claim to political self-determination and equality of international treatment. Yet who should this be extended to, and at whose subsequent cost? Also, the claim to nationhood does not automatically guarantee statehood.

This section will start by addressing the problem of defining the nation from a modernist perspective – mainly drawing on the ideas of B.Anderson, E.Gellner and E.Hobsbawm - before introducing some important revisions from A.D.Smith. All, however, agree that in the modern sense of the word, a 'nation' is a very young concept, having been formed (possibly 'invented') by the ideological drive of nationalism. Nationalism itself can be seen as "*primarily a principle that holds that the political and national unit should be congruent*".<sup>61</sup> Thus in modernity, the 'nation' can be seen as equating the People with the State, thus becoming one and indivisible. Hobsbawm puts forward the following equation as a preliminary working framework for this theory:

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<sup>59</sup> Smith, A.D. 'The Ethnic Origins of Nations' (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1988)

<sup>60</sup> Anderson, B. 1991, p.5

<sup>61</sup> Gellner, E. 'Nations and Nationalism', (Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1997), p.1



NATION=STATE=GOVERNMENT=SOVEREIGN PEOPLE.<sup>62</sup>

Such a relation undoubtedly linked the nation to *territory*, since the structure and definition of states were now essentially territorial. The nation was also being linked to the political state, which necessitated a change from ethnic community groups within a territory, to a unified citizenship. The relation between citizen and state was to be one of mutual obligation and responsibility, irrespective of original cultural differences.

This equation by itself however, already throws up two important problems involved in defining the nation, and in aligning the ideology of a nation with its divergent reality. Firstly, the more 'one and indivisible' the nation claimed to be, the more that heterogeneity within it caused problems. Also, in equating the nation with something practical and political (the State), it then must take on these State elements.

Citizenship might be achieved at the cost of ethnic self-determination, a situation where the differences between 'nations' and 'states' are highlighted. This was demonstrated by the Iraq of the early 1920s – a new state in which various, distinct ethnic groups struggled for recognition and representation within the new territorial limits.

It is this political element that leads Anderson to his definition of a nation as "*an imagined political community, and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign*".<sup>63</sup> It is imagined in the sense that members will never know all their fellows, yet in the minds of each is created an image of their community. The nation is imagined as a community, as regardless of actual inequality and exploitation which may exist, it is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship or fraternity, which makes possible the millions dying for such limited imaginings. The nation is also imagined as sovereign, as the concept rose to importance at a time when old legitimacies of divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realms were being destroyed by the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution.

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<sup>62</sup> Hobsbawm, E.J. 'Nations and Nationalism Since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality.' (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990), p.19

<sup>63</sup> Anderson, B. 1991, p.6

The questions arising from all this must surely be *why* were such imaginings necessary, *why* did they become so prevalent, and from *where* did they receive such extraordinary power over peoples' minds. This leads us into one of the most important creative forces behind nationalism and nation-building – the fundamental reason why such imaginings found such a particular niche at some point of historical convergence.

Most scholars agree that nation-states were born in Europe, and therefore such conceptualisations were not globally uniform. Anderson contends that the rise of nationalism must be seen in its true historical, sociological and economic contexts.<sup>64</sup> In European history, religion was the main force attempting to cushion the fatality of the human condition, with the hope of continuity after death. Thus, as religion declined, individuals and communities needed another form of secular continuity, and nationalism in a sense filled the void. Thus, Anderson contends, with the use of common memories and symbols, nations seemed to be anchored in a timeless past, and offer a limitless future – thus offering some salvation from the void with the promise of communal immortality. “*Nationalism must be understood by aligning it with the large cultural systems that preceded it – out of which, - as well as against which – it came into being*”.<sup>65</sup> Fundamental changes had occurred in European modes of comprehending the world, and it became possible to ‘think’ the nation. Anderson believes that this alone fully accounts for the rise of this form of imagining, and also its awesome potency.<sup>66</sup> People needed to feel that they had a place, and a secure community.

Thus, the nation came into existence in Europe to fill an emotional space left by the retreat and disintegration of *real* human communities. As societies developed throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, traditional life-styles were broken down, and local communities eroded. Anderson therefore believes that such imagined communities – by evoking a sense of immortality with which other anonymous individuals can identify – serve vital psychological as well as economic needs under the peculiar modern conditions of secular capitalism. In doing this, they also provided

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<sup>64</sup> Anderson, B. 1991

<sup>65</sup> Anderson, B. 1991, p.12

a much more contingent present security. Smith concurs, describing the importance in the concept of the nation of the stress on a flow in time and delimitation in space, both of which are pivotal in providing mental barriers to the certainty of human mortality. By linking oneself to a 'community of history and destiny', a measure of immortality can be achieved, with nationalism acting as a surrogate religion. With the modern-day scientific undermining of old religious certainties, individuals are returned to their pre-religious isolation, and all that is then left is "*memory and hope, history and destiny*",<sup>67</sup> which is *collective* and *inter-generational*. It is important to remember that the territories of the Middle East had not gone through this European experience, and had not suffered the same decline in religion that had been witnessed throughout Europe. In Iraq therefore, nationalism would be only one form of human community that would be in conflict with other, still deep-seated modes of human association and belief.

Hobsbawm's term 'proto-nationalism'<sup>68</sup> identifies a process of pre-nationalist collective consciousness-forming, with certain groups of people developing new and wider communal identifications. Elements of such a process included the development of common denominators such as similar dialects, ethnicity, religion, the belief of membership in a historic state past, or even a simple economic partnership. However, all such elements in provoking proto-nationalist sentiments were not uniform, or even all present in different situations. Therefore they can only ever be seen as a rough-working framework, which must not be imposed arbitrarily. That is, language sometimes was, and sometimes was not an important criterion in proto-nationalism. In fact, the simple consciousness of belonging has probably been the most decisive criterion of proto-nationalism: a feeling of belonging to a lasting, political entity.

Usually, where proto-nationalism did develop, the concept of a 'political-nation' only really gained ground amongst the elite and gentry. This concept then needed to be diffused downwards to the masses if anything approaching modern nationalism was to be attained. Hence, proto-nationalism is not the same as modern nationalism, and only

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<sup>66</sup> However, nations did not arise in a vacuum. It is important not to underestimate the role of individuals and the historical process.

<sup>67</sup> Smith, A.D. 1986, p.177

really constituted a fertile breeding ground for nationalism to take seed (which it did not always do), providing the necessary symbols and sentiments that could then potentially be mobilised behind the modern cause. Where nationalism did take root, nationhood was pushed for, and by the end of the nineteenth century the nation emerged as a spontaneous distillation of complex ‘crossings’ of discrete historical forces. Once created, the concept could then be endlessly transplanted, and mutated across the globe – its success being largely due to its adaptability. This thesis will examine whether any appreciable levels of ‘proto-nationalism’ were evident in pre-First World War Mesopotamia, and if so, did such communities correspond to the imposed state limits?<sup>68b</sup>

Anderson holds that the transition from Hobsbawm’s ‘proto-nationalism’ to modern nationalism was due to the introduction of **print-capitalism**, which had the power to change people’s conceptions of time to a new idea of ‘*homogenous, empty time*’<sup>69</sup>. In such a concept, simultaneity was transverse and crosstime, marked by temporal coincidence and measured by clock and calendar. Before this, people had no conception of history as an endless chain with cause and effect, or of any radical separations between the past and the present. “*The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation*”.<sup>70</sup>

#### **2.4.1. The Absorption of the Nation by the State**

According to Hobsbawm,<sup>71</sup> the rise of Liberalism between 1830 and the 1880s witnessed a trend towards seeing the nation as more of an *economic* entity.<sup>72</sup> The idea

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<sup>68</sup> See Hobsbawm, E. 1990

<sup>68b</sup> However, it is important to remember that other, non-European, state structures did exist in other parts of the world, and that the ‘Westphalian’ model was not the only state framework in existence. There were Hindu and Islamic ‘state models’ before the Westphalian system even evolved. For further details see: Khoury, P. & Kostiner, J. ‘Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East,’ (University of California Press, Oxford 1990); Smith, A.D. 1988; Nichols, D.L. & Charlton, T.H. (eds.) ‘The Archaeology of City-States: Cross-Cultural Approaches,’ (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington 1997)

<sup>69</sup> Anderson, B. 1991, p.24

<sup>70</sup> Anderson, B. 1991, p.26

<sup>71</sup> See Hobsbawm, E.J. 1990

was that the fundamental criterion of nationhood was nothing so esoteric as collective identity, but that the nation must be of sufficient size to form a viable unit of development. This implied that small nations would be severely disadvantaged, and thus a 'Threshold Principle' was to be applied to aspiring nations. Whilst this economic angle actually helped to bypass the pending 'problem' of heterogeneity within nations, it denied smaller aspiring nationalities an independent future whilst also rendering the qualitative differences between a 'state' and a 'nation' virtually impossible to discern. In fact, as soon as 'nationalism' left the sanctuary of its purely ideological format, such 'press-ganging' of the 'nation' into the service of the state became commonplace, and indeed seemingly the only form in which the nation could exist.

Anderson documents the start of this trend as being in the mid-nineteenth century. Due to the rapidly rising prestige in Europe of the 'national ideal', there was a clear tendency among European monarchies to lean towards a national identity as a means of retaining their legitimacy in a radically changing world. Anderson terms this '*Official Nationalism*',<sup>73</sup> which became a means of combining naturalisation with the cleverly concealed retention of dynastic power, - "*stretching the short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire*".<sup>74</sup> Thus this reactionary policy managed to conceal the discrepancy between the nation and the dynastic realm, leaving the nationalists with a very hollow victory.

A similar 'take-over' technique has been utilised by many modern states, and it is easy to understand why. Defining the state proves less difficult than defining something so idealistic as the concept of nation. The modern state is novel in that it claims sovereignty over people within a certain, clearly defined territory and rules directly over these inhabitants. The state apparatus seeks standardisation of all rules and administration over this entire area. Increasingly, it had to listen to the opinions of its citizens, as whilst the state needed their consent and activity in ever more ways, the state's political arrangements also gave them a real voice for the first time. Thus,

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<sup>72</sup> Of course, there was more than an economic ideology: the relation between citizen and state was one of mutual recognition and responsibility, regardless of original ethnic and linguistic differences. However, during this period 1830s to 1880s, it was the economic aspect of aspiring nation-states that was emphasised above others.

<sup>73</sup> Anderson, B. 1991, p.86

government and subject were linked by daily bonds as never before. This raised questions regarding citizen loyalty to the state and the ruling system, and any rival for loyalty had either to be removed or commandeered into state service. This was where the power of nationalist sentiments could be manipulated and so 'national identity' was pushed to the top of the political agenda. The process of state-building necessitated the integration of citizens, therefore the governments "*plainly engaged in conscious and deliberate ideological engineering*",<sup>75</sup> appealing to already present unofficial nationalist sentiments, for purely political ends. Thus the concept of the 'nation' was reduced to the function of 'carrier' for the ambitions of the state, a hi-jacking which was made possible by the fact that the 'nation' is a concept on which it is impossible to secure a patent. Such a scenario becomes evident in Iraq throughout the 1920s, as Sunni Arabs, concentrated around the Baghdadi region, consolidated their own power over the 'nation' of Iraq, allowing only their own vision of the Iraqi nation to distill downwards through the population. Such local geographies of power greatly influenced the geopolitical framework of the resulting Iraqi state.

We are forced then to accept Gellner's observation, that the apparently universal ideological domination of nationalism today is, in many ways, a sort of optical illusion. We are also faced with an interesting question: to what extent does the idea of the nation depend upon the democratisation of the concept, and can this shed any light upon the nature of the new Iraqi state in the 1920s?

#### **2.4.2. The Transformation of Nationalism**

The nationalism of 1880 to 1914 saw the fall of the Threshold Principle, with ethnicity and language becoming the most important criteria for potential nationhood.<sup>76</sup> This critically affected national sentiments within established 'nation-

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<sup>74</sup> Anderson, B. 1991, p.86

<sup>75</sup> Hobsbawm, E. 1990, p.92

<sup>76</sup> This time also witnessed the advent of the Darwinian theory of evolution, which was elaborated by nationalists of the day into a set of 'racial' distinctions. That is, it provided racism with 'scientific' reasons for barring strangers, and nations became something to keep 'racially pure'. (For example, see Romein, J. 'The Watershed of Two Eras: Europe in 1900' (Middletown, 1978); Finot, J. 'Race Prejudice' (Archibald & Co, London, 1906)). This stress on the ethnic elements now required in a 'nation', also led to a stress on the linguistic element, as there is a clear analogy between the insistence of racists on the importance of 'racial purity', and the insistence of many forms of linguistic nationalism on the need to 'purify' the national language from foreign elements.

states', as many constituent groups felt that they could have a viable independent future. Thus there was a re-ignition of the fires of nationalism. However, it was not fully until 1918 that a true 'national' feeling had crystallised out among the broad masses of the population into a stable component of consciousness, as until then "*people were not yet conscious of the discrepancy between loyalty to the state, and to the nation, or had not yet made a clear choice between the two*".<sup>77</sup>

The interwar Europe of 1918 to 1939 saw major attempts to redraw Europe's political map on these new 'ethnically homogenous' definitions of 'national' lines. How ironic that the impetus to consolidate the post First World War nation-state view should have been driven by the United States – who then opted out of the 'League of Nations'. This 'Wilsonian Principle' was unworkable in reality, fuelling the potential for dangerous mass expulsions and exterminations of minorities. "*Such was and is the murderous 'reductio ad absurdum' of nationalism in its territorial version, although this was not fully demonstrated until the 1940s*".<sup>78</sup> An accompanying problem was that the hyped 'national' ideal was formulated by officials, which did not necessarily coincide with the actual self-identification of the people concerned.<sup>79</sup>

Despite the difficulties of implementing such an ideology within Europe itself, the leading powers of the international community also sought to create nation-states from the newly founded territorial units in the Middle East – Iraq among them. Here too, the problems of superimposing such an ethnically homogenous ideology over a

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<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Hobsbawm, E. 1990, p.128. Original can be found in Hanak, P. 'Die Volksmeinung während des letzten kriegsjahres in Osterreich-Ungarn' in *Die Auflosung*, (Vienna, 1970), pp.58-66

<sup>78</sup> Hobsbawm, E. 1990, p.133

<sup>79</sup> From the 1950s onwards national identity (still generally under the auspices of the state) gained new means of communication in this modern world, in the form of the media, which performed the functions of mobilisation and inclusion which were so necessary in generating a national consciousness. The media enabled the divide between the private sphere of the individual, and the public realm of the citizen to be largely broken down. As noted before, rather than seeing this phenomenon as the deepening and development of already present nationalist identification, Anderson argues that in the centuries before, the media – under the label of **print-capitalism** - had actually created nationalism, and allowed people for the first time to 'think' the nation. Hobsbawm, whilst acknowledging the undoubted importance of print-capitalism in helping to form and spread a national collective consciousness, does not credit it with the same over-riding power as Anderson, instead recognising the other crucial components in this imagining which were already beginning to develop in his process of 'proto-nationalism'. That is, Anderson does not perhaps give enough weight to the already present and important collective imaginings, with the fading authority of religion and the dynastic hierarchies demanding new imaginings of immortality and continuity. Thus, I would venture, the seeds of nationalism as an ideology (within Europe), were already taking root, and print-capitalism simply acted as a (albeit vital) catalyst to this then fragile attempt to replace religion with another form of continuous community.

heterogeneous population were largely ignored or misunderstood by President Wilson, and such a process greatly informs our understanding of the factors affecting the development of Iraq's geopolitical identity and function in the world.

### 2.4.3. Questioning the Modernity of Nations

Whilst it is now firmly accepted that the nation is not the 'natural' and 'universal' entity that earlier scholars believed, Smith points out that there are dangers too in regarding the nation as a wholly modern phenomenon.<sup>80</sup> 'Modernists', as he terms them, although they differ over the weight to be attached to various modern processes in promoting a sense of national identity, are in complete agreement regarding the periodicity of nationalism. Smith, however, calls on us to ground our understanding of modern nationalism on a historical base involving a much broader time-span than the modernists saw as necessary. Whilst accepting that the modern concept of the nation was indeed born in the last two hundred years, Smith's wider historical perspective would allow us to see how far the themes and forms of modern nationalism were pre-figured in history, and if any considerable connection with earlier ethnic ties and sentiments can be established.

*"In rejecting the claims of both the modernists, who say there is a radical break between pre-modern units and sentiments and modern nations and nationalism, and equally of the perennialists, who say that the latter are simply larger, updated versions of the pre-modern ties and sentiments, we look to the concept of the ethnic or ethnic community and its symbolism, to distance our analysis from the more sweeping claims on either side".<sup>81</sup>*

This approach succeeds in conceding a greater measure of continuity between 'traditional' and 'modern' eras, thus not viewing them as such classic polarities, whilst also according due weight to the changes wrought by modernity especially in the realms of human loyalty. Smith claims that myths and **memories** form the fundamental bases of the nation, just as they are the life-blood of previous and present 'ethnie' (an ethnic community). Somewhat paradoxically, the key to achieving a

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<sup>80</sup> Smith, A.D. 1988, p.3

<sup>81</sup> Smith, A.D. 1988, p.13



modern 'nation' in the mass imagination, is to root it firmly in the past, giving the members a shared conviction of the antiquity and 'naturalness' of their unit stretching back into time immemorial via established communal symbols and myths. Hence, as the importance of such memories, myths and symbols become evident, clearly it highlights just how vital it is to give due recognition to their origins and their persistence. Such ideas prove crucial to understanding the extent of integration within the early Iraqi State. What were the established 'ethnie' within the territory? What was their geographical extent? In the State of Iraq, many prominent ethnic and religious groups co-existed, each with their own particular vision of the 'Iraqi' State. Some communities, such as the Kurds, believed that the 'naturalness' of their community group had been destroyed by the various territorial agreements after the First World War, therefore their shared convictions and allegiances remained with communities that lay outside Iraqi territory from 1921. The strength of such divided communities, and the pressures they created, all filtered into the geopolitical form of the emerging Iraqi State.

#### **2.4.4. The Mythical Elements of Nations**

In exploring the necessary mythical components of a nation, we go back full circle to the idea of a nation as truly an 'imagined community'. "*No enduring world order can be created which ignores the ubiquitous yearnings of nations in search of roots in an ethnic past, and no study of nations and nationalism that completely ignores that past can bear fruit*".<sup>82</sup> Such ideas help to explain the form and nature that the Iraqi State took, as the ethnic pasts of many groups of its population were *not* recognised. Could this have had adverse affects in binding the new, territorially defined community? If so, Smith's theories on the importance of ethnic past and memories in building a coherent nation-state may add much to our comprehension of 1920s Iraq.

The core of an ethnicity is found in its unique collection of myths, symbols, values and memories – which together provide the ethnie with its 'myth-symbol complex'. From these are developed '*mythomoteurs*' which function as the constitutive myth of that particular ethnic polity. These shared experiences and meanings are crystallised

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<sup>82</sup> Smith, A.D. 1988, p.5

over time and then carried down the generations by forms and genres of artifacts and activities, which are able to adapt with the changing circumstances. This ability to remain relevant in any age is the key to an ethnies success and durability; as if the relevance is lost an ethnies will dissolve or be subsumed by a more powerful imagining. In many of the dimensions of ethnies, some striking parallels can be drawn with the model of modern nations. Ethnies must have a collective name and a common myth of descent, both of which are highly evocative and add a sense of imputed common ancestry and destiny. A distinctive shared culture serves both to bind members, and differentiate from outsiders – thus ensuring that the ethnies can feel unique and valuable. Developing a shared sense of solidarity is equally crucial, as without this, such groupings can only be seen as potential ethnies. In Mesopotamia, the sheer number of well developed ethnic and religious communities seriously undermined early attempts at ‘national’ consolidation.

An association with a specific territory is also of paramount importance, whether the ethnies resides there, or it is simply a potent memory of a ‘homeland’ to which they can symbolically ‘return’. Smith makes an important point when he states that *“ethnicity is a matter of myths, memories, symbols and values, and not of material possession or political power, both of which require a habitat for their realisation”*.<sup>83</sup> Here we can identify a potential problem for the early Iraqi State. Several different and well-defined ethnic and religious groups lived within, and claimed, the same territory, leading to sectarian and ethnic tensions over control.

Factors that form and maintain an ethnic identity must also be recognised in today’s modern nationalism. Myths and legends are just as vital for stimulating nationalisms as they are for ethnies, as they instill a sense of collective heritage, arouse people to collective action, and bestow a message of revival and unique destiny. Parallels can again be seen when we analyse the impact of warfare on both ethnic and nationalist consciousness. Past inter-state warfare often crystallised ethnic sentiments, especially when it involved mass physical mobilisation of the population, leading to feelings of

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<sup>83</sup> Smith, A.D. 1988, p.28. In a sense, we can recognise a little more of the ‘pure’ form of the nation in such a statement, before the umbrella of the state politicised the nation perhaps a little more than was intended by the early nationalist conceptualists. For example, surely the diaspora of the Jews, although having (until 1948) no habitat for the realization of political power, should be seen as a **nation** rather than as simply an ethnies?

*collective* resistance. This also proved a critical feature of the First World War. The geo-political location of communities determined their relations with neighbours and often helped to sharpen a sense of ethnicity via self-determination. War then politicised original cultural differences, even in defeat, forming genuine integrated ethnies with distinct identities and destinies. Equally, Hobsbawm points out that “*nothing stimulated nationalism on both sides as much as international conflict*”.<sup>84</sup> Surely, if two different phenomena are being stimulated and created by the same forces, we are forced to concede some measure of fraternity between the two, and how elements of the former may be simply being taken further in the latter. However, perhaps such a strengthening of collective sentiment via conflict with an outside force was overestimated by many scholars. Could such a failure for the ‘Iraqi people’ as a whole to merge together against the Ottomans highlight some deficiencies within the nation-building body of theory? And what happens when such a ‘sharpening of a sense of ethnicity’ divides a population of a given territorial extent, rather than binds them?

Ideally, the ethnies' myths and symbols are fed into the heritage of an enlarged 'proto-nation'. Of course, a nation is qualitatively different from an ethnie in many crucial ways, including a heightened sense of territoriality, the transformation of the population into ‘citizens’ with standard citizenship rights and duties, a coherent political culture and common legal codes affecting all citizens equally. It also requires a new imagination as a sovereign but limited community (as Anderson explained), plus a new level of inclusion and mass mobilisation, thus endowing a nation with a power that no ethnie could ever attain. However, even Smith’s distinction between the Western ‘territorialism’ in nation-formation, and the Eastern ‘ethnicism’, - whilst being too deterministic – does underline the importance of the various ethnic and cultural backgrounds in subsequent nation formation, and implies that the entire ethos of any resulting nation will be unique, just as a previous ethnies’ ‘myth-symbol complex’ was unique. Nationhood, therefore, is not necessarily a new beginning, but yet another form of imagining being super-imposed on an already well-fashioned landscape of mythology, and each will take hold of nationalism in varied ways. In Iraq, different cultural and religious groups certainly took hold of nationalism

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<sup>84</sup> Hobsbawm, E. 1990, p.91

differently. For the Sunni Arabs, nationalism was largely seen in terms of a wider Arab nationalism, therefore excluding non-Arab groups. The Kurds of Iraq championed Kurdish nationalism, calling for the unification of the Kurdish 'nation', or at least some form of cultural and political autonomy with <sup>in</sup> the Iraqi State. Such varied displays of nationalism led to internal cleavages within the territorial extent of Iraq. This is why the path to nationhood is never the same twice, and can not be engineered to be so.

#### 2.4.5. The Paradox of the Nation

Thus we can see that nation-building needs myths to integrate individuals into communities, and therefore an understanding of the different mythical backgrounds leads in turn to an understanding of the nature of each individual nation. This brings us to the fundamental paradox of the issue: these masses are integrated into the 'ancient' myth-ridden nation by *new* modes of communication, occasioned by modern science.<sup>85</sup> The goal of the new national imaginings is to 'rediscover' a unified past, to evoke deeper meanings of collective destiny and community in the face of the dangerous fragmentation and alienation that modern industrialisation and science bring; yet "*the nation can only be imagined through the medium of science*".<sup>86</sup>

Although modern science may be the conductor through which these communal imaginings are facilitated, this sense of an historic past is the crux of the nation. It is therefore modern communications that help to build "*that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation.*"<sup>87</sup> Nation-building is not simply a matter of establishing the relevant institutions, but is a recurrent activity, necessitating endless reinterpretations and reconstructions of the community's myths and symbols in the light of present needs. "*All this powerfully qualifies the modernity of nations*".<sup>88</sup> If nations are to survive, they must have, or invent, a unique past – whose legends and landscapes locate a nation, give it solidarity and direct its future. In this way, "*our myths, memories and symbols must be constantly renewed and continually*

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<sup>85</sup> This indeed seems bizarre in view of the gulf between the romantic concept of the historical nation, and the increasingly mechanised and rationalised nature of the modern disciplines used to disseminate such a communal illusion.

<sup>86</sup> Smith, A.D. 1988, p.172

<sup>87</sup> Anderson, B. 1991, p.44

*retold, to ensure our survival. The nation becomes the constant renewal and retelling of 'our' tale by each generation of our descendants".*<sup>89</sup> Without such a sense of 'antiquity' in our modern nations, these units are simply states, lacking the ethnic cores and models for mobilising grass-roots aspirations and solidarities.

The trends inspired by the rise of modern communication techniques, whilst disseminating communal myths, could *not* by themselves account for the distinctive qualities of 'nations', their activation of the population and their sense of unique identity and destiny. It is indeed true then, that nations need myths and pasts if they are to have any future, and these pasts are invariably ethnic. In this sense, the modern science of Anderson's 'print-capitalism' was only acting as a medium for the mythomoteurs of the past to find their expression in the present. Modern nations can be seen to simply extend, deepen and streamline the ways in which members of ethnic associated and communicated. That is, they do *not* really transcend ethnicity, introduce radically novel elements, or change the goals of human association.

Nations and nationalism must be seen in the context of their ethnic roots, and the power of ethnic 'myth-symbol complexes' should be taken seriously. Whilst nations as we know them are an undeniably modern phenomenon, they also owe a large and persistent debt to pre-modern forms of collective identity. Therefore, the numerous forms of collective identity present in pre-First World War Iraq greatly increase our understanding of the problems encountered by the Iraqi State of 1921. Ethnic myths can ignite and mobilise populations, and thus shape the dynamic and expressive character of identities formed before the age of nations, and their long-term influence on human affairs. In this, we must also recognise the very real possibility that different ethnic groups forced into one political nation-state, may well experience bitter conflict with their fellow 'citizens', as the various collective identities are so strong. It is within such theory that we can find explanations into the nature of Iraqi society after the creation of the new state. The Iraqi State contained a very heterogenous population, with many different social, cultural and religious groups. What exact impact did this have on the nature of the Iraqi State? We must recognise the roots of identity conflicts in their historical ties and ethnic mythologies, which

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<sup>88</sup> Smith, A.D. 1988, p.207

<sup>89</sup> Smith, A.D. 1988, p.208

alone can account for the depth of feeling created by ethnic nationalisms. Present day confrontations may therefore lie a lot deeper than the immediate economic or political 'problems' may suggest.

One such area of confrontation is that the number of would-be-nations is liable to be larger than the present state-system can accommodate, or indeed tolerate. Many ethnic who missed out at the crucial moment of state-formation now call for territorial revision, but encounter not only the opposition of the state-system, but also the problem of 'bureaucratic nationalism' whereby states pass themselves off as a 'nation', to retain control of an area which may in fact consist of several potential nations – which are then ignored. This was the fate suffered by the Kurds of northern Iraq after the First World War. Thus there remains a problem of dual loyalty in polyethnic states, with suppression igniting the fires of separatism, due to this favouring of the earlier nationalisms in any area. Timing has been the decisive element in achieving nationhood, as late-comers to the table have found that they must struggle to gain recognition, as the social space has now hardened to squeeze out any power vacuum. Therefore, as Hobsbawm recognises, "*the explosive issues of 1988-92 were those created in 1918-21*".<sup>90</sup> The ideological 'problem' of heterogeneity within nation-states has never really been properly resolved. This leads us into a clearer understanding of the situation of Iraq. What proves crucial to our comprehension of the situation, is a recognition of the multitude of visions for statehood and communal identity that existed within the geographical area of Iraq. How severe are the problems that could arise when the majority of these are subordinated to a vision that is not universally shared? Just how far did the vision of Britain for a state in that geographical unit tie in with the visions of the local population? Such factors are fundamental to understanding the consequent Iraqi State in the 1920s.

The problem then remains that the international community has fully subscribed to what amounts to a worthy ideology, but one that oversimplifies the reality. Thus politically, it can now only recognise sovereign 'nation-states', and so is too often forced to accept all manner of brutality carried out inside these units on 'minorities',

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<sup>90</sup> Hobsbawm, E. 1990, p.164

by the 'legitimate' regime of the 'nation-state'. If such a minority were labelled a 'nation', the international community could more easily intervene.<sup>91</sup>

One important issue that this raises is that the 'nation-state' is not the 'natural' phenomenon that is often assumed. The State and the Government are determined by political criteria, whilst increasingly it is being recognised that People and Nation are determined largely by pre-political criteria. "*What this suggests is that the idea of 'the nation', once extracted, like a mollusc, from the apparently hard shell of the 'nation-state', emerges in distinctly wobbly shape*".<sup>92</sup> However, this was not the view held at the start of this century, when the nation-state paradigm was very much in vogue, and it was at this time that Iraq came into being.

## 2.5. The Issue of Boundaries

The discourses surrounding the imposition of international boundaries in a world of nation-states will also prove useful in analysing the factors that affected the identity of the Iraqi state as it emerged. What has become known as the 'Westphalian' model of territorial sovereignty, reached further than the European world when it was superimposed through the colonialism of the last century, and it brought with it the notion of fixed territories. "*Sovereignty is territorial; hence it must have a known extent*".<sup>93</sup> This meant that these territories had exact points at which they ended – and the sovereignty of another state began. As Mackinder described it: "*You have two societies, organised on each side of the frontier. In each of these societies you have an organisation of men such that they look towards widely separated centres... Thus what*

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<sup>91</sup> However, the nation as we know it, is going through radical change. Internationalism and globalisation are removing ever more economic and even political issues, from the control of individual state governments. With this, the old concept of nation-states with distinct people on 'their' own territory is being undermined by mass international migration. That is, we are witnessing the decline of the 'nation-state' as an operational entity. The old equation of; NATION=STATE=GOVERNMENT=SOVEREIGN PEOPLE, has been seen as too simplistic, and is being broken down.

<sup>92</sup> Hobsbawm, E. 1990, p.190. Fragile it may be, but perhaps this new nation of the 1990s, once divorced from its controversial marriage with the state, can become the pure and largely emotional entity that the original ideology may have intended. Hobsbawm contends that in losing its operational capacity, which was solely due to its partnership with the state, it may be gaining the ability to exist contentedly in a supra-national world.

<sup>93</sup> Kristof, L.K.D. 'The Nature of Frontiers and Boundaries'. A.A.A.G. 49, 1959, pp.269-282.

*was at first merely an imaginary line becomes in fact a frontier of the most marked character. It is as important as any natural feature".<sup>94</sup>*

Such boundaries raised many issues as they were imposed in many areas that had had a far more fluid conception of territory until that point. In Iraq, the population's perception of territory and territoriality had to undergo immense change with the imposition of these international boundaries. Even now, there are areas in the world that have not yet fully adapted to notions of territorial fixation, which still clash with the territorial behaviour of many indigenous and nomadic or tribal societies.<sup>95</sup>

Boundaries, along with the states they contain, have long been seen as fixed, stable empirical entities that divide the global space into bounded units. The state-centred system of territories and boundaries largely defines how we understand and represent the world, and how knowledge of the geography of the world is produced, organised and used in the reproduction of the nation-state system.<sup>96</sup> The logic of this maintains that all individuals should belong to a nation, have a national identity and state citizenship, and that the bordered state sovereignties are the fulfilment of historical destiny. States play the decisive role in the production of these manifestations of territoriality. Through state administration, education and governance, they try to overcome or marginalise other ways of viewing 'space', and other forms of identity, such as ethnic, tribal, religious, linguistic, gender or class.

However, perhaps our focus should be on the factors that mean that sometimes the state is unable to wipe out such a variety of identities within a bounded space. Anssi Paasi<sup>97</sup> argues that instead of seeing boundaries as fixed products, we should conceptualise them as social processes. Rather than analysing how boundaries distinguish social entities, we should concentrate on how social action and discourse produce diverging, continually changing meanings for boundaries. Many people that live within a given international bounded space, may well not identify themselves as being 'distinguished' by such boundaries. It is here that the nation-state paradigm can

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<sup>94</sup> Mackinder, H.J. In discussion of W.L.Grant, 'Geographical Conditions Affecting the Development of Canada'. *Geographical Journal* xxxviii, 1911, p.377.

<sup>95</sup> See Newman, D. 1998, pp.1-16.

<sup>96</sup> See Paasi, A. 'Boundaries as Social Processes: Territoriality in the World of Flows'. *Geopolitics* Vol.3, no.1. Summer 1998, pp.69-89.



begin to fail, as it assumes too much. Traditionally, there always was “*a social definition of territory rather than a territorial definition of society*”,<sup>98</sup> - and perhaps this is a process that can not be fully overcome, even though the nation-state paradigm seeks to. The issue becomes even more telling, when the boundaries have been imposed by a foreign power, and as such have never represented a true compromise between the inhabitants of the area. For example, many of the borders of the Middle East have their origins in the territorial arrangements arising from the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, and “*claims have been made that they are artificial creations of the former colonial power in territories which historically owe allegiance to other centres of Arab power. Thus Iraq has in recent years laid claim to the whole of Kuwait*”. (N.B. – written in 1982).<sup>99</sup>

## **2.6. The Problems of Reality**

Smith draws attention to the differences between what he terms Western ‘territorialism’ and Eastern ‘ethnicism’ in respect to nation-formation.<sup>100</sup> The former term refers to a process of nation-state formation usually seen in the West, where the new concept of communities bounded by politically delimited territory took hold. Such a state gradually required increasing manpower and resources, and therefore peripheries were pulled in and standardised, slowly evolving into territorial nations via the operations and agencies of their states.

In contrast, the Eastern ‘model’ was perceived to be markedly different. In many parts of the east, including the Middle Eastern regions, ethnic ties and sentiments were paramount, but usually with no fixed territorial expression or political manifestation until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Although such a theory is perhaps a little oversimplistic, it does contain certain basic, useful ideas that give important insights into the resulting form of the Iraqi State. The lack of congruence between ‘ethnie’ and polity, and between co-extensiveness between ethnie and clearly demarcated territories was very great in the Middle East. The result was a clash between the ethnic and territorial concepts of the nation in this region. For example, with many of

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<sup>97</sup> Paasi, A. 1998

<sup>98</sup> Soja, E. ‘The Political Organisation of Space’. AAAG Resource Paper 8, 1978

<sup>99</sup> Day, A.J. ‘Border and Territorial Disputes’. (Longman, Essex, 1982), p.178

the Arabs, their geographical extent and their separate political histories led to a dual problem. Firstly, the application of the Western 'territorial' concept of the nation meant a permanent fragmentation of the Arab ethnic community. This in turn then meant that realising the ethnic concept of the Arab nation would encounter all the geographic, economic and political problems of any 'Pan-movement'. Added to this was the often overlooked issue of many other non-Arab communities living within the area, breaking up any 'pure' geographical continuity of the Arab community. Moreover, even among the Arab communities, there was a distinction between the nomadic and settled views on space and territory. Therefore, many of the states in the Middle East were unable to make any clear movement along either the ethnic or territorial trajectory.

## 2.7. Conclusion

Whether we are talking about forming nations within the new individual states in the Middle East after the First World War, or the success of a wider pan-Arab nation, *"Can a nation be forged from so many disparate elements or is a nation a natural configuration? Must a 'nation' evolve or can nationalism be imposed from the top down?"*<sup>101</sup> Such a question lies at the crux of this thesis, as, in the case of Iraq, many different cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic groups lived within its geographical confines, as shall be seen in the following chapter. Such a varied population contained a multitude of group identities, and even if national integration were to progress successfully, it is never an irreversible process, and group identities are never uni-dimensional.

One must remember also, the particular context of Iraq's path to statehood: *"This was a period when the lingering effects of the millet system still determined allegiances, loyalties, identities. The passage from the Ottoman era to modern statehood was in the making, while contradictory interests clashed continuously."*<sup>102</sup> This heterogeneous nature of the new Iraqi State therefore threw up many problems. It led to an inability to clearly follow either the ethnic or the territorial model of nationhood.

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<sup>100</sup> Smith, A.D. 1988

<sup>101</sup> Simon, R. 'The Imposition of Nationalism on a Non-nation State. The Case of Iraq During the Interwar Period, 1921-1941.' In Jankowski, J. and Gershoni, I. 1997, p.88

It also had to find a common ground of allegiance amongst a disparate population base, and as the majority of its population was Arab, it then had to see whether any of the non-Arab Iraqis would ever subscribe to the idea of a national identity that was largely Arab in essence. Each community had different collective memories, and each had their own notions of identity. Even for the Arab 'Iraqis', the choice of framing Iraqi national identity as fundamentally Arab was problematic, as many Arab inhabitants of Iraq felt that they in fact belonged more to the larger community of Arabs, which was being dissected by such states as Iraq. Therefore, bringing Arab solidarity to the forefront of sovereign state building could backfire badly.

Overlying all of these internal divisions, and perhaps partly causing them, was Iraq's geographical location in a prime region of Great Power rivalry. Such external pressures exacerbated Iraq's political, economic and cultural fracture lines, and thus affected the geopolitical development of the state of Iraq that was established after the First World War. Such a shatterbelt location helps to explain foreign interests within the Iraqi region, and also emphasises the potential problems that such a state would encounter in its attempts to consolidate.

All of these issues impacted upon the geopolitical identity of Iraq as it sought to establish itself as a viable nation-state in the world community. There were to be geopolitical repercussions relating to the size, form, ethnic composition and religious make-up of the new state. There were to be reactions too, to the type of political entity chosen for Iraq, and one must question its appropriateness. Vital dynamics between Iraq and its equally new neighbours were introduced that affected Iraq's geopolitical interests in the region. Also of importance is exactly how Iraq perceived its interests in the region, and whether such interests were imposed by Britain or were genuinely held by the local population.

After examining issues such as these, we can begin to place Iraq into the geopolitical order of the time, and see what bearing this in fact had on its immediate and longer-term viability. We can perhaps begin to see the exact factors, and the channels through which they worked, that affected the nation-state paradigm that sought to

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<sup>102</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p.4

create an Iraq with a defined geopolitical identity and function. The following chapter begins this analysis by examining the composition of the population of the Mesopotamian region on the eve of the First World War and before the concession of statehood. It also looks at how the Iraqi provinces were governed and administered by the Ottomans, and what legacies such processes may have left behind.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE POPULATION, ADMINISTRATION AND HISTORY OF THE REGION

#### 3.1. Introduction

The State of Iraq, created after the First World War, was formed with a population that numbered about three million, widely diverse in race, religion and language. The new state was also faced with the consolidation and defence of its 116,000 to 120,000 square miles of territory. The factors involved reflect the complexities of the past. Geographically, the State of Iraq has the apex of its triangular area resting upon the head of the Persian Gulf, with its meagre outlet to the sea being skirted by various strong powers. Iraq's flanks also lie open and vulnerable to any foreign aggression from the east and west.<sup>1</sup> Even before the concession of statehood, the borders that marked the approximate territorial extent of the Mesopotamian region were all very different in nature. The southernmost frontier was historically hazy and its enforcement was half-hearted, as it merged into the southern deserts of Arabia. It therefore ran across a predominantly tribal area, in which people had freely crossed and mixed. The eastern fringe of Iraq however, was separating the territory from the ancient, consolidated state of Iran that had long sought to control the Iraqi provinces, making this a strongly defended boundary. There was a complicating factor here however, in that the large Shi'i population of Iraq held strong cultural and religious allegiances to the Shi'i Iranian State. The final boundary of the Iraqi region was on its western flank, and this functioned merely as an internal demarcation during the time of the Ottoman Empire. This raises the interesting question of why that line was there at all, and why at that specific point? Was there ever a noticeable cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious or economic divide represented by this internal boundary in the old Ottoman Empire?

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<sup>1</sup> Foster, Henry. 1935, p.303.

It is the make up of the population as it interacts with this geography that establishes the dimensions of the research question. It will be important for this thesis to examine how people were organised spatially within the Iraqi provinces, and whether this had an impact on the character and form of the resulting State. Also vital to this analysis will be an examination of any factors present that would pull the new state apart, such as the strength of any cross-border affiliations. Not only does Iraq contain numerous racial and religious minorities, but the majority of the inhabitants, the Arabs, although sharing many common characteristics, were themselves clusters of “*distinct, discordant, self-involved societies,*” at the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup> Previous Ottoman rule had long tolerated ethnic and religious diversity, even allowing certain autonomous powers to some communities in matters of worship and education. Foster, writing in 1935, foresaw the problems that may come from such a split society, and the danger of having a large majority of the population that looked outwards to the east for religious leadership:

*“The danger from the east is the more threatening because of its connection with the internal conflict between Shiah [sic] and Sunni. The great mass of the Shiahs live in Persia while their holy cities are in Iraq, which is the home of considerably more Shiahs than Sunnis. The dominant element of Iraqi control...is Sunni,”*<sup>3</sup>

### **3.2. The Composition of the Population**

The diversity of the population in this region is a crucial element in the area’s history. Early this century, Mesopotamia was a fragmented society with much ethnic and religious diversity, in which some groups called for independence and others paid nominal allegiance to whoever collected the taxes. Local, Ottoman and European sources generally agree that late 19<sup>th</sup> century Iraq was really a sleepy back-water of the Ottoman Empire. The historiography of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Iraq supports this view of the region.<sup>4</sup> According to recent calculations, based on Ottoman sources,

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<sup>2</sup> Batatu, Hanna. ‘The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq.’ (Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1978), p.13.

<sup>3</sup> Foster, Henry. 1935, p, 303.

<sup>4</sup> For the state of the historiography of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Iraq, see Farouk-Sluglett, Marion and Sluglett, Peter, ‘The Historiography of Modern Iraq,’ in *The American Historical Review*, 96, 1991, pp.1408-1421.

the total population for Ottoman Iraq in 1914 was approximately 3,650,000, (including the provinces of Kuwait and Najd).<sup>5</sup> Ottoman estimates suggest that this population was spread between the provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul as follows:<sup>6</sup>

Baghdad	c.1898	1,300,000
Basra	c.1908	1,150,000
Mosul	c.1909	828,000

The population was predominantly rural, and this rural population was largely tribal. One estimate holds that the urban population was only 24% of the total population in 1867, 25% in 1890 and 24% in 1905.<sup>7</sup> The tribal population was divided between settled, semi-settled and nomadic, with the nomadic tribes mainly inhabiting the desert in the west and the south-west – approximately 60% of the total area of Iraq.

It is notoriously hard to paint an accurate picture of the entire population of Iraq at the turn of the century, and its exact breakdown by subgroups for that period. E. Dawson produced some of the first estimates of settlement patterns, which were published in 1930<sup>8</sup>, estimating a total population of just above 2 million, with 8% purely nomadic, 48% tribal cultivators (often semi-nomadic), 32% settled village dwellers, and 12% city dwellers.

### 3.2.1. Ethno-Religious Communities

Such a varied population, composed of many ethno-religious communities, contained many lines of tension, that ran through Iraqi society at the turn of the twentieth century. The depth, spread and causes of these lines of tension will be analysed throughout this thesis. Ethnic divisions were also superimposed over these settlement

<sup>5</sup> See: McCarthy, Justin, 'The Population of Ottoman Syria and Iraq, 1878-1914,' *Asian and African Studies*, 15, 1981, pp.3-44; Hasan, M.S. 'Growth and Structure of Iraq's Population, 1867-1947,' in Issawi, C. (ed.) 'The Economic History of the Middle East, 1800-1914', (Chicago University Press, Chicago 1975), pp.155-162; Cuinet, Vital, 'La Turquie D'Asie,' Vol. II, (Ernest Leroux, Paris 1892), pp.764-65, Vol. III, 1893, pp.17, 220.

<sup>6</sup> McCarthy, J. 1981, pp.3-44

<sup>7</sup> M.S. Hasan, 'Growth and Structure of Iraq's Population, 1867-1947,' in Issawi, C. 1975, p.157.

<sup>8</sup> Dawson, E. 'An Inquiry Into Land Tenure and Related Questions.' (Orig. Baghdad, 1931, Translation: Letchworth, England, 1932), p.9.

variations, sometimes coinciding with added religious divisions, and sometimes not. According to Cuinet and Semseddin Sami, the ethno-religious composition of Mosul vilayet in the 1890s was as follows:<sup>9</sup>

Settled Arab	80,000	Yakubi	7,000
Nomadic Arab	93,000	Jews	6,000
Kurd	59,380	Suryani Catholic	7,000
Turkoman	16,000	Yezidi	14,900
Keldani	18,000	Various	1,000

Thus, the region of Mesopotamia was home to many different ethnic and racial groups, each with their own particular cultural values and local practices. The following maps, Maps 6, 7 and 8, each show geographically, the racial and ethnic divisions of Mesopotamia, according to various sources.

The religious composition of the provinces overlaid this ethnic pattern, creating an added complexity to the make-up of the population. (See Map 9). Cuinet's estimates show the religious characteristics of the population of the three Iraqi provinces in the early 1890s:<sup>10</sup>

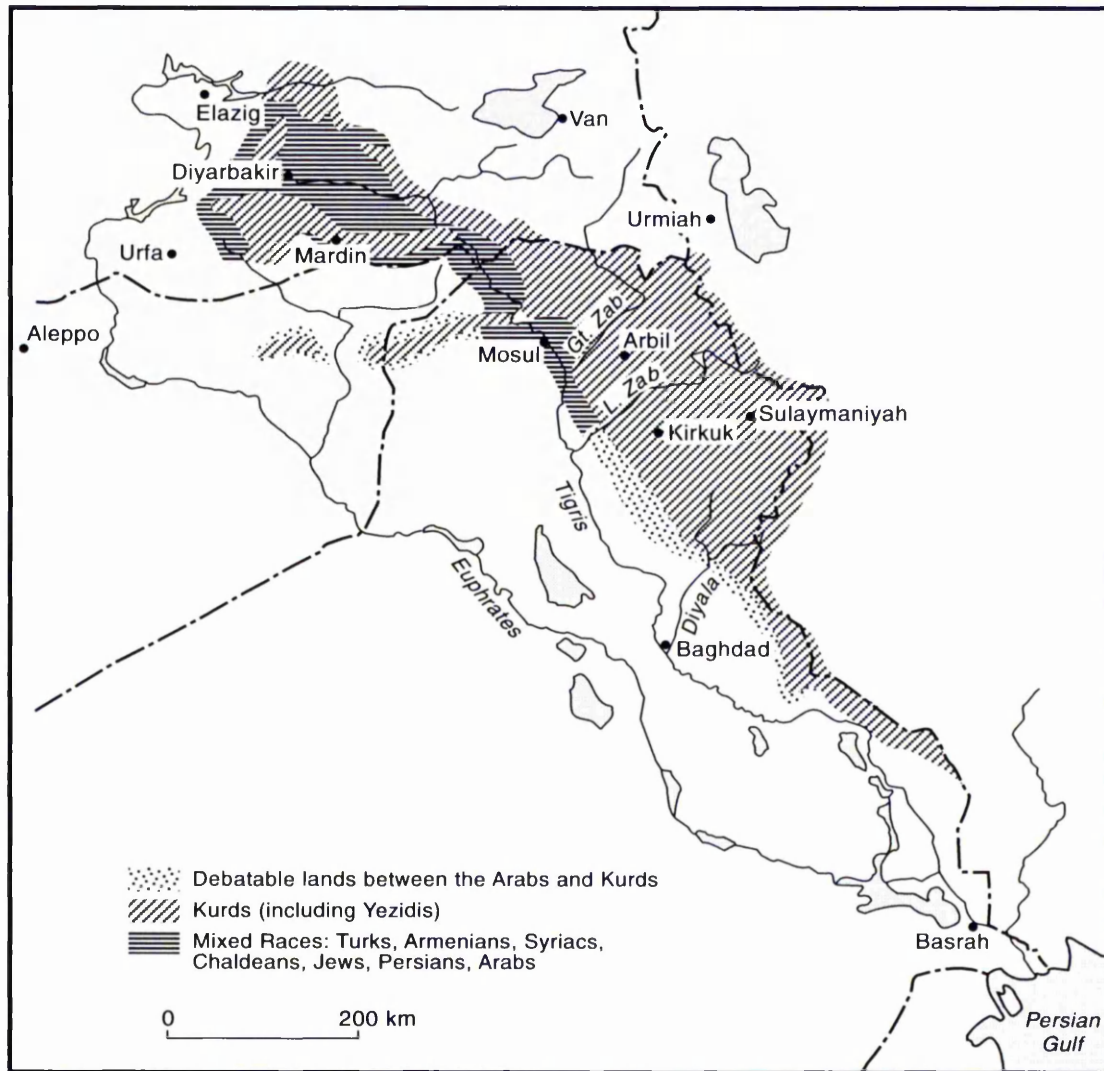
	Muslims	Christians	Jews	Others.
Baghdad	789,000	7,000	53,000	
Basra	939,650	5,850	4,500	
Mosul	248,380	30,000	6,000	15,900

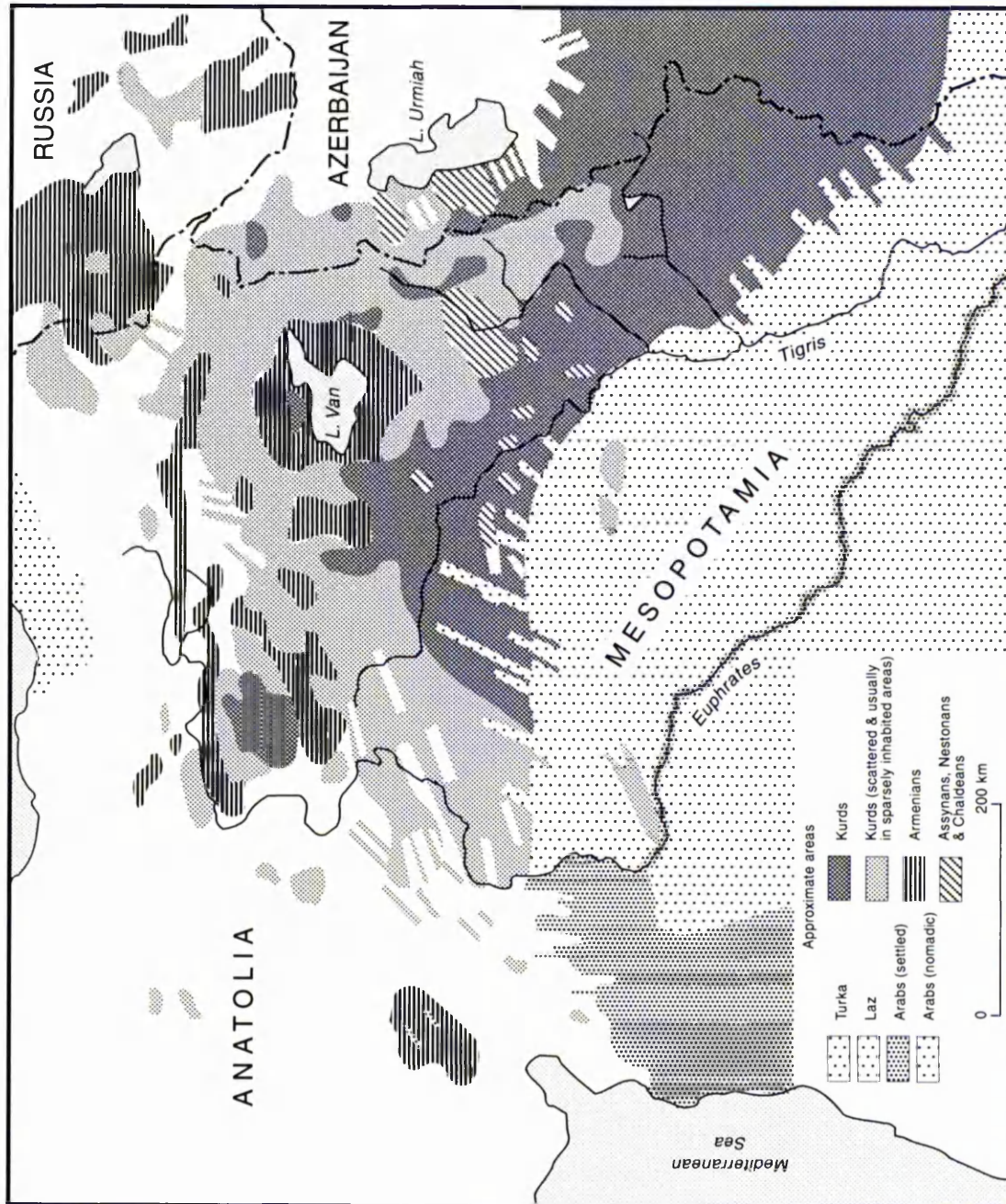
Although in political terms, the non-Muslim communities were very small, the size of the Shi'i population (above 50% of the total population) always constituted a problem for the Sunni Ottoman government, especially as the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the steady expansion of the Shi'i sect through conversion.

<sup>9</sup> See: Cuinet, V. 1891, pp.764-65; Semseddin Sami, *Kamusu'l-Alam*, VI (1962), p.4483; Admiralty, *A Handbook of Mesopotamia*, Vol.I, (London, 1916), p.66; FO, Historical Section, *Mesopotamia*, (London, 1920), p.8.

<sup>10</sup> Cuinet, V. 1893, pp.17, 220, and 1891, pp.764-65; Admiralty, *A Handbook of Mesopotamia*, (London, 1916), p.66.

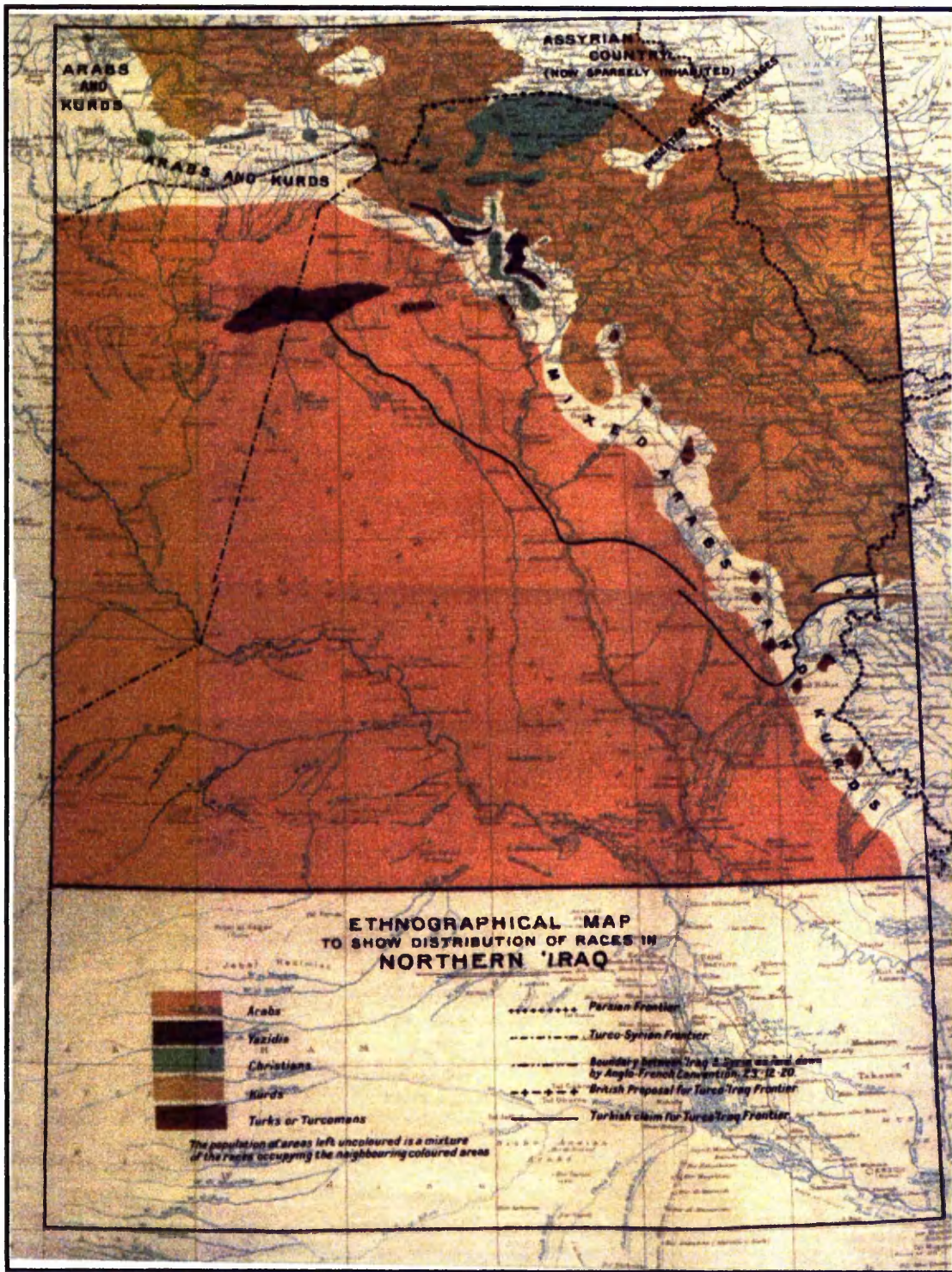




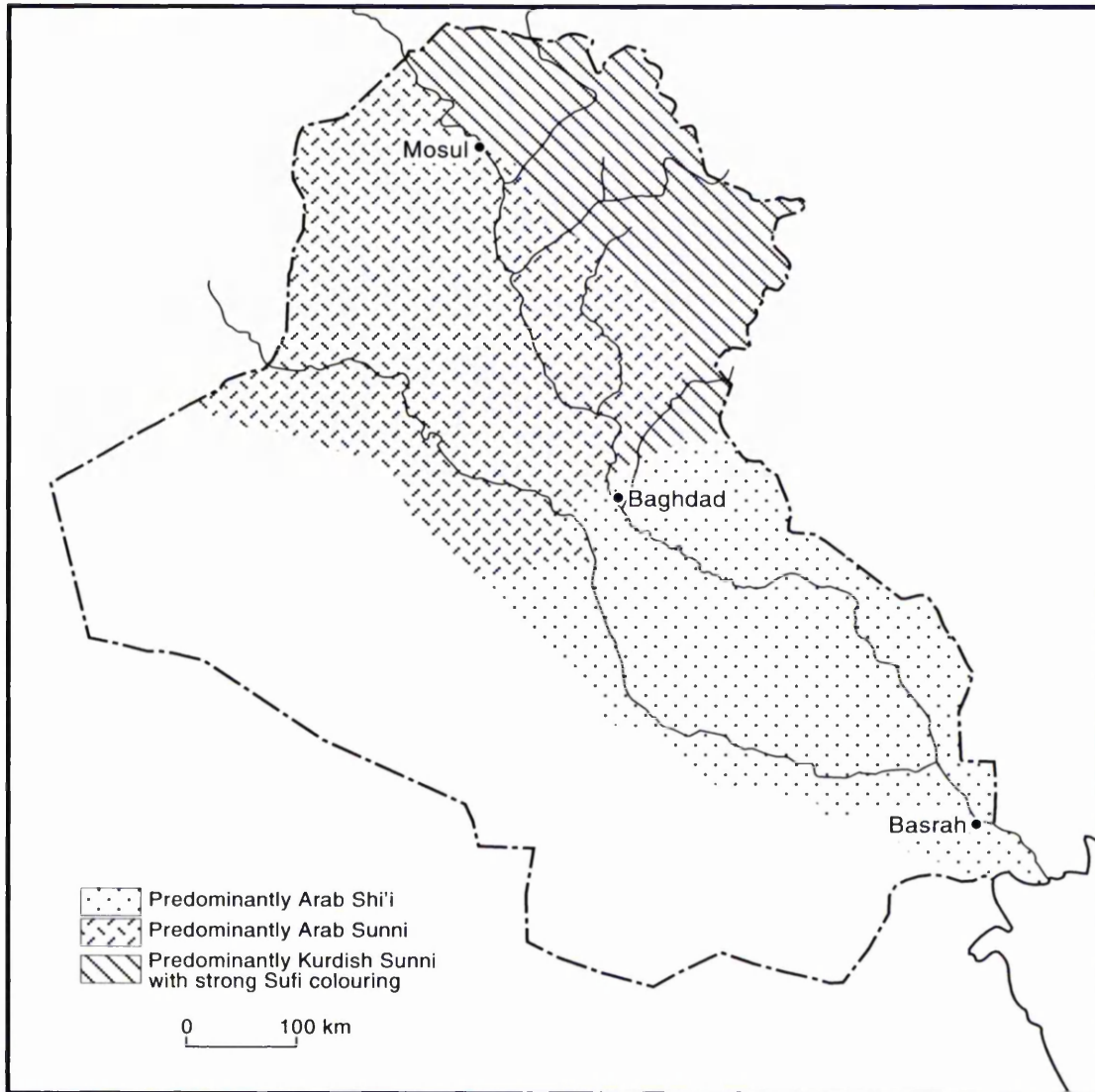


**Map 7. Ethnographical Map of Eastern Turkey in Asia, Syria and Western Persia**  
 Source: Foreign Office 1919, Public Records Office, London, F.O. 373/1/1





**Map 8. Ethnographical Map to show Distribution of Races in Northern Iraq**  
 Source: War Office 1924, Located at Public Records Office, London, F.O. 925/41335



**Map 9. Religious Map of Iraq**

*Source:* Batutu H., 'The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq', (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1978)

The Shi'i were mostly organised in tribes and tribal confederations. Estimates suggest that they constituted 53% of the population in 1919, and 56% by 1932.<sup>11</sup> The Shi'i occupied one of three approximate major religious zones that were in evidence nearing the end of the Ottoman period. This southernmost zone was the most populous, and extended over all the provinces to the south of Baghdad, therefore covering the region of irrigated flatlands, and the marshes further south.<sup>12</sup> The ethnic composition of this zone was heavily Arab, except for concentrations of Persians in Basra and the Holy Cities of Najaf and Karbala. It is important to note that as well as these settled Persians, many thousands of Persians also made pilgrimages to these Holy Shi'i cities every year, creating another interesting population dynamic. Small pockets of Sunnis were also to be found in this zone, mainly urban in character, with considerable communities in Basra and Nasiriyyah, and an entire Sunni town of Zubair to the south-west of Basra.<sup>13</sup>

Sunnis were statistically a minority group within the whole region of Mesopotamia, although Arab Sunnis enjoyed a high status due to the Sunni-dominated Ottoman administration. The majority of these Sunni Arabs were from a zone that embraced the Arab-inhabited valleys of the Euphrates above Baghdad and of the Tigris between Baghdad and Mosul. Only small communities of Shi'is could be found here, and a string of Turkoman settlements along the old Baghdad-Mosul-Istanbul post road, some of which were Shi'i and others Sunni.

The Kurdish rain-fed mountain region in the north and north east of Iraq comprised the third major religious zone. Most of the Kurds here were also mainly Sunni, but were non-Arab, and were in constant political struggle for at least some measure of cultural autonomy. These Kurds also displayed a strong leaning towards mysticism and Sufi sects. Map 2 shows the approximate religious distribution around the Iraqi provinces.

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<sup>11</sup> Simon, Reeva. 'The Imposition of Nationalism on a Non-Nation State. The Case of Iraq During the Interwar Period, 1921-1941.' In Janowski, J. and Gershoni, I. 1997, p.87. Also see Nakash, Y. 'The Shi'is of Iraq'. (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1994)

<sup>12</sup> This zone covered the present day areas of Wasit, Babylon, Karbala, Qadisiyyah, Thi-Qar, Maysan and Basra.



Mingled throughout these three zones were communities of non-Muslims. Christians comprised approximately 2% of the population, being mainly Chaldeans and Nestorians (offshoots of Roman Catholicism), with an Assyrian population that was to increase significantly after the First World War. This Christian element lived mainly in Mosul, and mostly stayed out of local politics, with their spiritual focus being Rome.<sup>14</sup>

Jews had also lived in this Iraqi area since ancient times, and by the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were a city-based people, concentrated in Baghdad.<sup>15</sup> Consular despatches since the beginning of the century regarding the Jewish community in Baghdad, usually stressed the fact that it was the largest single group in the city. An estimate in 1904 by a French Vice-Consul was 40,000 out of a population of only 60,000 in the whole vilayet. In 1910, a British consular report by H. D. Shohet, put the figure at about 45-50,000.<sup>16</sup> To illustrate the predominance of the Jewish population in Baghdad, the last official yearbook of the Baghdad vilayet in 1917 put the population figures for the city of Baghdad as follows:<sup>17</sup>

Arabs, Turks and Muslims other than Kurds	101,400
Persians	800
Kurds	8,000
Jews	80,000
Christians	12,000

However unreliable such statistics are, broad trends can be noticed. The Jewish population was certainly very important in the life of the city, never estimated at less than a third to a half of the entire Baghdad population. It was also the largest homogenous group, and was generally a rich and well-to-do class, made up almost

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<sup>13</sup> Batatu, Hanna. 1978, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Both of these religious groups were Catholic sects. Nestorians were followers of Nestorius (born 431 A.D.), who became the Patriarch of Constantinople. The Chaldean Church was formed by conversions from Nestorianism

<sup>15</sup> See: Rejwan, Nissim, 'The Jews of Iraq: 3000 Years of History and Culture' (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1985); Kedourie, E. 'The Jews of Baghdad in 1910,' in 'Arabic Political Memoirs and Other Studies' (Frank Cass, London 1974), pp.263-72.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Haim, Sylvia, G. 'Aspects of Jewish Life in Baghdad Under the Monarchy'. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 12, 1976, pp.188-209

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in the *Arab Bulletin* No. 66, October 21, 1917.

entirely of bankers and merchants – again making it a central element in the life of the city.

### 3.2.2. Tribal Communities

In early twentieth century Iraq, the tribe still functioned as the primary military, social and political organisation, especially in the southern region. During the long period of Ottoman administration (1534-1918), the local authority of the tribal leaders was never successfully challenged for long periods of time by the central government.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, tribes had the chance to consolidate as powerful political units, with voluntary or forced alliances between different tribes sometimes producing strong confederations. In rural areas, such large tribal confederations prevailed, the most important nomadic confederations in Iraq being the ‘Anaza, Dulaim and Shammar.<sup>19</sup> The ‘Anaza tribal territory, or *dira*<sup>20</sup> was on both sides of the Euphrates in the Jezira region, and extended into both present-day Iraq and Syria. The ‘Anaza were split into four main subgroups, of which the territory of the ‘Amarat fell in Iraq. The Shammar of Iraq lived between the Tigris and the left bank of the Euphrates – to the north of Baghdad. The Dulaim were nomads and migrated between the left and right banks of the Euphrates, from Falluja to ‘Ana. These three powerful northern confederations were Sunni and were often at war with each other.

South of Baghdad, there were many settled and semi-settled tribes, which as we have seen, were mainly Shi’i in religion. These were organised into about thirty-six large groups, which were themselves then subdivided. The most powerful of these tribal groupings was the Muntafiq confederation, whose *dira* encompassed approximately 10,000 square miles and extended on both sides of the southern Euphrates from Samawa to Ghor al-Hammar. This particular loose alignment of tribes was ruled over by the Sa’dun clan who were Sunni, while the tribes they ruled were Shi’i. This

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<sup>18</sup> Sweet, L. (ed.) ‘The Central Middle East: A Handbook of Anthropology.’ (Hraflex Books, New Haven, Connecticut, 1968), Vol.II, pp.253-260.

<sup>19</sup> Tribal confederations were found amongst nomadic and cultivating tribesmen, and are best seen as highly fragile political alliances used for defence purposes.

<sup>20</sup> A *dira* is a tribal territory that is managed and used communally, and whose extent is dependent upon the ability of the tribe to defend it.

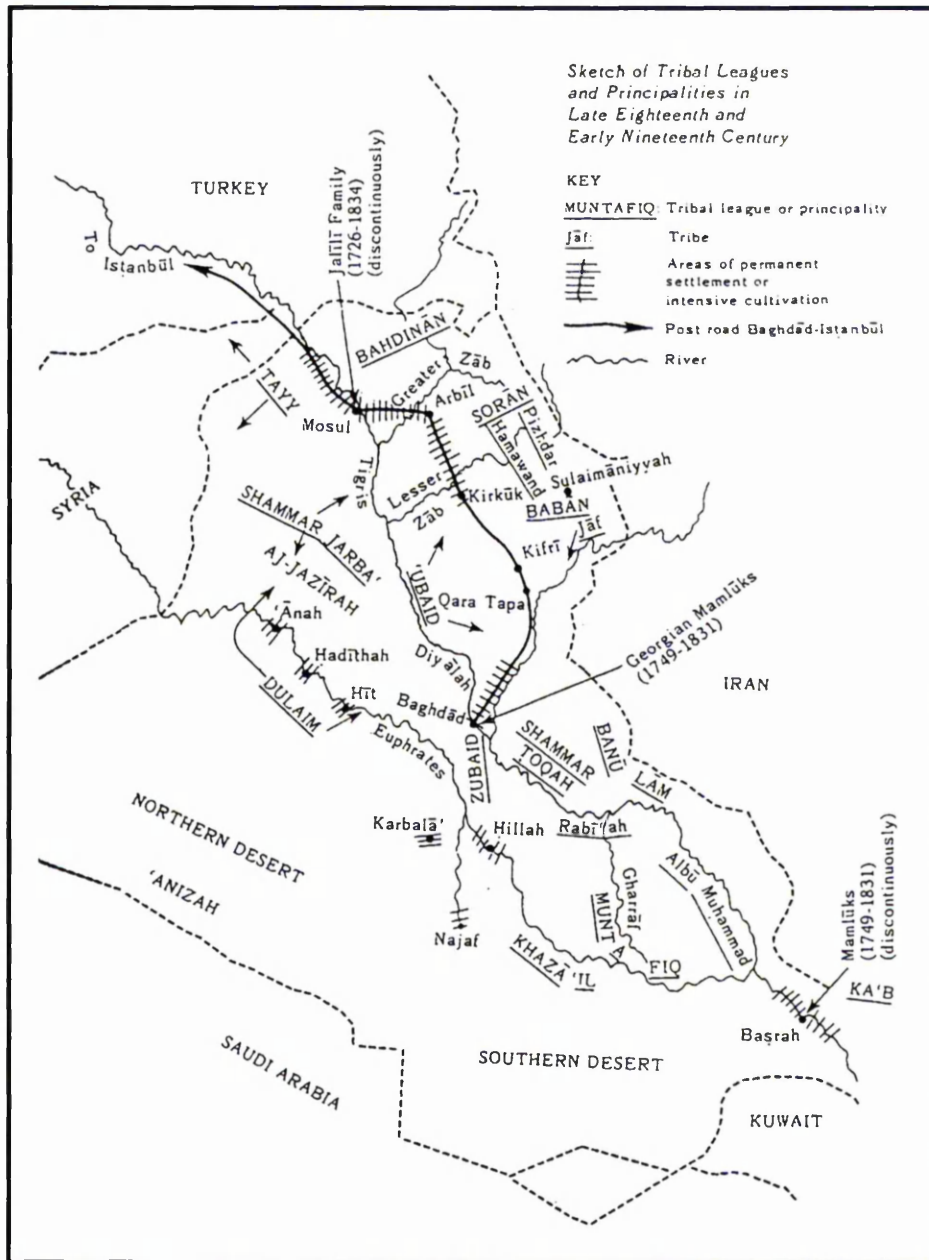
indicates the complexity involved when attempting to analyse the factors making for corporate tribal action. Such factors were rarely uni-dimensional.<sup>21</sup>

Above the Muntafiq, and along the Tigris, two large tribes shared the area up to the Persian border -- the Bu Muhammed and the Beni Lam. The Khaza'il predominated above 'Amara in the central Euphrates region, and the Zubaid were the dominant tribe to the south-east of Baghdad. However, these tribal lands were not delineated according to any concept of fixed boundaries, as the rights to any particular territory were determined by a tribe's ability to defend it successfully. Thus, a rough, flexible pattern emerged. In the flatlands of Iraq, small areas of permanent settlement fringed with farms and palm groves, then led directly into the larger semi-settled regions of the riverine shaikh and his tribesmen. Beyond this lay the vast nomadic realm of the desert. The key characteristic of such a pattern was its 'geopolitical' instability, as hardly any tribe remained in the same position for very long, largely due to the predominance of raids in such a society. Thus, inward pressure from the nomads of the desert interior would occasion the movement of many of the tribes in its path, so heralding a new tribal distribution in the river valleys. Such sociological processes had, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, created an ethnological tribal distribution that is represented by the following maps: Map 10 shows the distribution of tribal leagues and principalities up to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, whilst Map 11 shows the approximate tribal lands of the main tribes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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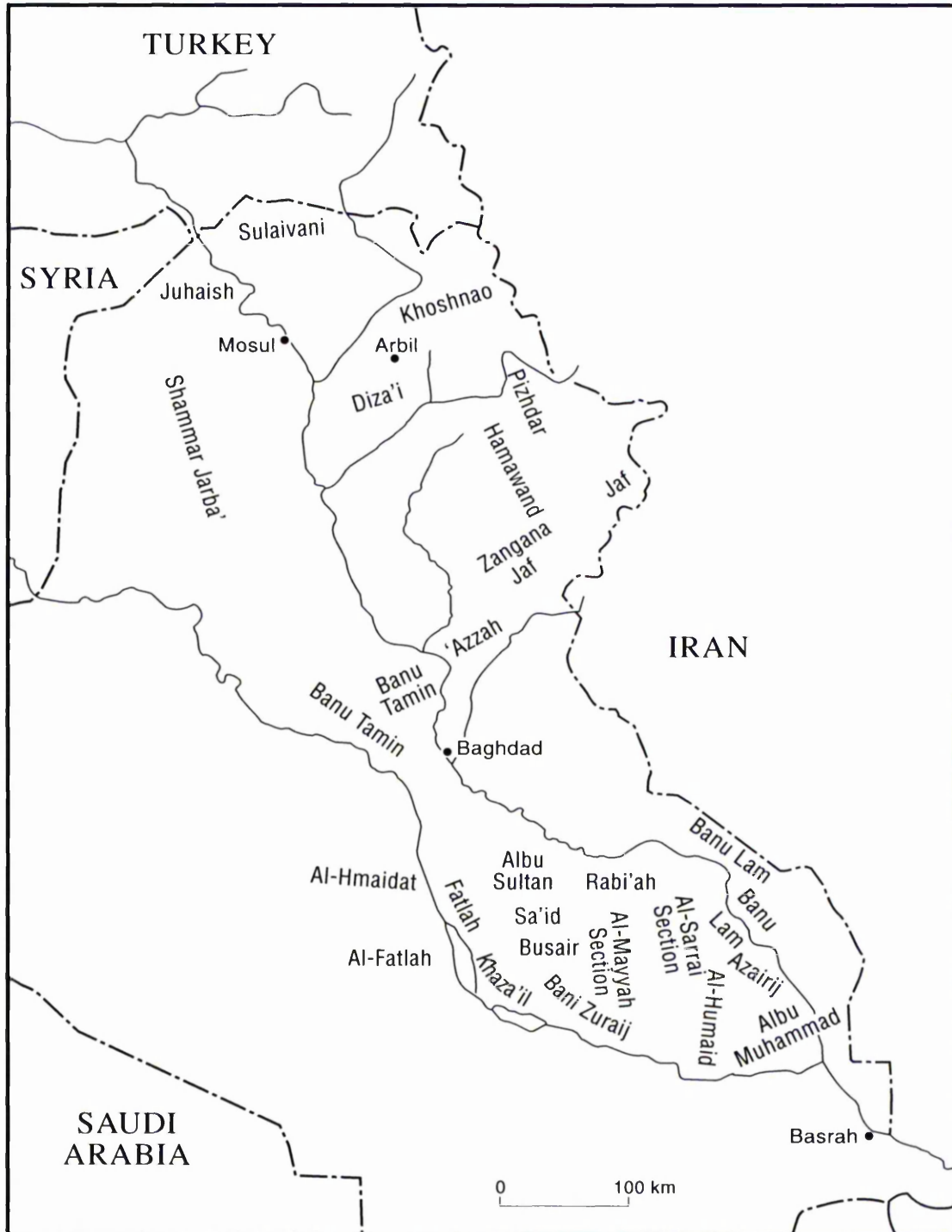
<sup>21</sup> Vinogradov, Amal. 'The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: the Role of Tribes in National Politics.' In *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. 3, 1972, p.126.





**Map 10. Sketch of Tribal Leagues and Principalities in Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century**

Source: Batutu H., 'The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq', (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1978)



**Map 11. The Major Tribes of Iraq**

Source: Batutu H., 'The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq', (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1978)

### 3.3. A Common Citizenship?

Such was the socio-cultural universe of Iraq coming into the twentieth century: a highly complex and multi-layered mosaic of separate groups, which ranged from Turkish-speaking urban notables to water buffalo herders in the southern marshes. Interaction between these disparate groups was often based on suspicion and hostility, because:

*“despite the shared ideology of Islam and Arabness (for the majority of the population), there did not exist a common sense of citizenship founded on shared interests and goals.”*<sup>22</sup>

However, such a lack of a sense of citizenship might also be said of many other non-European societies at that time, so such a situation must be seen in its proper context. The reason it may start to present a problem is when a radical change is imposed on such a society. Of course, both tribal and urban Arabs were conscious that they were Arabs, especially when presented with a Turk or a Persian, but this consciousness was in no way comparable to that of the later Arab nationalists.

*“That they were Arabs was to them a natural fact, a fact they may have taken pride in, but they did not feel at all impelled to do something about it.”*<sup>23</sup>

Added to this was the division in the tribal domain created by a complex tribal hierarchy. Politically, the tribes were grouped into self-defined and mutually recognising hierarchies of chiefs and notables, with the authority of the tribal leaders, or ‘shaikhs’, stemming both from personal attributes and noble lineage. Tribes were also split into *filih*, peasants; *ma’dan*, Marshdwellers; *shawiyah*, People of the Sheep; and *ahl-il-ibl*, People of the Camel.<sup>24</sup> This last group functioned as the tribal aristocracy, looking down on the other tribes, and refusing to fraternise with them. As a general rule, those tribes who maintained all the elements of a truly nomadic

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<sup>22</sup> Vinogradov, Amal. 1972, p.127.

<sup>23</sup> Batatu, Hanna. 1978, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Batatu, Hanna. 1978, p. 16.

existence and fiercely defended their liberty, tended to treat their more settled neighbours with disdain. It was the ascendancy of warriors over cultivators, with those tribes that held arms and possessed greater fighting skills, being able to rise to dominance in the tribal world.

Despite such fractures, what was remarkable in Iraq at that time was quite how important tribal life still was. Tribal people were, and still are, traditionally thought of as marginal, and incapable of any organised corporate action that transcended narrow tribal sentiments. In Iraq however, the tribes could hardly be thought of as marginal as not only were they able to form powerful corporate bodies, but they were also the majority of the population. Nor did they exist in a cultural void, as complex systems had evolved to regulate their interaction with the towns, and also between themselves. Tribesmen visited towns regularly, to trade and to visit shrines, and thus can be seen as neither isolated nor politically naïve.<sup>25</sup>

### **3.4. The Town and Country Divide**

A wide socio-cultural chasm separated the main towns from the tribal country, so much so that the inhabitants of each seemed to live in two distinct worlds which overlapped only infrequently. Any links between them were generally economic, although even in this, the links were tenuous and intermittent, with many areas of the tribal domain, which controlled most of the agricultural and pastoral lands of Iraq, remaining self-sufficient. The cities tended to have their own narrow band of countryside ringing them, which was worked by peasants who had generally lost most of their tribal affiliation, and were now held together by a territorial connection.

Psychologically too, urban and tribal Arabs were split by fundamental cleavages. Urban Arabs were governed more by Islamic and Ottoman laws, with a very pervasive consciousness of their Muslimness. Tribal Arabs, in contrast, responded more to Islamically-tinged ancient tribal customs, with rallying cries usually containing secular, tribal or Arab elements as opposed to religious ones. Relations between tribesmen were still patriarchal, whereas class positions had become more

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<sup>25</sup> See Vinogradov, A. 1972

strongly developed amongst the urban Arabs. Tribesmen seemed to regard the townspeople with the same disdain they held for the more settled tribes, and celebrated their own irrepressibility and lack of respect for any government.

### **3.5. The Divides Existing Between and Within Cities**

Although the urban population was a minority, the main cities of Iraq were very important politically, socially and economically, and thus so were the urban notables. During the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II, (1876-1909), the urban population was estimated to be approximately 24% of the population: Baghdad housing 145,000; Basra, 18,000 and Mosul, 70,000.<sup>26</sup>

Physical bonds between different cities in Iraq were tenuous at best. This state of affairs was fostered by the lack of any real communication infrastructure between the various centres. A very basic telegraphic service was established in the late nineteenth century, to connect main centres to Istanbul rather than to encourage communication within the region, and steamers on the rivers were infrequent and unreliable. In response largely to these conditions, and their own geographical positions, the cities evolved their own economic and social orientations. The ties of Mosul were predominantly with Syria and Turkey; those of Baghdad and the Shi'i Holy Cities with Persia and the western deserts, whilst Basra had its major links via sea trade with the Persian Gulf and India. The lack of economic integration was compounded by the use of different measures and weights in the different towns of Iraq, and wide price variations for the same commodity, due to dissimilar market conditions throughout the region. All this was further compounded by the use of different currencies, so hampering accessibility to certain markets.<sup>27</sup> Thus, a strong spirit of localism prevailed, which fed into separatism even within cities. Whether tribal or urban — Iraqi society was marked by such social and cultural variations within relatively small geographical areas. Different regional links played a crucial role here; for example, due to the importance of the Shi'i shrines in Najaf and Karbala, there were many

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<sup>26</sup> Cuinet, V. 1891; Batatu, H. 1978

<sup>27</sup> Before World War One, Persian currency seems to have been more commonly used in the Kurdish districts of Iraq, than the 'official' Turkish currency. See Cuinet, Vital, 1893, Vol. III, pp.38-39. In Basra, Indian and Persian currency was in wide use. See Great Britain, Foreign Office, Historical Section, *'Arabia, Mesopotamia'* (London, 1919), pp.119-120.

pilgrims from Shi'i communities elsewhere, especially Iran and Pakistan. As a result of such contacts, the various cultures of Iraq reflected a variety of alien influences, such as local Arab dialects around the Holy Shi'i cities, containing Farsi and even Indian terminology. Such cross-cultural contacts also fed through into local folklore and story-telling, reinforcing a pattern of surprising cultural variation throughout the Iraqi provinces. Louise Sweet remarks on this in her examination of the anthropology of the region:<sup>28</sup>

“In contrast with many other regions of the Middle East, where within comparatively large areas, one village is essentially like the next, southern Iraq offers macroscopic [sic] comparisons between neighbouring villages and tribes which provide contrasts in limited aspects of social and cultural life against a background of general historically derived similarity. The contrasts appear related to variations in ecological circumstances, length of sedentary existence, government policies (particularly with respect to land registration), contact with ‘alien’ groups, as well as differentials in economic opportunity...It is one of the comparatively few areas in the modern world where the dynamics of change are not embedded exclusively in the dialectic between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ culture contact.”

Even Islam in Iraq was a cause for division rather than integration. It cut sharply between the Shi'i and Sunni Arabs, who seldom mixed or intermarried, to the extent that in mixed cities they lived in separate quarters and followed separate lives. Batatu highlights the amazing degree of parity between confessional allegiance and social standing that is evident when juxtaposing the religious and social features of early twentieth century Iraq.<sup>29</sup> The most influential landlords in Basra province were overwhelmingly Sunni, while the peasants working the land were Shi'i.<sup>30</sup> Within Basra city itself, the leaders of Arab society were also Sunni, while the majority of the townspeople were again Shi'i. The same pattern repeated itself in nearly every town in Iraq (with the exception of the Shi'i Holy Cities), with the minority Sunni element

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<sup>28</sup> Sweet, Louise. 1968. Note the year that this observation was made, as it shows that such local variations were still highly visible in the 1960s, even after many decades of economic development and governmental policies of centralisation and standardisation.

<sup>29</sup> Batatu, Hanna. 1978. Chpt 4, Some Religious-Class and Ethnic-Class Correlations.

<sup>30</sup> The massive conversion of the bulk of Iraq's nominally Sunni Arab tribes to Shi'ism in the south occurred largely during the nineteenth century. Details of this process, and the factors driving it can be

being socially dominant, and constituting the large majority of the affluent merchants and landowners. Thus it seemed that such a divide by sect was also underlain by deep-seated socio-economic cleavages. To some extent, such Sunni social dominance had its roots in the preceding historical situation. In some rural areas, it was a reflection of the dominance of the Sunni tribal warring People of the Camel over Shi'i tribal peasants, or People of the Sheep, whilst in the towns this existing divide was reinforced by the Sunni Ottoman political dominance. Also telling, is that Shi'ism as an ideology had an innate appeal to the underdog due to its preoccupation with suffering and passion.

Whilst these religious and class divisions approximately coincided in the south of Iraq, in a similar way in the north in ethnically mixed areas, the divide between classes was often a divide between races. For example, in an area of villages inhabited solely by Kurds, the vast majority of such villages would have been owned by notables from Arbil, who were predominantly Turkomen. Again, in Mosul, Muslim Arabs were the principal landlords, whilst the majority of the peasant population were Christian Arameans.

When such divides were transferred to the city areas, such urban cleavages, class, sect, ethnic origin, economic, - were reflected in the *mahallah*, or city quarter, with different groups living in their own distinct *mahallah*. Within these quarters, the inhabitants lived largely in a world of their own, with little concept of a larger city community. Furthermore, those constituting part of a *millah*, an officially recognised religious community such as the Jews or Christians, even had autonomy in their denominational affairs. An example of such *mahallah* mentality is evident in the April 1915 uprising in Najaf against the Turks. After expelling the Turks from the city, each of the four quarters proclaimed their independence, - a situation that remained until the British arrival in 1917.<sup>31</sup>

The retention of certain tribal views and perspectives can be seen in such *mahallah* mentalities within the towns. Such forms of social organisation displayed the innate

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found in Nakash, Y. 1994, pp.25-48. The result was that the majority of the converted Shi'i population were tribal peasants and rural agriculturalists.

need for protection through unity – a protection that an overstretched Ottoman administration seemed unable to provide. The links provided by a tribe, or a town *mahallah*, gave the individual a sense of belonging, and an anchor to the world around him.

What must also be considered however, is that such loyalties and groupings were dynamic and flexible, and that by the start of the century, had undergone a considerable process of erosion. The impact of river steam navigation (1859), the electric telegraph (1861), the opening of state schools in 1869, the evolution of the printing press and the increasing economic penetration by Britain into the region with the subsequent commoditisation of Iraq, all wrought fundamental changes on the nature of the society. On top of this, efforts by the Ottoman government since the mid-nineteenth century to centralise its control of these lands, break the cohesion of the tribes and Ottomanize the city populations, had all begun to initialise change. Thus, the balance of the town-versus-rural population dichotomy had begun to shift before the dawn of British administration in Iraq. In the past, the existence of powerful tribes in Iraq's river valleys had forestalled the growth of strong cities. By the same logic, under the late Ottoman reign, the growth of the cities involved the decline of the tribes. Increased capitalisation, centralisation and the consequent ties to a less parochial market, led to the infusion of new ideas and life into the cities during the nineteenth century and onwards. With this came the decomposition of the tribal order. Ottoman policies of land tenure change and detribalisation were not implemented with the same fervour throughout the region, so leading to a bewildering array in the forms and expressions of tribal organisations.

Also significant was the impact of the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. Traditional patterns of political non-involvement in the Iraqi provinces began to change, with the stimulus provided by the rapid development of the Iraqi political press. From 1908 onwards, the number and variety of political clubs and parties within Mesopotamia increased dramatically.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Great Britain, *Reports of Administration for 1918 of Divisions and Districts of the Occupied Territories of Mesopotamia*. (1919), I, p. 68.

<sup>32</sup> Details can be found in Yapp, M.E. 'The Making of the Modern Middle East, 1792-1923.' (Addison, Wesley, Longman Ltd., Harlow, 1987). Relative to areas such as Syria and the Hijaz, the level of political activity within the Iraqi regions was quite low until this point.



The population of Baghdad began to increase dramatically, with Basra also experiencing similar growth. (See table below)<sup>33</sup>. Although the statistics may not be wholly accurate, the rapid urbanisation is unquestionable, and was due in large measure to mass migrations of peasant-tribesmen from the countryside.

### 3.5.1. Population of Baghdad, Mosul and Basra (1908-1947)

Year.	Baghdad	Mosul	Basra
1908 <sup>34</sup>	150,000		
1922 <sup>35</sup>	200,000	70,000	55,000
1935 <sup>36</sup>	350,000	100,000	101,535
1947 <sup>37</sup>	515,459	133,625	

Another estimate suggests that there was a speedy fall in the number of nomads, which clearly corresponded with such a significant rise in the settled tribal population in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – as a direct response to the government’s policy of settling the tribes. As a proportion of the rural population, it is suggested that nomads fell from 35% to 17% between 1867-1905, while settled cultivators rose from 41% to 50% during the same period.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Source: Batatu, Hanna. 1978, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> Estimate by Chiha, Habib, K. ‘La Province de Baghdad. Son Passe, Son Present, Son Avenir’ (Cairo, 1908), p.165.

<sup>35</sup> Official estimate, *Al-Iraq Year Book* (Baghdad, 1922), p.44.

<sup>36</sup> Estimate, *Dalil-ul-Mamlakat-il-Iraqiyyah Lisanat 1935-1936*. (‘Directory of the Iraqi Kingdom for the Year 1935-1936’), (Baghdad, 1937), p.97.

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of Social Affairs, ‘Official 1947 Census of Iraq.’ 3 parts, (Baghdad, 1954)

<sup>38</sup> Hasan, M.S. ‘Growth and Structure of Iraq’s Population, 1867-1947’ in Issawi, C. 1975, pp.155-162.

### 3.6. The Extent of Ottoman Control Over Iraq<sup>39</sup>

#### 3.6.1. An Uncertain Control: 1516-1831

Map 12 displays the extent of the Ottoman Empire in 1768, whilst Map 13 shows the extent of the Ottoman Empire and its breakdown into administrative units by 1914. Ottoman rule in Iraq was shaped by several factors: geographic, social, political and economic. Iraq was an outlying region. It contained a large Shi'i population, and as a frontier region it was vulnerable to invasion. The country was largely tribal and economically poor. Although Mosul was conquered by the Ottomans in 1516, Baghdad in 1534 and Basra between 1538-46;<sup>40</sup> broadly speaking, Iraq remained a back-water province of the Ottoman Empire until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup> Until that time, virtually ignored by Istanbul and only under its nominal and occasional control, the territories were ruled by independent Mamluk<sup>42</sup> and tribal chiefs. The Ottomans viewed the area as an important buffer to repel foreign encroachment into the region, and a useful source of taxation revenue, but the area was not of central importance in itself. Therefore, as long as the Ottomans could collect taxes, they considered their role in the area's governance to be complete. The powers of the local representatives of the Sublime Porte did not really reach beyond the outskirts of the towns in which they were stationed, and the rural area remained the realm of inter-tribal competition. Therefore tax collection was sporadic, and only implemented in the small percentage of Iraqi territory over which the Ottomans could exert their will.

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<sup>39</sup> Although the term 'Iraq' (or Irak), was an old one, it did not correspond to the area of the modern state, and was *not* used to designate any of the Ottoman administrative divisions of the area. The Ottomans divided the area into provinces based upon Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, Kirkuk and occasionally, Sulaimaniyya.

<sup>40</sup> Inalcik, Halil, 'The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600', (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1973), pp.38 and 106; Shaw, Stanford J., & Shaw, E.K., 'History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey,' (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), I, pp.95-96.

<sup>41</sup> Simon, R., Mattar, P. & Bulliet, R. (eds.), 'The Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East, II.' (The Middle East Institute of Columbia University, 1996)

<sup>42</sup> These were the Georgian Mamluks of the family of Sulayman the Great. Their rise to power was the principle feature of the political history of Iraq during the late eighteenth century. They came originally from the Caucasus, as Christian slaves who had converted to Islam. As they possessed no local loyalties, they were deemed by the authorities to be more reliable than locals, and therefore many entered into the service of the pashas of Baghdad as bureaucrats. They consolidated their power, forming a strong military corps, and took control of the Baghdad government in 1747. Ottoman attempts to remove the Georgian Mamluks failed, and the Porte was forced to tolerate their rule in Baghdad, which reached its political peak under Sulayman the Great, 1780-1802. The Mamluk regime was brought to an end in 1831, when Ottoman authority was reinstated.





*“Like other outlying provinces which joined the Empire late, such as Egypt and the Yemen, Iraq was never fully integrated into the Ottoman administration system, and the Porte did not maintain an all-embracing political control there. Its control was further weakened by periodic wars with Iran, which did not finally end until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and also by periodic Iranian occupations.”*<sup>43</sup>

After 1831, when Ottoman officials were appointed direct from Istanbul, such governors could only exert any control via conciliatory relationships with the local power bases, so severely limiting their image of authority. As Vinogradov noted:

*“Material scarcity, political insecurity, and the general arbitrary nature of the administration tended to reinforce the tribal framework which fulfilled the primary functions of conflict and resource management in the absence of a strong central authority.”*<sup>44</sup>

This tribal framework fulfilled a vital function. As one Baghdad deputy to the Ottoman parliament explained in 1910:

*“To depend on the tribe is a thousand times safer than depending on the government, for whereas the latter defers or neglects repression, the tribe, no matter how feeble it may be, as soon as it learns that an injustice has been committed against one of its members readies itself to exact vengeance on his behalf.”*<sup>45</sup>

The administration of the Iraqi regions changed much in the last 150 years of Ottoman rule. During the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, only Mosul was treated under the *timar* system, in which cavalry officers were given the right to collect and keep the tax on certain agricultural lands in return for military service in times of need. Baghdad and Basra were administered as *salyane* provinces, in which the tax revenues were not distributed as *timars*, but split between the provincial governors, who then delivered

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<sup>43</sup> For details of wars with Iran, and Iranian occupations, see: Longrigg, S.H. ‘Four Centuries of Modern Iraq,’ (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1925); Shaw, S.J. & Shaw, E.K., 1977; Shaw, S.J. ‘Iranian Relations with the Ottoman Empire in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries,’ in Avery, Peter (ed.) et al, ‘The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol 7: From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic,’ (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991), pp.297-313.

<sup>44</sup> Vinogradov, A. 1972, p.127.

<sup>45</sup> Baban, I.H. ‘De Stamboul a Bagdad. Notes d’un homme e’etat Turc.’ (“From Istanbul to Baghdad. Notes of A Turkish Statesman”), 1910. Translated from the Turkish, Collection de la *Revue du Monde Musulman*, Paris, 1911, p. 256.

fixed annual sums (*salyane*) to the central treasury.<sup>46</sup> In fact the pre-modern economic status of the three regions was very varied, which raises questions as to what benefits the Ottomans gained from each individual province. For example, in terms of agricultural production, Ottoman statistics show that in 1909-1910, the wheat production from Basra province was 1,254,140 *kiles*,<sup>47</sup> Mosul produced 4,784,515 *kiles*, whilst Baghdad province only provided 551,631 *kiles*. Baghdad however, produced more millet than either Mosul or Basra.<sup>48</sup> Clearly however, advantages other than economic strengths helped to shape Ottoman perceptions of the relative importance of each province.

The bulk of the land in Baghdad and Basra provinces was *miri* or state land, but this was complicated by old Islamic customs, including the extensive use of *waqf*, (religious endowments), and also by the destabilising influence of widespread tribalism. The provincial division of the region also varied. Iraq was originally divided into 3 provinces called *elayet*:<sup>49</sup> Baghdad, Basra and Mosul. However, the province of Mosul at times lost territory to Iran, and a separate province called the *elayet* of Lahsa (al-Hasa), was also formed in Najd in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Over time, the central authority grew weaker, and the subsequent power vacuum was filled by local potentates, all owing a nominal allegiance to Istanbul. Georgian Mamluks rose to power in Baghdad and Basra provinces in 1747, and kept control until 1831, whilst the Jalilis, a local family, gained control in Mosul from 1726.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See: Inalcik, Halil, 'An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1914,' (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.104; Shaw, S.J. & Shaw, E.K. 1977, Vol.I, p.122; Shaw, S.J., 'A Note on the Ottoman Administration in Arabia in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century,' *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, 3/1 (Winter 1984-85) pp.93-99

<sup>47</sup> an Ottoman *kile* was a measurement of volume, equivalent to approximately 36 metric litres

<sup>48</sup> For more details and statistics, see McCarthy, J. 'The Arab World, Turkey and the Balkans: A Handbook of Historical Statistics.' (G.K.Hall, Boston, Massachusetts 1982). Agricultural production was listed by the Ottomans in *kiles*, *okkas*, *kiyyes*, and *kilos*.

<sup>49</sup> Such *elayet* divisions did not carry the same status as the later *vilayet* provinces.

<sup>50</sup> For details of the Mamluk period, see: Hourani, A. 'A History of the Arab Peoples,' (Faber & Faber, London 1991), p.249; Hourani, A. 'The Changing Face of the Fertile Crescent in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century,' *Studia Islamica*, 8 (1957), pp.89-122; Nieuwenhuis, T. 'Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq,' (The Hague, 1982); Shaw, S.J. 'Between Old and New: The Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim III, 1789-1807' (Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1971), pp.219, 294; Perry, John, 'The Mamluk Pashalik of Baghdad and Ottoman-Iranian Relations in the Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century,' in Kuneralp, Sinan, (ed.), *Studies on Diplomatic History*, Vol.I, (Istanbul: ISIS, 1987), pp.59-70.

The reign of Suleiman Pasha (1780-1802) saw the curbing of the power built up by Kurdish leaders and the southern tribes of the Muntafiq. At this time too, Karbala and Basra were brought under Ottoman control. However, it was not really until the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839) that the central government attempted to restore some authority over the provinces, and produce a reformed and centralised system of provincial administration. By 1831, the Porte had regained firm control over Baghdad, taking advantage of the military weakness of the Mamluk Vali there, Davud Pasha (reign: 1816-1831). Mosul was also restored to central control in 1834, although the subordination of certain autonomous Kurdish Emirates around Diyarbakir and Rawanduz took several years longer.

### **3.6.2. The Tanzimat Reform Era in Iraq: 1844-1872**

Immediately after the restoration of central Ottoman authority at Baghdad in 1831, issues of security took precedence over issues of reform, with many local uprisings and rivalries for the Ottoman government to contend with. However, during the reign of Sultan Abdulmecid (1839-1861), the Tanzimat Reform Program was declared, promising overall reorganisation in every institution of the state and society: from more orderly tax collection and a regular system of military conscription, to reform in the educational and judicial systems. Such a reform package was based partially on European models, and initiated a slow process of institutional and cultural 'westernisation'. Such reforms also broke fundamentally with Islamic tradition by extending the promise of civil equality to the Empire's non-Muslim peoples. In the provinces, the reforms envisaged a radical overhaul of provincial administration, and a strengthening of central control. The authority of the provincial governor-generals was first to be actively weakened by giving many of their functions to other officials, and then by giving them advisory councils containing representatives of the local population, usually influential notables and important religious leaders. Also important was the reorganisation of the administrative divisions, using the traditional term *sankaks*, but redrawing the boundaries to establish units of comparable wealth and population..

Clearly, these new reforms could not be introduced everywhere at once, thus there was a delay in their implementation within the Iraqi provinces, and even then,

implementation was not uniform throughout the region. Tanzimat reforms were first introduced into Baghdad in 1844 under Necib Pasha, and in Mosul in 1848 under Vecihi Pasha. However, not much was done in Baghdad until the appointment of Abdulkirim Nadir Pasha in 1849, when the registration of the population was started, and the financial administration began to be reformed. Even then, such reforms were hampered by financial difficulties, as their application was costly and required large amounts from the central government funds.<sup>51</sup> Such financial constraints were further compounded by the refusal of many tribes within Iraq to pay any tax – so severely limiting local revenues.

By 1851, the central Ottoman government had decided that Iraq's problems would be better dealt with under a single administration. Mosul was reduced to the status of a *sancak* of Baghdad, and policies were concentrated on the restoration of law and order, with better control of the tribes, and hence more effective tax collection. This offered a partial solution to the administrative and financial problems of the region.

Great changes did not occur in Iraq until the era of Midhat Pasha as the Governor of Baghdad between 1869 and 1872, when the Ottomans really extended their control over the Iraqi provinces. As in other parts of the Empire, the Iraqi provinces were still governed largely by tacit agreement between the Ottoman authorities and the local notables, with each side understanding the limitations of the other.<sup>52</sup> It was the advances in communications seen throughout the nineteenth century that enabled the Ottomans to penetrate more deeply into the affairs of the Iraqi region. The advent of the telegraph, of steamships on the Tigris, and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 all brought the world of Mesopotamia far closer to the seat of power in Istanbul. It also brought with it the possibility of access to more external markets, and more profitable agricultural ventures. The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought great expansion in trade, especially sea-borne after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Mesopotamia's main trading partners were Britain and British India, with a few new competitors entering the market in the early 1900s. Land trade with Iran was also important, as was the revenue raised from the Iranian pilgrims to the Shi'i holy sites

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<sup>51</sup> See Guran, T. 'The First Statistical Yearbook of the Ottoman Empire.' (Ankara, Statistics Institute, 1997). Original published in Arabic script, 1897. Also see: Guran, T. *Tanzimat Doneminde Maliyesi*, (Istanbul, 1899), pp.93-96.



within the Iraqi *vilayets*. Between 1869-70 and 1912-13, the value of official imports to the Iraqi provinces rose from approximately £152,000 to £3,264,000 (7.5% p.a.), and the value of exports rose from £218,000 to £2,593,000 (6% p.a.).<sup>53</sup> Such an increase in trade also provided a good indicator to the development of the region's transport system, and its reformed land system. The desire by agriculturalists for the greater level of security needed to attain stable agricultural output was another aid to the Ottoman attempts to pacify the country, as the resistance of such settled farmers was hugely broken down. As agricultural production required peace and stability, the martial values that had served to promote tribal cohesion in times past, became less significant. With this, and the sweeping changes in land tenure ushered in by Midhat Pasha, the position and influence of the leading shaikhs began to wane.

The Ottomans also began to flex their muscles in Mesopotamia due to the increasing sense of threat they felt from Europe's (and especially Britain's) growing significance in the Persian Gulf from the early nineteenth century onwards. Foreign influence in Iraq, and the fear of its spread, were constant preoccupations of the central government and the provincial authority – occasionally bordering on the paranoid. In bringing their more remote provinces under closer control, the Ottomans hoped to avoid the encroachment of British influence into Ottoman-held territory.<sup>54</sup> The French, Germans, Russians, Iranians, Americans and of course, the British, all had consulates in Baghdad by the early 1900s, and their influence was growing.<sup>55</sup>

Midhat Pasha did indeed implement many policies that were to accelerate socio-economic change in the region, and his reign can be seen as a watershed in the history of the country. He had been sent to Baghdad in the midst of the *Tanzimat* Reform Era that was embracing the Ottoman administration,<sup>56</sup> and his remit was to restore centralised Ottoman authority in the Iraqi provinces. Midhat initiated the process of

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<sup>52</sup> Slugget, P. 'Britain in Iraq 1914-1932.' (Ithaca Press, London, 1976), p.2.

<sup>53</sup> Issawi, C. 'The Fertile Crescent 1800-1914: A Documentary Economic History.' (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988), p.132.

<sup>54</sup> for details, see: Brown, Carl, (ed.), 'Imperial Legacy: The Ottoman Imprint On the Balkans and the Middle East,' (Columbia University Press, New York 1996).

<sup>55</sup> see: Lorimer, J.G. 'Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia,' Vol.I/2, (Calcutta, 1908), pp.2694-2699; FO, Historical Section, *Mesopotamia*, (London, 1920), pp.26-27; Longrigg, S.H. 1925, pp.4-5, 66-67.

<sup>56</sup> The *Tanzimat* Reforms were initiated in the years after 1839, with their principal aim being to reassert the rights and effective control of the central government, and to tie the provinces more closely to the centre.

modernisation in Iraq by making sweeping changes in provincial administration under the 1864 Vilayet Law, in land registration<sup>57</sup> using the Land Law of 1858, road construction, the creation of newspapers in the region, and the establishment of government schools with a standardised curriculum that allowed Iraqis to attend the military and law schools in Istanbul. This in turn enabled more Iraqis to become more socially and economically mobile, as they could then join the Ottoman civil service, and enlarge their perspective of the community in which they lived. The improved access to higher education created a new group of native intellectuals who then served as 'ideological brokers'<sup>58</sup> between the westernising Ottoman administration, and their own communities. Clearly then, such processes resulted in extensive disruptions to the traditional ideological and social spheres.

### 3.6.3. Land Tenure Change

*"There is no need to explain the productive capacity of the land in the provinces of Syria and Iraq, and the capacity of the Asi and Euphrates (rivers) to irrigate the land and transport its produce. Further, as the plains of these regions are broad, and their mountainous areas are small, there is no question that roads, passages and land drainage will cost less than in the Balkan provinces. Yet the Ottoman state cannot draw any benefit from the few million bedouins (urban) who wander about the extensive and fertile plains between the lands of Damascus and Aleppo and Iraq, and to the eastward towards Jabal Shammar and the Najd border; on the contrary, there is seen much harm from their attacks on settled areas. Why not draw benefit from them, and why suffer harm? Has this matter ever been put on the agenda and discussed with attention and care? In your humble servant's opinion, no idea has ever been circulated in central government, other than the forcible repression and devastation of the Arabs. And they (the Arabs) have never been viewed as potential friends...The Arabs are not savage, but they fear and hate us."*

**Abdullatif Suphi Pasha to Sultan Abdulaziz. 1864.<sup>59</sup>**

<sup>57</sup> More shall be said of this in the following section devoted to Land Tenure Changes.

<sup>58</sup> A phrase coined by Vinogradov, A. 1972, p.125.

<sup>59</sup> Original: 'Suphi Pasha Hazretleri'nin Layihasi'ndan' in *Yeni Edebiyatt Antolojisi I: 1839-1865*, Kaplan, Mehmet, et al (eds.), (Istanbul: IUEF, 1974), p.21. Quoted in Cetinsaya, Gokhan, 'The

As agriculture became an increasingly profitable enterprise and not solely a basis for subsistence, the tribal-land relationship also changed, causing the position of the shaikh to weaken further. This process was deliberately accelerated by the new Ottoman Land Law of 1858 that was implemented in the Iraqi provinces by Midhat Pasha. Such reforms had the effect of converting the majority of the land within Iraq into the private property of largely absentee landlords, and reducing the status of generally free tribesmen to near-serfs – bound to the soil.

The new Land Law was declared in 1858 throughout the Ottoman Empire, (the Law went hand in hand with the Ottoman policy of detribalisation), upholding the rights of the Ottoman Government as the owner and lessor of all the land under its jurisdiction. The law was intended to re-establish the state's legal right of ownership, and provide each cultivator with secure title to his fields. Such security, it was hoped, would encourage investment in improving production, thus boosting the economy, and raising tax revenues. The new law defined several categories of land: 1) private property (*mulk*); 2) state property (*miri*); 3) religious endowment lands (*waqf*); 4) communal or public land (*metruk*); and 5) idle or barren land (*mevat*). All *miri* land was to be registered in the name of an individual who could prove that they had worked on it continuously for a number of years, and such individuals could gain free-hold rights only via title deeds (*tapu saned*). In the Iraqi regions a Land Commission was established to survey the country and sell these title deeds, with the land rights going to the highest bidder if no individual could prove their rights. An added complication was that in the Iraqi provinces, Midhat also split all cultivatable land into three categories, which were dependent upon their ease of irrigation. Title deeds to land watered by a river or canal were seen as the most valuable, and were sold to the population on special terms which included an enhanced tax liability. Title deeds to lands requiring the re-opening of irrigation channels were sold mainly by auction, whilst deeds to lands watered by rain or waterwheel were seen as the least valuable and were given free of charge to those who had been cultivating them. Each category paid a different rate of tax.

Before long, the overwhelming majority of land within the Iraqi regions was in the hands of urban notables, with all rights taken away from those who actually worked the land. The Ottoman's logic behind the change was to modernise their entire state-system in an attempt to compete with the growing European Powers, such as Great Britain. There was a desire to reassert their authority over the countryside; to break the foundations of shaikhly power; allow more vigorous revenue collection, and to offer more permanent rights of possession to landholders in the hope that this would encourage more investment in agriculture, and hence more productivity. Indeed, the opening up of the market, and the development of the region's infrastructure was already leading to a shift from subsistence farming to market cash crops. Also, by holding the ultimate access to land, the Ottomans hoped that this would reinforce their legitimacy and demand the population's acquiescence to their authority.

In introducing the new Land Law to the Iraqi provinces, Midhat hoped to create a class of industrious peasant proprietors, <sup>who</sup> would be regular tax-payers. However, although the new system worked quite well in areas where there were already peasant proprietors, it was not a great success within the Iraqi regions. Such a system was fundamentally at odds with the widely-held tribal notion of land ownership. The tribe considered its *dira* as an extension of its tribal solidarity, with the land being held communally and individuals having usufruct rights – a system that depended upon the mutual recognition of tribal lands. The Ottoman leases did not recognise such corporate legal entities, and title deeds could not be held communally. This meant the further breakdown of the tribe, as tribal leaders were given individual rights over land that had formerly been held in common by them and their tribesmen. A new class of proto-feudal landlords emerged, while free tribesmen were transformed into mere tenants with very few rights. Thus, the role of the tribal shaikh as a defender was redundant, and he increasingly became an economic burden to his tribe. As the process progressed, the peasants had no need for any allegiance to a shaikh, and the territorial connection came to dominate any tribal one remaining.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, by withdrawing and re-granting *tapu* deeds, the government was able to promote hostility between tribes, thus breaking down many powerful confederations

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<sup>60</sup> Great Britain, *Tribes Round the Junction of the Euphrates and Tigris*, p.2-3, *The Administrative Report of the Baghdad Vilayet, 1917*, p.26

and again extending Ottoman power. For example, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the Ottomans succeeded in pitting the dominant Sa'duns of the Muntafiq confederation against one another, and parcelling out their land to the highest bidder. This created a serious divide within the confederation between Ottoman supporters and those who clung on to old tribal principles. The Muntafiq fractured along these lines into many mutually hostile tribes, which were themselves beginning to decompose into even smaller groups.

An added complication in the distribution of new *tapu* land was that many people with a legitimate claim to land did not come forward and register, due to the suspicion in which the Ottoman authorities were held. Such registrations were feared to be a first step towards compulsory military conscription. Others simply felt that there was no point in claiming something that they already considered to be theirs.<sup>61</sup>

However much the Ottomans had increased their administrative presence in Iraq by the early twentieth century, full domination of these lands was still hampered by financial constraints, growing problems in other parts of an over-stretched empire that diverted resources, and a cumbersome administrative machine. This meant that whilst such land registrations were implemented in Iraq, they were done so in an *ad hoc* manner, with policies not being fully followed through. What was left then when the British arrived, in 1917, was a mish-mash of different systems of land tenure throughout the country, which they took to be the normal way of things,<sup>62</sup> and a tribal system in the latter stages of decomposition.

This political history of the Iraqi regions raises many important questions. How far did these Tanzimat reforms contribute to the development of an 'Iraqi' national identity? Were there any political implications for the subsequent creation of the Iraqi state, and if so, what? It is clear that the Tanzimat Reforms, as implemented within the Iraqi provinces, accelerated a process of tribal disintegration, and created new social layers of disinherited rural tenants and proto-feudal absentee landlords. Great

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<sup>61</sup> For details of the results of land tenure changes in Iraq, see: Owen, R. 'Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914,' (I.B.Tauris, London, 1993), pp.118-119; Karpat, Kemal, 'The Land Regime, Social Structure and Modernisation in the Ottoman Empire,' in Polk, William, R., & Chambers, Richard, L. (eds.), 'Beginnings of Modernisation in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century,' (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1968), pp.69-90.

social and economic divides therefore still cleaved the society, in addition to the ethnic, religious and cultural tensions. Any political power was held by these rich landlords, who became concentrated within the urban areas, and who felt little in common with the peasantry out in the countryside.

#### 3.6.4. Vilayet Law of 1864

This involved a general re-organisation of the provincial government. Old elayets were to be replaced by larger *vilayets*, each governed by a Vali (governor-general) with extensive powers. Such a move was intended to give Valis greatly increased discretion, as such valis were directly responsible only to the central government in Istanbul. Each *vilayet* was divided into smaller *sancaks*, and these into *nahiyes* or quarters and villages, with administrative councils at each level. Baghdad was finally brought into this system in 1867, but full implementation only came with the appointment of Midhat Pasha. Even, then, it was not until 1875 that Basra was established as a *vilayet* in its own right – independent of Baghdad.<sup>63</sup> This status was again suspended in 1880 however, when Basra was again subordinated to Baghdad. It was only after 1884 that the division of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul into separate *vilayets*, was maintained. It is important to notice then, that these administrative units were not particularly old by the time of the Ottoman Empire collapse. It is also worth stressing that such divisions were only administrative, within the framework of a unified empire, - and as such they should not be compared with the more rigid boundaries dividing today's modern states. In commerce, as well as in culture, there was a constant stream between these 'Iraqi' provinces, and between them and other provinces of the Ottoman empire.<sup>64</sup>

Midhat set up this *vilayet* system in the Iraqi provinces, attempted to tackle the issue of military conscription, and tried to improve the navigation and irrigation on the Tigris and Euphrates. Steamer services began between Basra and Istanbul via the Suez Canal, and Basra harbour was radically improved. He also set up a printing press in the region, established an official newspaper, an industrial school, hospitals and

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<sup>62</sup> Slugglet, P. 1976, p. 238.

<sup>63</sup> For details, see: Shaw, S.J. and Shaw, E.K. 1977, p.90: Davison, R.H. 'Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1856-1876,' (Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1963), p.151.

new factories. Despite such innovation and motivation however, Midhat was recalled to Istanbul in 1872, and thus was unable to bring many of his policies to fruition. There followed a reaction against the decentralising aspects of the Vilayet Law, with subsequent revisions designed to curb the independent powers of the future valis.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.6.5. Educational Reform

This was another of the central schemes in the Tanzimat Reform Program. Public education became a priority, to train the officials required to run the new administration, to aid social and economic development, and as a means of inculcating loyalty to the Empire. Non-state schools remained, - such as the *mahalle* schools and the *madrasas* run by the ulama, the private Shi'i schools, the foreign and missionary schools, and the educational institutions run by non-Muslim communities for their members, - but new civilian, military, commercial and industrial state schools were also now available.<sup>66</sup> In 1908, a law school was founded in Baghdad for higher education.

Limited though it was, state schooling played a significant role in Iraq, enabling some poorer and middle class students to rise in the state apparatus, especially within the army. Each year, a number of selected military students from Baghdad, were sent to the military academy in Istanbul, whilst many upper class students favoured the Law School and Civil Administration School in the empire's capital.<sup>67</sup> Many of these students went on to play significant roles in the Ottoman administration, and then the new administration of the Iraqi state after the First World War.

### 3.6.6. 1875 Administration Onwards

From 1875, the Tanzimat regime of the Ottoman Empire entered a period of profound crisis, with bankruptcy of the state treasury, rebellions throughout the provinces,

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<sup>64</sup> Brown, C. 1996, pp.121-122.

<sup>65</sup> Davison, R.H. 1963 pp.167-172.

<sup>66</sup> For details of state education in Iraqi provinces, 1894-5, see: McCarthy, J. 1982, p.116; Szyliowicz, Joseph, 'The Ottoman Educational Legacy: Myth or Reality?' in Brown, Carl, 1996, pp.284-301.

<sup>67</sup> See: Pool, David, 'From Elite to Class: The Transformation of Iraqi Political Leadership,' in Kelidar, Abbas, (ed.), 'The Integration of Modern Iraq,' (Croom Helm, London 1979), pp.63-87; Simon, Reeva,

constitutional revolution, diplomatic confrontations with European powers, and disastrous wars with Russia, that culminated in the loss of large amounts of Ottoman territory. The authoritarian Sultan Abdulhamid came to power (1890-1908), placing a new emphasis on centralisation, on Islam and Muslim solidarity, and on his own position as Caliph. He saw Muslim solidarity, expressed in a common loyalty to the Caliphate, as crucial to the empire's efforts to resist European penetration. Such a rallying point was also used to help ease the doubts he had over the loyalty of Arab Muslims. His aversion to risk at any cost, in a desperate attempt to maintain some stability in his empire, led to many fundamental problems being ignored and allowed to fester.

### 3.7. Conclusion

The historical geography of Mesopotamia contributed greatly to the nature of the region as a geopolitical entity by the time of the First World War. The Tanzimat reforms had compounded a process of tribal decay and the development of <sup>a</sup> new class <sub>^</sub> of rich, urban land-owners. Such an urban population, whilst containing many cleavages within itself, also was greatly removed from the rural sphere, politically and culturally. Divides at all levels, cut through the society of the Iraqi provinces.

However, there was evidence of an incipient national political consciousness, born largely in opposition to the Ottomans, and stimulated by the Tanzimat reforms. Such a movement however, was almost wholly concentrated within the Arab sections of the urban elite.<sup>68</sup> This elite had more access to education, and to new and radical political ideas and practices. Ironically, the Tanzimat reforms had caused the rural population to suffer greatly, yet it was the urban intelligentsia, who had benefited most from the Ottoman reforms, that had the opportunity and the will to question the Ottoman authority. Generally though, new political demands couched in a 'modern' idiom appeared only just before 1914 in Iraq, and possessed little substance or popular

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'The Education of an Iraqi Ottoman Army Officer,' in Khalidi, Rashid, et al (eds.), 'The Origins of Arab Nationalism,' (Columbia University Press, New York 1991), pp.151-166

<sup>68</sup> For more details see Kayali, Hasan. 'Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918.' (University of California Press, 1997).



support. Yapp identifies several specific reasons for this relative lack of political activity.<sup>69</sup>

One such reason was that one of the most prominent of the non-Muslim communities within Mesopotamia was the Jewish community, who kept out of political activity. They concentrated on commerce and finance, and gave their backing to the Ottoman regime. Two other substantial groups among the notables kept out of government, and tended to confine their opposition to traditional forms of protest. These were many of the tribal shaikhs, and nearly all of the Shi'i notables.

The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 did instigate some changes to this pattern of political non-involvement. There was a rapid development of the Iraqi political press, with newspapers expressing a wide range of political opinions.<sup>70</sup> The years 1908-1914 also witnessed an upsurge in the number and variety of political clubs and parties, including in 1912, the Baghdad-based Arab Patriotic Society.

One important source of political activity in the Iraqi regions was the secret society of al-'Ahd. Many of the Arab officers in the Ottoman army were from the Mesopotamian region, and it is thought that they made up the bulk of the members of al-'Ahd, which aimed at the independence of the Arab provinces from the Ottoman Empire.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that some sections of the Mesopotamian population held aspirations for Arab independence before 1914, but this was not a unified and consolidated movement, was not even widespread amongst the Arabs of Mesopotamia, and was almost totally non-existent amongst the non-Arab communities of the region.

The historical geography of Mesopotamia also had territorial implications for a putative Iraqi state. For example, it was not until 1884 that the division of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul into separate *vilayets* was maintained. Before then, Basra had been intermittently attached to the Baghdad province. Although this was purely an

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<sup>69</sup> Yapp, M.E. 'The Making of the Modern Near East, 1792-1923.' (Addison, Wesley, Longman Ltd., Harlow, 1987) The level of political activity within the Iraqi regions was quite low, relative to areas such as Syria, and down in the Hijaz.

<sup>70</sup> Yapp, M.E. 1987, p.212

administrative detail, it may have contributed to a certain sense of unity between the two regions, at least as seen from a foreign perspective. The following chapter examines the various interests that the Great Powers of Russia, Britain, France, Germany and Italy, had in the Mesopotamian area. Such a history of Basra and Baghdad being treated, at certain times, as one administrative unit, might have encouraged foreign powers to widen the scope of their interest. The *vilayet* of Mosul however, although regarded as a Mesopotamian province, was always treated as an administrative unit distinct from either Baghdad or Basra. Interestingly, the following chapters demonstrate how, after the First World War, it was indeed the province of Mosul that proved most problematic to the British. In setting up the Iraqi State in 1921, the British found it very difficult to establish their claim that Mosul was an integral part of the new Iraq.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Most of the Mesopotamian officers within the Ottoman army were from notable Sunni Arab families. After 1918 many of these men came to hold the leading positions of power within the new Iraqi State.

<sup>72</sup> This matter remained unsettled until 1926.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### GREAT POWER INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST BEFORE THE FIRST WORLD WAR

#### 4.1. Introduction

To fully appreciate the factors that had an impact upon the geopolitical form and function of the new State of Iraq in the 1920s, it is important to locate Iraq in its global space. Such a context is vital, as no country can be examined in isolation from the external factors and pressures that help to shape it – especially one whose original form was so determined by foreign powers.

*“The establishment of a League of Nations mandate in Iraq represents the institutionalisation of a western idea. It came, however, as one of the climaxes in the play of world influences. But now the world had greatly widened with the expansion of civilisation. And the European nation-state had appeared as a new and dominant factor. Rivalry among these new and self-conscious western communities came eventually to converge their conflicting interests upon the Near and Middle East.”<sup>1</sup>*

The outcome of this rivalry between the Great Powers at that time, - Britain, Russia, France and Germany and the Ottoman Empire, - was the creation of a new political order in the Middle East after the First World War – a true ‘tectonic shift’<sup>2</sup> in the social and political structure of the region.

*“Out of the ruins of the (Ottoman) empire emerged, by accident or design...a series of states and mandated territories including Turkey, Albania, Syria, the Lebanon, Palestine (Israel), Transjordan (Jordan), Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Each of these countries was, in the following years, obliged, sometimes with the help of a*

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<sup>1</sup> Foster, H.A. 1935, p.28.

<sup>2</sup> Macfie, A.L. ‘The End of the Ottoman Empire: 1908-1923.’ (Addison Wesley Longman, London 1998), p.234.

*mandatory appointed by the League of Nations, to establish a new government and administration, fortify and defend frontiers, few of which had been delineated in accordance with ethnic, strategic and geographical reality, and create from the crude rhetoric of race, nationality and culture, an ideology appropriate to its needs. These tasks were to preoccupy the rulers of the new states for many years to come.*"<sup>3</sup>

How had this fundamental change occurred? The pre-war 'circling' of the Middle East by the Great Powers, had resulted in the creation of specific mandated territories by 1921, in the areas formerly under Ottoman control. Such a 'tectonic shift' therefore, may appear to have happened in a very short space of time. In fact, it was more of a rapid resolution of complex processes that had been developing and evolving over centuries: - processes that could have resolved themselves in different ways under different circumstances. Foreign powers had sparred with each other for hundreds of years over spoils in the Middle East, with even the Greek and Roman Empires making concerted pushes to the east of the Mediterranean. Napoleon said to the French at the very start of his career that if they meant "*really to ruin England they must make themselves 'masters of Egypt'.*"<sup>4</sup> The strategic importance of this region only grew throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Such a process was directly linked to the projection of new transport lines to the east, driven by the Industrial Revolution in Western Europe. With the increase in manufacturing, paths to foreign markets had to be correspondingly more direct and effective. Hence, in the 1830s, the English, "*after alternating in interest between an Egyptian canal to the Red Sea and an overland route to the Tigris and Euphrates, decided upon the latter...the double valley had its own trade possibilities and was always subject to seizure by others.*"<sup>5</sup>

This chapter will examine how such Great Power interests evolved, and what drove them. What was it inherently about the region that demanded their attention? Or could it have been that the region became a foreign policy objective for a particular Power, simply because it was for a rival Great Power? What were the predominant interests: - economic; strategic; military; security; to do with the local population, or simply a

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<sup>3</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.234.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Foster, H.A. 1935, p.30.

<sup>5</sup> Foster, H.A. 1935, p. 31.

question of prestige? Also, even with an understanding of the European foreign interests in the region, how did some of them, especially Britain and France, end up in control of some of the former Ottoman territories after the First World War, finding themselves in a position to directly determine the political and geographical structure of these territories? Several major treaties and agreements were made between the Great Powers before and during the First World War, and each of these brought the partition of the Ottoman territories ever closer, should the Entente Powers win the war. These will be examined more closely in this chapter.

Of particular interest in this thesis, is the process by which Britain came to hold the mandate for Iraq, and why this specific region was of more importance to them than any of the other territories that had been under Ottoman control. Firstly, the various interests in the Middle East held by the significant powers in the run up to the First World War will be analysed. Then the emphasis shall be narrowed down to the interests that the British held in the specific territory that came to be incorporated into the State of Iraq in 1920.

## **4.2. Partition or Preservation of the Ottoman Territories?**

The preservation or partition of the Ottoman Empire was central to the Eastern Question of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. How did each of the Great Powers at that time view the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire? Understandably, such perceptions were determined by the interests of each power, which lay either in Europe itself or the maintenance of control over their respective empires, and by how the Ottoman Empire could help or hinder these interests. Throughout the greater part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Great Powers, especially Britain, France, Russia and the Austrian Empire, generally supported the preservation of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>6</sup>

Almost until the outbreak of the War, the French continued their policy of supporting the integrity of the Ottoman Empire. *“in Syria and Lebanon we have traditional interests and we intend to see that they are respected...We ourselves are resolved to*

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<sup>6</sup> See Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.98.

*maintain the integrity of the Ottoman Empire.*"<sup>7</sup> For both France and Britain, the Empire constituted a necessary buffer between Europe and the advance of Russia. France also had pressing financial reasons for wanting to maintain the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. She held two-thirds of the Ottoman public debt, and also had significant financial and cultural interests in Syria. French involvement in the Ottoman pre-war economy was unrivalled by any European country.<sup>8</sup> *"Until the outbreak of the First World War the French remained generally committed to the preservation of the Ottoman Empire, which alone it was believed would secure French interests in the area. Nevertheless in the period following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkan Wars, French diplomats and politicians began seriously to consider the possibility of partition."*<sup>9</sup>

The French started to think that it may be best to concentrate on their interests in Syria, lest a sudden partition leave her unprepared. In 1913, therefore, a conference of French diplomats and ministers agreed that France should seek to recover railway privileges in southern Syria, which they had previously lost to Germany. However, the majority opinion remained committed to the preservation of the Empire.

*"Partition would favour mainly Russia and Germany, both well established in the area. In the event of a break-up, it was unlikely that French bond-holders would ever receive payment."*<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the preservation of Ottoman power was vital because the French (and indeed the British), were not strong enough to exercise direct power, and the Ottomans were therefore crucial to protect French interests in the region.

Britain was also generally committed to the principle of Ottoman integrity until the First World War. Until then, they believed that the Empire was best preserved, as it helped to maintain the European balance of power, and the stability of the area under Ottoman control. This safe-guarded British routes to India. The worry about the Ottomans using Pan-Islam to undermine British control in areas such as Egypt and India, made the British very cautious over their dealings with the Ottomans. *"This*

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<sup>7</sup> France, Assemblée Nationale, *Journal officiel, Senat, Debats parlementaires*, Dec. 21, 1912, p.340.

<sup>8</sup> See Tanenbaum, J.K. 'France and the Arab Middle East', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* (Philadelphia, 1978), Vol.68, p.10.

<sup>9</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.110.

<sup>10</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.111.

*fear acted as a permanent constraint upon Britain's Near Eastern Policy.*"<sup>11</sup> How far this general British commitment to the integrity of the Empire went in practice is debatable. Yapp represents a widespread view that such support for the principle of Ottoman integrity had become merely nominal in the decades leading up to the First World War.<sup>12</sup> The failure of the Ottomans to carry through grandiose reforms laid out in the Tanzimat era, the bankruptcy of the Ottoman State and the revulsion provoked by the Armenian and Bulgarian massacres had fatally undermined British support for the Ottoman Empire.

Britain also viewed Iraq's position within the Ottoman Empire very differently to that of the other Ottoman territories. As early as March, 1910, the British Resident in Baghdad wrote in his political diary that: *"the universal Turkish system of administration is in almost every respect unsuitable to Iraq. The Turks themselves must recognise that it is a failure here...Iraq is not an integral part of the Ottoman Empire, but a foreign dependency, very much in the rough; and its government by sedentary officials according to minute regulations, framed at Constantinople for Western Turkey can never be satisfactory. I had no idea before coming to Baghdad of the extent to which Turkey is a country of red tape and blind and dumb officialdom, nor of the degree in which the Turkish position in Iraq is unsupported by physical force."*<sup>13</sup>

Britain was also getting increasingly worried by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century about a potential Russian attempt to take control of the Turkish Straits (the Bosphorus and Dardanelles). Until this time, Britain had seen the Ottomans as a useful bulwark to preventing this Russian ambition, but were now beginning to feel that the Ottoman Empire did not have the power to resist the Russians. Russia had made an alliance with France in 1894, which was a great threat. *"The concern of the British regarding their seeming inability to prevent a Russian seizure of Constantinople and the Straits, led Lord Salisbury, the British Prime Minister, to speculate from time to time about the possible partition of the Ottoman Empire."*<sup>14</sup> In such a partition, Russia would

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<sup>11</sup> Yapp, M.E. 1987, p.88.

<sup>12</sup> See Yapp, M.E. 1987

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Gertrude Bell, in *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, cmd. 1061 (London, 1920), p.1.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, K.M. 'British Foreign Secretaries', (Croom Helm, London 1987), p.129.

gain Constantinople and the Straits, and Britain gain Syria and Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia in particular had been of interest to Britain well before this time, partly due to its location in the region of the 'Garden of Eden', and its perceived natural resource wealth. (See Map 14). France may be paid off with Tripolitania and part of Morocco, and Italy with Albania. On the 31 October, 1914, the British Resident in Baghdad issued a proclamation to Arab rulers in the Gulf that Turkey had entered the war on the side of Germany, "*to her own destruction, and that it seemed impossible to hope that the Ottoman Empire could be preserved.*"<sup>15</sup>

Russia was also generally committed to the preservation of the Ottoman Empire in the period preceding the First World War, as they constituted a harmless neighbour lying on their southern borders. However, Russia had conflicting interests on this issue, as her priorities lay with opening the Straits up to Russian warships. She also had ambitions to hold Constantinople, the centre of the Russian Orthodox religion. Thus, as German influence over the Ottomans grew, Russian commitment to Ottoman territorial integrity correspondingly fell.

### **4.3. Great Power Interests in the Region**

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain found itself in a very strong position in the Persian Gulf, so much so that the Gulf was seen by many as a 'British Lake'.<sup>16</sup> Securing a vital link in the 'overland' route to India had been a long-term policy objective, as "*British hegemony in the Persian Gulf, its waters and its littoral, was established during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, principally to serve British interests in India, and chiefly maintained by the Royal (or earlier, the Indian) Navy.*"<sup>17</sup> (See Map 15 and Map 16). However, although Britain was in a very strong position on the eve of the First World War, she did not enjoy the same over-riding dominance that she had had in the nineteenth century. After three generations of unchallenged domination, Great Power rivals appeared, mainly Russia, Germany and France, who

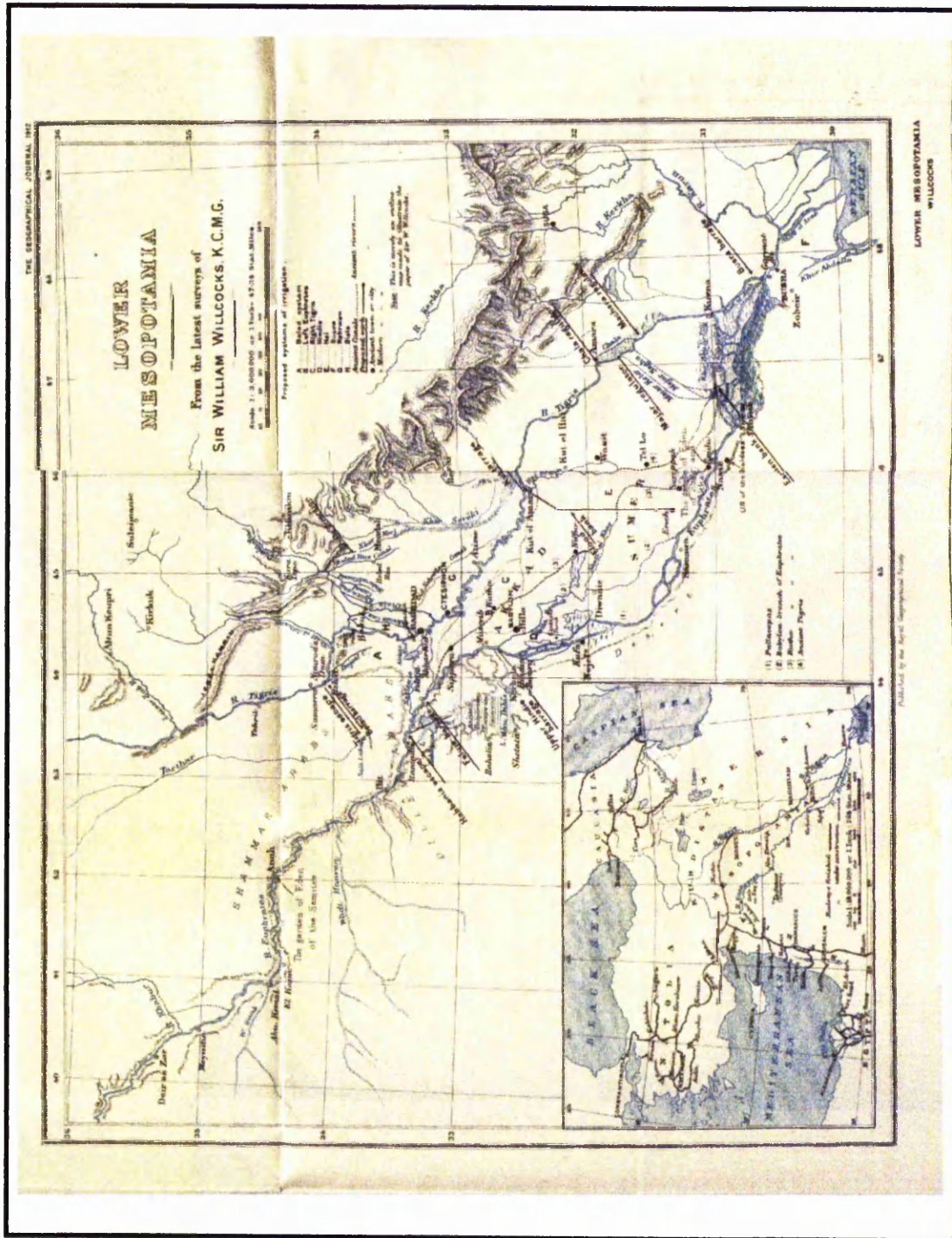
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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Gertrude Bell, in *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, cmd. 1061 (1920), p.1.

<sup>16</sup> See Busch, Briton Cooper, 'Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1894-1914', (University of California Press, 1967), p.1.

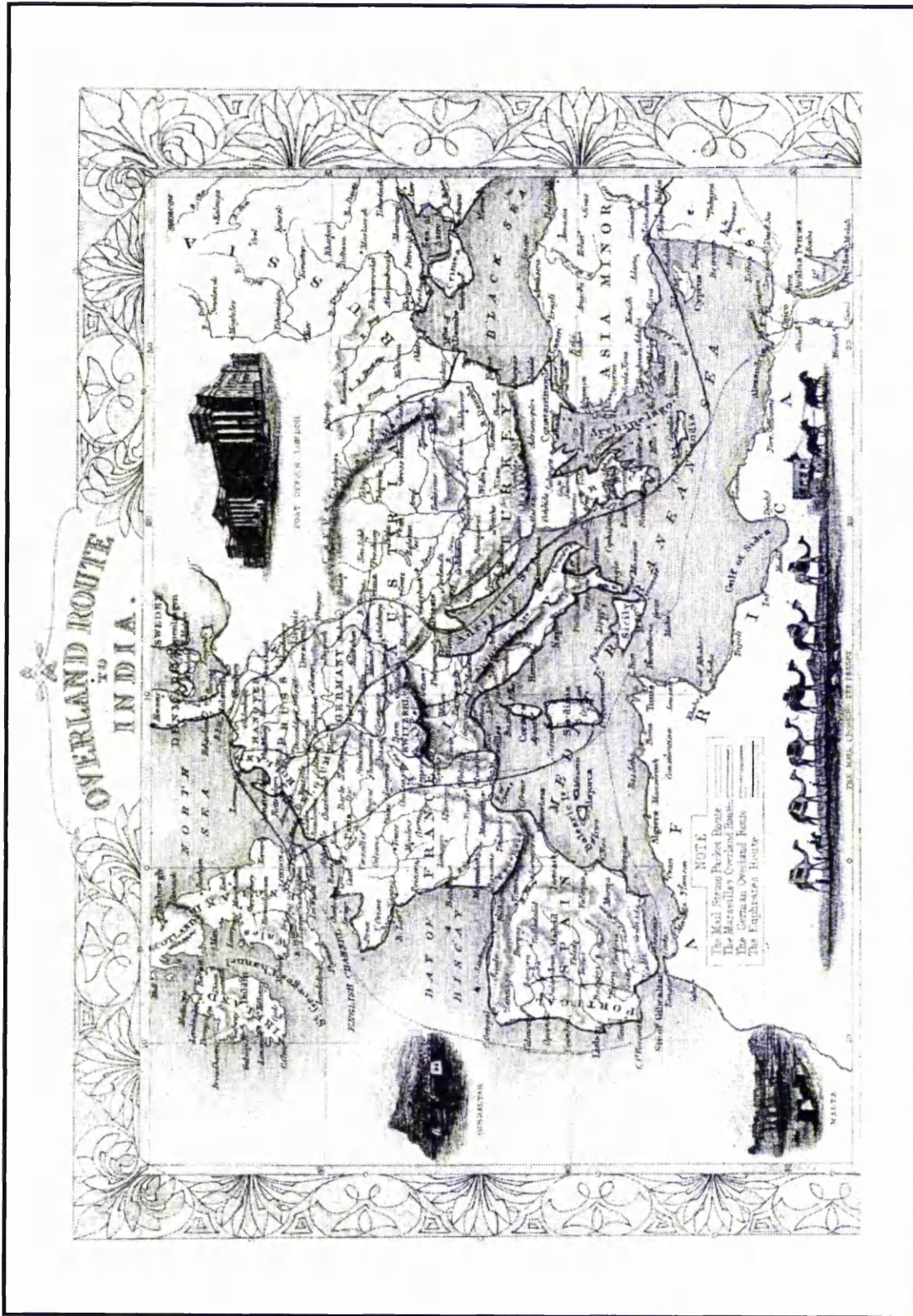
<sup>17</sup> Dann, Uriel, (ed.) 'The Great Powers in the Middle East: 1919-1939.' (Holmes and Meier: New York and London, 1988), p. 50.





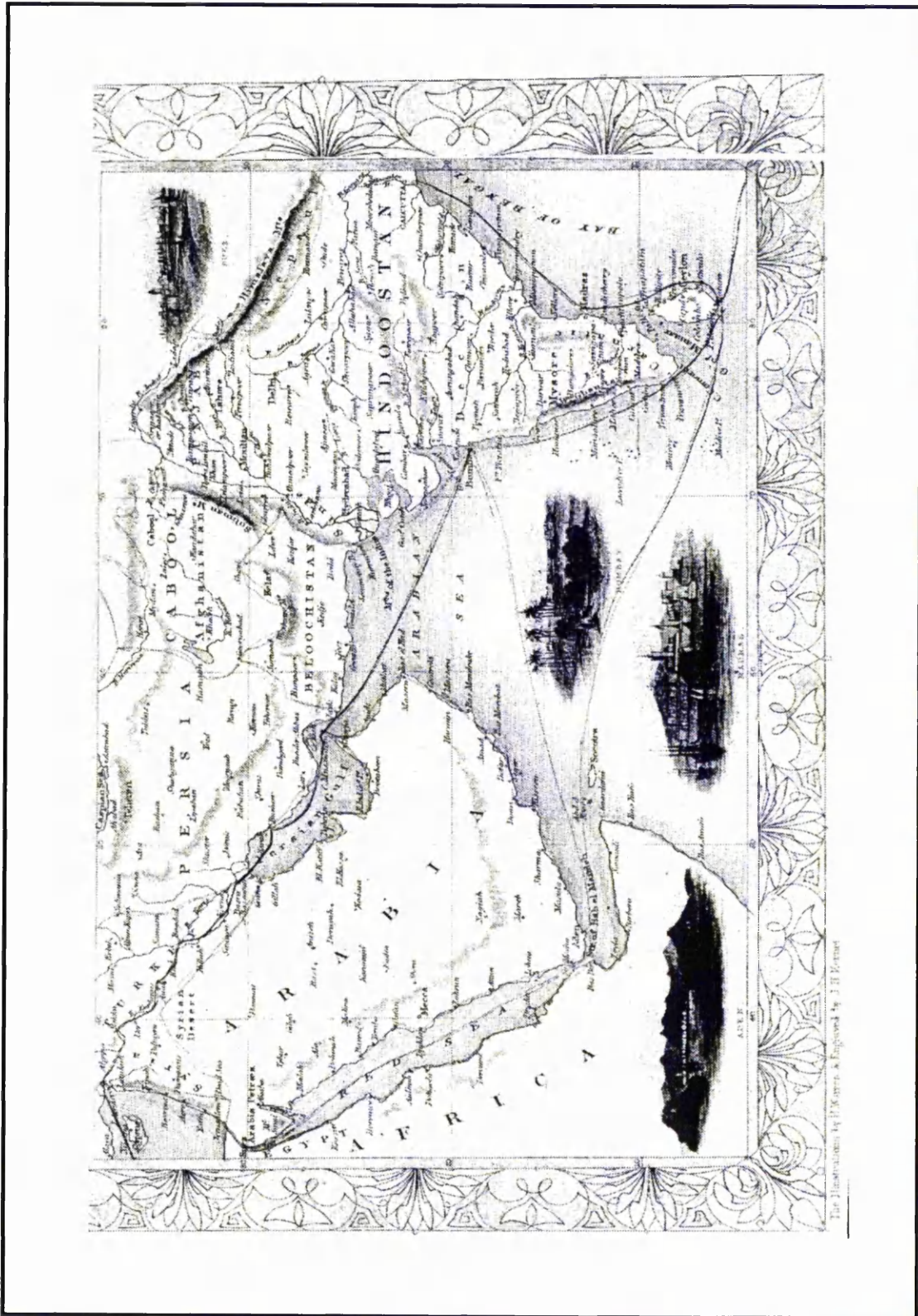
**Map 14. Lower Mesopotamia**  
 Source: Willcocks W., 'The Garden of Eden and its Restoration', (*The Geographical Journal*, Vol. XL No. 2, 1912)





**Map 15. Overland Route to India, Part I**  
 Source: Montgomery Martin R., 'The Illustrated Atlas and Modern History of the World', (London 1902)





**Map 16. Overland Route to India, Part II**  
 Source: Montgomery Martin R., 'The Illustrated Atlas and Modern History of the World', (London 1902)

threatened the British position in the Gulf region. The problem was clear: "*the 'Lake' was no lake at all, but an international waterway of steadily increasing importance in an age of imperial rivalries, diplomatic flux, and sizeable dangers to international peace of mind in the cycles of decay and revolutionary activity in the Ottoman and Persian states.*"<sup>18</sup>

In 1903, Britain's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Lansdowne, declared in the House of Lords that "*we should regard the establishment of a naval base, or a fortified port, in the Persian Gulf by any other power as a very grave menace to British interests, and we would certainly resist it with all the means at our disposal.*"<sup>19</sup> Such a stance was supported by the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, on the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1903 during a tour of the Gulf. "*We are not going to throw away this century of costly and triumphant enterprise...The peace of these waters must still be maintained...and the influence of the British government must remain supreme!*"<sup>20</sup> The Gulf area was becoming a region in which European politics were played out, and European antagonisms and designs were reflected.

#### **4.3.1. Great Britain**

British interests in the region were manifold, involving "*strategic interests of outstanding importance.*"<sup>21</sup> Of paramount importance, was the security of her routes to India, (see Map 17) seen as "*a possession which all the world envies us.*"<sup>22</sup> Therefore, keeping the waters of the Gulf free of piracy, and the land around the Gulf free of powerful contenders, became policies that the British and Indian governments spent a good deal of their energies and resources on. Oil was also a factor, although a limited one until after the 1920s. Britain's Navy ruled the Sea, and this was only possible with a secure supply of oil. Thus, protecting the operations of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, formed in 1909, and their pipelines and wells, was a significant

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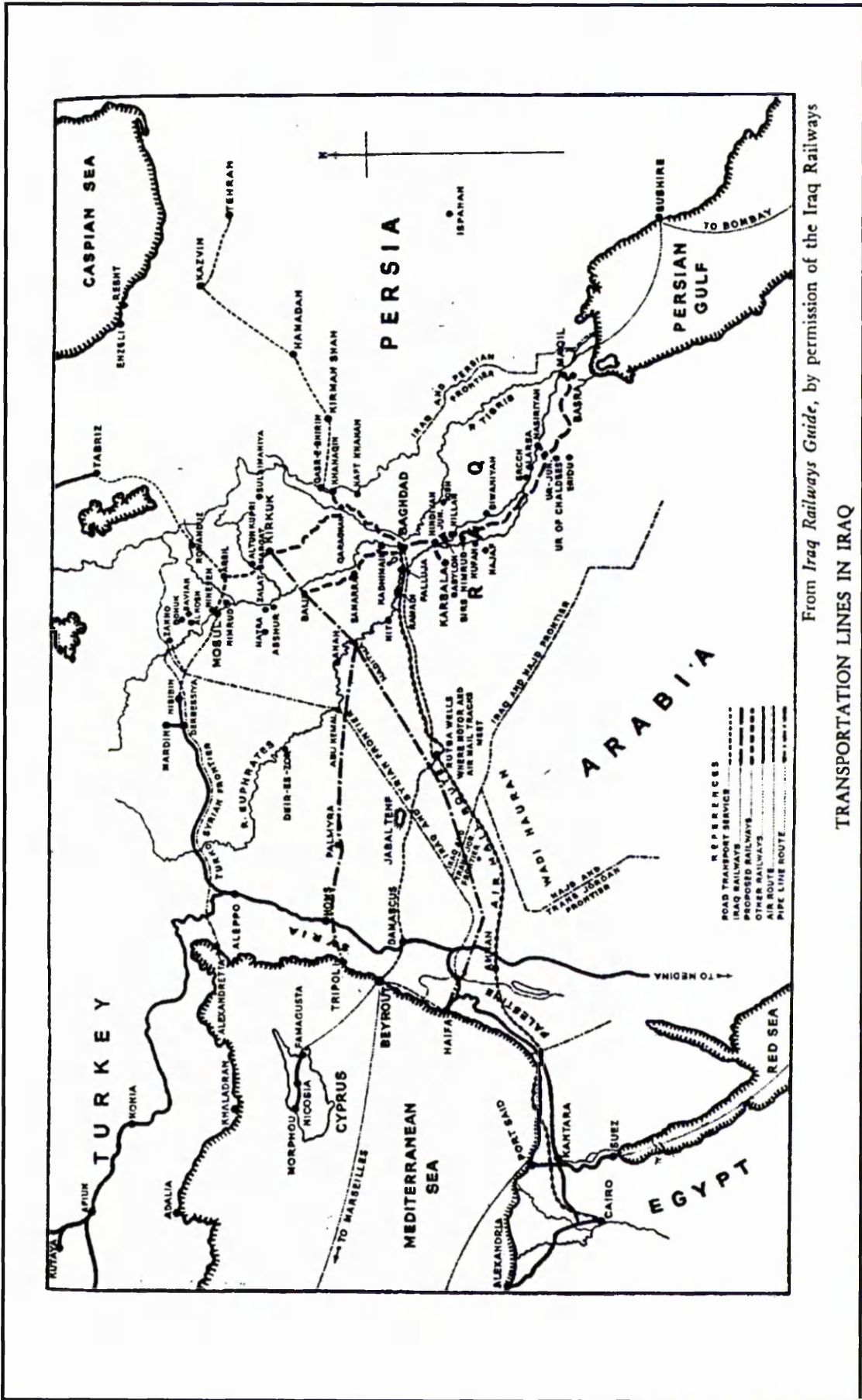
<sup>18</sup> Busch, B.C, 1967, p.1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Gooch, G.P. & Temperley, H. (eds.), 'British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914'. (London 1926-38), vol.4, p.371.

<sup>20</sup> Lorimer, J.G. 'Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia,' (Calcutta 1908); vol.1, pt.2, pp.2638-9.

<sup>21</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.112.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Fraser, David, 'The Short Cut to India: The Record of a Journey Along the Route of the Baghdad Railway,' (Blackwood & Sons, Edinburgh & London 1909), p.319.



From *Iraq Railways Guide*, by permission of the Iraq Railways

TRANSPORTATION LINES IN IRAQ

Map 17. Transportation Lines in Iraq  
 Source: Foster H.A., 'The Making of Modern Iraq: A Product of World Forces', (University of Oklahoma Press, Oklahoma, 1935)

factor. However, Cohen documents<sup>23</sup> that the India Office let it be known in 1914, that if a crisis were to arise in the area, they would be unable to spare many troops to help the Oil Company. This demonstrates that although important, oil did not drive the formation of British policy in the way that more vital British strategic interests did.

The defence of India demanded that Britain preserve its supremacy in the Gulf, threatened in the early 20th century by the construction of the Baghdad Railway. Also important was securing the control of the approaches to the Nile Valley to defend Egypt and the Suez Canal, the principal route to her empire in the east. Britain was also having to defend her position within Europe, the Near and Middle East, and even the world, by defending her interests in the area of the Straits, threatened by the advance of Germany and Russia in the area.

Britain feared that in the event of war breaking out in Europe, the Ottomans would side with the Central Powers. Then, Ottoman armies, supplied and equipped by Germany and led by German officers, might then attack Britain's position in Egypt and the Persian Gulf. They were also worried that secret agents, supported by a pan-Islamic propaganda campaign, might spark off uprisings among the people of India, Egypt and Afghanistan. If the Central Powers also gained control of the Straits, they could close the principal supply line linking the western Entente Powers, Britain and France, with Russia.<sup>24</sup> Thus, when war did break out in August 1914, Britain went to great lengths to persuade the Ottomans to remain neutral, but all offers were rejected. By the end of October 1914, the Ottomans attacked Russian shipping in the Black Sea.<sup>25</sup>

Britain's financial and commercial interests in the Ottoman Empire were by no means as extensive as its strategic interests, but they were not insignificant. The British share in the Ottoman public debt was approximately 15%, and its share of investment in

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<sup>23</sup> Cohen, S.A. 1976, pp.119-133

<sup>24</sup> see Macfie A.L. 1998, p.112.

<sup>25</sup> see Kent. M. (ed.), 'The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire'. (George, Allen & Unwin, London 1984); Macfie, A.L. 'The Straits Question, 1908-1936,' (Institute of Balkan Studies, Salonica 1993), Chpt. 2; Heller, J. 'British Policy Towards the Ottoman Empire'. (Frank Cass, London 1983)



private enterprise was 14%.<sup>26</sup> In Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf, where it had secured valuable oil concessions, it controlled two thirds of the import-export trade.<sup>27</sup> Britain also controlled certain substantial industries and institutions, including the Izmir-Aydin Railway, the National Bank of Turkey, the Euphrates and Tigris Steam Navigation Co. and the Constantinople Telephone Co.

To secure these interests in the Persian Gulf area, Britain concluded a series of treaties with the Trucial States, obliging them to acknowledge the exclusive influence of the British government. In 1907, the British agreed a secret treaty with the Shaikh of Kuwait, providing for exclusive control of land likely to be used as a terminus for the Baghdad Railway. In 1913-1914, Britain succeeded in concluding with Germany and the Ottomans, a series of agreements promising that no extension of the Baghdad Railway, from Basra to the Gulf, would be permitted without British consent.

It became increasingly clear to Britain that control of Egypt and the Suez Canal was simply not enough, as without a wider territorial control, or at least influence, it would remain in a weak strategic position. They worried about French influence in the Mediterranean, and Russian influence in the Straits – as this could still effectively close off the Suez Canal and cut Britain's communications to India. Thus, in the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Mesopotamia became increasingly important to Britain. Indeed, as early as the 1830s, "*Britain began a new initiative in Iraq associated with the development of steam navigation and the possibility of developing shorter routes to India.*"<sup>28</sup> Such steamboat experiments on the Tigris and the Euphrates proved unsuccessful, and Britain decided to direct the bulk of its energies towards the route through India and the Red Sea. However, the potential of Iraq had been highlighted, and it was an interest that Britain was to turn to increasingly in the build-up to the First World War.

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<sup>26</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.113

<sup>27</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.113.

<sup>28</sup> Yapp, M.E. 1987, p.73.

#### 4.3.2. France

France also had significant interests – which were limited mainly towards the Levant region of the Middle East. By the end of the nineteenth century, France had acquired substantial interests in the Ottoman Empire, especially in Syria and Lebanon. French enterprises were involved in the construction of harbours, the exploitation of mineral resources, and the business of production in the Ottoman Empire. French interests controlled the Regie Generale des Chemins de Fer – specialising in the construction and management of Ottoman railways, the Societe des Quais de Constantinople, the Societe d’Heraclee – a mining company, the Regie des Tabacs, and the Imperial Ottoman Bank – nominally Anglo-French – but in fact French controlled. Perhaps most significantly, French investors also held nearly two thirds of the Ottoman public debt, and such a situation may explain France’s initial policy of maintaining the Empire’s territorial integrity. Both the French Government, and private French entrepreneurs, would lose everything if the Empire collapsed.

France also had a unique interest in the Levantine areas of present-day Syria and Lebanon, due to their significant Christian populations. Since the Crusades of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, France had established extremely close cultural and religious ties with these areas, as well as with Palestine. From then on, France regarded its role as the defender of the Catholics in the Middle East, a position even recognised by the Ottoman government when they took Constantinople in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Over the following centuries, the Ottoman Empire acknowledged that France had the right to protect all Christians in the Levant, agreed that French citizens were immune from trial in Turkish courts, and granted French entrepreneurs concessions that led them to hold the powerful economic position mentioned above.<sup>29</sup>

Although clearly underpinned by other economic and strategic considerations, to the French, the Middle East also provided “*a territory for the radiation of France’s intellect and the expansion of her culture.*”<sup>30</sup> This helped to fulfill the French need for prestige to rival the British, both locally and in the global arena, which would in turn maintain the balance of power within Europe.

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<sup>29</sup> See Tanenbaum, J.K. 1978, vol.68, Pt.7, p.5.

<sup>30</sup> Dann, U. 1988, p.164



### 4.3.3. Russia

By the end of the nineteenth century, both Britain and France were becoming increasingly concerned over the ambitions of Russia in the Middle East, as these could prove a threat to their own position there. At that time, Britain and France saw the Ottoman Empire as an essential bulwark, preventing a Russian advance in the Middle and Near East. Indeed, in the Eastern Crisis of 1876-8, Britain and France stepped in to prevent the imposition on the Ottomans of the draconian Treaty of Stefano by the Russians – which included clauses that made provision for the creation of a Greater Bulgaria, incorporating Ottoman territories.<sup>31</sup> Britain and France did not want the Ottoman buffer to be weakened, especially for the benefit of an expanding Russian power.

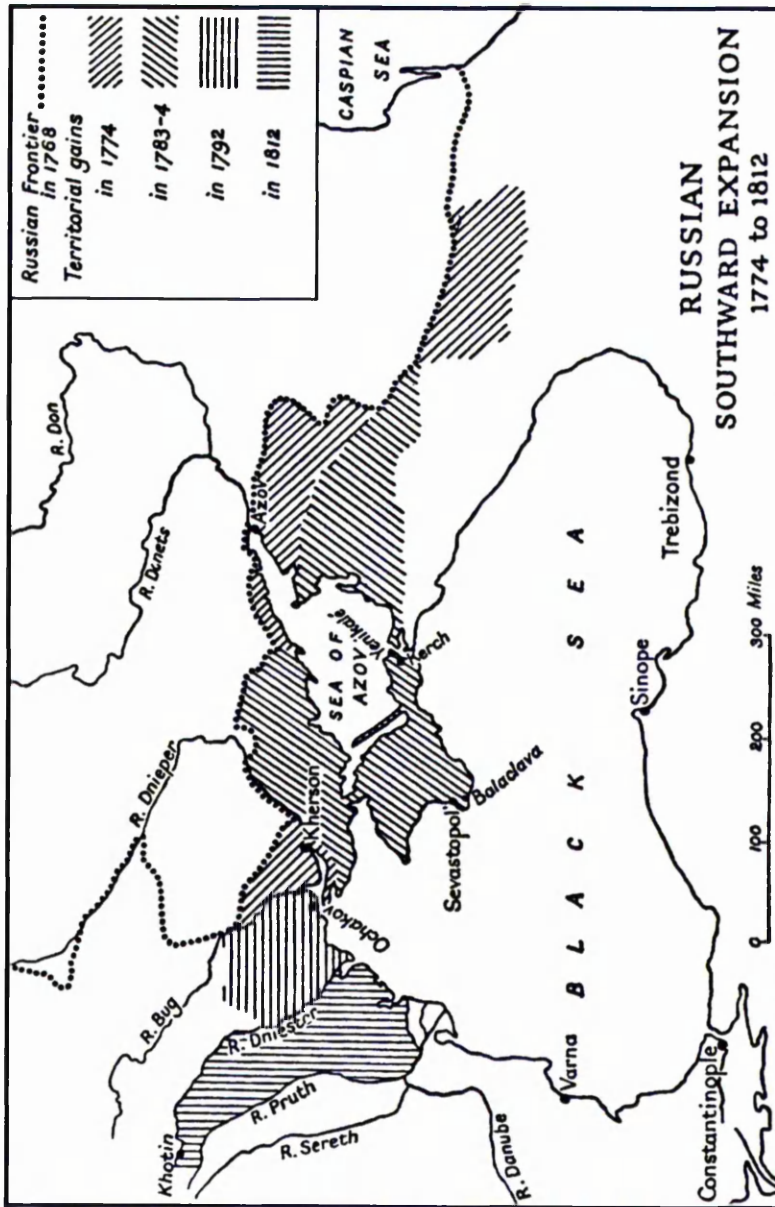
Despite this, even Russia herself saw the Ottoman Empire as a harmless neighbour, and likely to preserve a degree of stability on Russia's southern borders. However, this leaning was more than offset by Russia's support for the Balkan League during the Balkan Wars. Russia had other designs too, despite the usefulness of an intact Ottoman Empire on her southern flank, "*her attempts to have the Straits opened to Russian warships, her support for the Christian minorities...and her dreams that Constantinople, the cradle of the Russian Orthodox civilisation, might one day be liberated, tended to constantly undermine her efforts in that direction.*"<sup>32</sup> The Russians were very concerned about the nature of the regime governing the passage of the Straits, and the need to secure the stability of the area. They believed that only the opening of the Straits to Russian warships would enable Russia to maximise the potential of her naval establishment in the world. In April-May 1912, closure of the Straits for several weeks, threatened to devastate the Russian economy. This therefore, was the area that the Russians had the most interest in,<sup>33</sup> although her ambitions also extended to undermining the position of other foreign powers throughout the Ottoman region. (See Map 18).

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<sup>31</sup> Mentioned in Macfie, A.L. 1998, p. 98.

<sup>32</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.105.

<sup>33</sup> See Macfie, A.L. Chpt. 1. 1993; Zotiades, G.B. 'Russia and the question of Constantinople and the Turkish Straits during the Balkan Wars,' *Balkan Studies*, vol. 11, 1970, pp.281-298



**Map 18. Russian Southward Expansion 1774 to 1812**

Source: Anderson M.S., 'The Eastern Question, 1774 - 1923' (Macmillan Press, London, 1966)

Also perturbed by the designs of the other Great Powers in the region, before the First World War, Russia followed a policy of simply trying to increase its own influence in the Ottoman Empire. They developed their bilateral trading links, sought local newspaper support, and secured the appointment of a Russian delegate to the Ottoman Public Debt Administration Council. Such a foothold in the region was of increasing concern to other powers, in particular Britain, as shall be seen in detail later on in this chapter.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4.3.4. Germany

Germany had built up a close economic relationship with the Ottoman government from the mid-nineteenth century. In 1888, the Deutsche Bank had arranged a loan for the Sultan, and in 1889, Germany played a central role in the establishment of the Ottoman Railway Company in Anatolia. The German Levant Line set up a shipping service between Hamburg and Istanbul during the 1890s, increasing trade volumes between the two. However, "*German military and political influence in the Ottoman empire generally marched hand in hand with economic investment*,"<sup>35</sup> and from the 1880s onwards, Germany was involved in training the Ottoman army.

German interest in the Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire evolved from this more general interest in influencing the Ottoman Empire's economic and military affairs. Germany did not wish for their favoured position within the Ottoman economy to be damaged by the ambitions of France or Britain in the Empire's outlying Arab provinces. German business, one in particular, was in the Gulf as early as 1897, when Robert Wonckhaus opened a mother-of-pearl trading firm at Lingah.<sup>36</sup> Despite the Deutsche Bank arranging a loan for the Sultan in 1888, and the Germans playing a significant role in the setting up of the Ottoman Railway Company in Anatolia in 1889, it was Wonckhaus' firm which remained the only serious German interest in the region until 1906, by which time Wonckhaus was becoming aware of a change:

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<sup>34</sup> For a full explanation of the 'Russian Danger' to Britain, see Busch, B.C. 1967, chapter 4.

<sup>35</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.100

<sup>36</sup> For more details see Staley, E. 'Business and politics in the Persian Gulf: The Story of the Wonckhaus Firm,' *Political Science Quarterly*, 48 (Sept. 1933), pp.367-385.

*“About 1906 I first began to feel that Germany was beginning to get politically interested in the Gulf, and I felt from the first that she was seeking an exchange object which she could trade off with Russia and England against corresponding concessions in the Baghdad Railway affair. I wasn't on the inside and didn't know exactly, but I smelled it in the air.”<sup>37</sup>*

The Germans certainly began to show an active interest in the region. In 1906, they established a regular shipping service to the Gulf, which ran in direct competition to the longer-established British cargo business. The Germans ran an efficient, regular service, that called at ports often neglected by the British lines.

The German intention to acquire a depot in the Gulf, posed both a commercial and a strategic threat to the British.<sup>38</sup> One important example of this was when Wonckhaus sought, and obtained, a concession for mining iron oxide on the small island of Abu Musa. As soon as the British noticed German interest, they warned the Trucial shaikhs who had jurisdiction over the island, that no concessions could be granted to the German firm without first consulting the Resident.<sup>39</sup> The British firm of Strick and Co. tried to gain the concession, but it became clear in 1906, that two of the Arab holders of the concession had handed it over to the Germans. This prompted several attempts on the part of the British authorities in the region, to get the concession revoked, but each was unsuccessful.<sup>40</sup> This implies that Britain was encountering important limits to their power in the region.

In 1902-3, the Ottoman Railway Company, in which the Germans played a leading part, secured a concession to build an extension of the Anatolia railway from Konya to Baghdad and the Persian Gulf. It was these plans over the railway that really started to worry Britain. As a result of these and other developments in the decade or so preceding the First World War, German economic enterprise in the Ottoman Empire expanded rapidly. However, even more unsettling was that German military and

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<sup>37</sup> Staley, E. 1933, p.376.

<sup>38</sup> See Busch, B.C. 1967, p.355; and Letter from the Admiralty to the Foreign Office, 9 Sept. 1914. FO 371/2139 48001/14.

<sup>39</sup> Resident Agent, Sharjah, to Resident, January 16, 1905, *SF* 1/08, 617/08. The Residency Political Diary for week ending Feb. 19, 1905 (extract in *FI* 697/05) indicates that this action was ordered by the Resident himself.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, FSI to Cox, Feb. 11, 1907, *FI* 441/07; Minto to Morley, June 27, 1907, *FI* 1181/07.

political influence in the Ottoman Empire grew correspondingly with this economic investment. Germany had been involved from the 1880s in training the Ottoman army, and early on in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, German arms manufacturers began to receive substantial contracts for the supply and equipment of the Ottoman military force.

*"Nor was German economic, political and military influence in the Ottoman Empire lacking in a sense of ideological support and direction."*<sup>41</sup> In 1886, Alois Sprenger had published *'Babylon – The Richest Land in Ancient Times.'* in which he suggested that the German people colonise Asia Minor. Carl Kaeger wrote a similar work in 1892, as did the pan-German League, who published a book called *'Germany's Claims to the Turkish Inheritance.'*<sup>42</sup>

It was clear then, that German commercial, military and political influence in the Ottoman Empire before the First World War was considerable. However, they did not originally respond favourably to Istanbul's offer of joining the war on the side of the Central Powers. This was partly due to the Germans not wishing to reckon with the open hostility of Russia on the Empire's weak eastern front, and also due to a belief that the Ottoman army was still incapable of fighting a modern war, and would thus prove more of a burden to Germany, than a useful ally. Germany decided that the way forward in the Near and Middle East lay not in the preservation of the Ottoman Empire, *"but in its partition and a profitable division of the spoils."*<sup>43</sup> Maps for Asia Minor were even prepared showing a possible sphere of influence.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the German decision on the eve of the First World War to regard the Ottomans as allies, must not be seen as the culmination of a long process of economic, political and military pressure, but rather as a sudden decision, taken due to the exigencies of the moment.

#### **4.4. The Eastern Question**

Such ambitions on the world arena, coupled with the perceived weakness of the vast Ottoman Empire, led to the 'Eastern Question', an issue that each of the Great Powers

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<sup>41</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.100

<sup>42</sup> For details see: Kent, M. 1984; Henderson, W.O. 'German Economic Penetration of the Near East, 1870-1914.' *Economic History Review*, vol. 18, 1948, pp.54-64

<sup>43</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p. 102.

<sup>44</sup> See Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.102.

tackled in their own way. What was the best way for each of the powers to safe-guard their own interests in the region? How was the Ottoman Empire best dealt with? What becomes clear through the documentary evidence, is that a deeper issue was at the core of the stand-off in the Middle East. The efforts of all the major European powers were channelled into finding a solution to the conflict "*which would not upset the balance of power in Europe*".<sup>45</sup> From the British point of view, the problem boiled down to that of preventing the matter being resolved in such a way as to make Russia the predominant power in the region.

This emphasis on the balance of power is a vital factor that adds depth to the examination of the Great Power interests in this region. Many simple explanations can be enhanced when they are looked at through this framework. For example, British activity during the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been taken to indicate an over-riding concern to protect her routes to India. This was clearly an important policy. However, if Britain had merely wished to protect these routes, there was much to be said for making a deal in the 1830s with Muhammad 'Ali of Egypt, who was the strongest power in the region at that time. It seems odd then, that Lord Palmerston, then the British Foreign Secretary, always rejected this line in favour of support for the Ottoman Empire,<sup>46</sup> demonstrating that he valued the preservation of the balance of power in Europe more highly than a possible regional advantage in the Middle East.

It also becomes clear that the main rivalries were not economic, but rather rivalries of "*prestige, boundaries, armies and navies, the balance of power, and the possible shiftings in the system of alliances.*"<sup>47</sup> This can even explain the entrance of Italy on the Middle Eastern scene early on in the War. Her interests were political rather than economic, and were "*connected principally with her desire to be recognised as a full member of the Club of the Great Powers.*"<sup>48</sup> What must be stressed is that the Middle East became a good testing-ground for reflecting relative international strengths. For example, in Curzon's 1892 statement on the Gulf, he made it clear that allowing a

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<sup>45</sup> Yapp, M.E. 1987, p.59.

<sup>46</sup> see Yapp, M.E. 1987, p.73.

<sup>47</sup> Fay, Sidney, 'The Origins of the World War,' Vol. I, (Macmillan & Co., New York, 1928), p.46.

<sup>48</sup> Yapp, M.E. 1987 p.90.

Russian port in the Persian Gulf would “import an element of unrest into the life of the Gulf that would shake the delicate equilibrium so laboriously established”.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the German and Austro-Hungarian penetration of the Middle East in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was a direct reflection of their increase in stature within Europe. Such a process is aptly highlighted by the question of the Baghdad Railway. In 1872, a special committee from the House of Commons gave careful consideration to the Euphrates River Valley Project, but decided that they would let their interest in this Mesopotamian route to India lapse, in favour of the Suez Canal. However, in 1902, the Ottomans granted the concession to build a railway to Mesopotamia to the Germans, and it was then that Britain suddenly took an interest. Control of the railway was of prime strategic concern. Britain wished to prevent German control of this communications link, “lest such a possession...facilitate the invasion of India or disturb our political prestige.”<sup>50</sup> This was Anglo-German politics, simply being played out on an arena outside of Europe.

Yapp contends that the important element to remember during this period of Middle Eastern history, is that for each of the Powers, the Middle East was subsidiary to Europe, and their relations with the Middle East subsidiary to their relations with one another in Europe. Their main concern was that changes in the distribution of power in the Middle East should not affect the balance of power in Europe. Indeed, “the larger crises of European relations set up sizeable eddies in the Gulf. Fashoda, the Boer War, the Russo-Japanese War, the formation of the European alliance system – each had its effect on the situation in the Gulf.”<sup>51</sup> Despite this it would be untrue to say that the European Powers’ interests in the region had not developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Britain had marked out an informal system of control from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf, running between the land bases of Egypt and India. Of course, India was the reason that the route was strategically important, and the route was much more vital to Britain for that reason than it was to Germany or France. Russia had also created a large land empire for herself, whilst France, Germany and Italy had all established important footholds for themselves, of economic, political and cultural

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<sup>49</sup> Lord Curzon, ‘Persia and the Persian Question,’ (Longmans, Green & Co., London 1892), p.465.

<sup>50</sup> Memorandum, Signed G. Hamilton, March 1900, *FI* 338/00

<sup>51</sup> Busch, B.C. 1967, p.4.

influence. However, all such advances must be seen in the context of not wishing to upset the balance in Europe.

The geographical element of global, regional and local politics is crucial, as politics are played out in geographically differentiated areas. As we have seen, the relative location of an area in the global system, is a function of the position accorded it at any given time by other states within the system. It becomes clear after an analysis of all the Great Power interests in the Near East before 1914, that the interest lay not in the land *per se*, but almost purely in its geographical location. The Middle East was of importance to various powers, *because of where it was positioned, relative to their other interests*. Thus, for Britain, it was Egypt and India that were of prime concern, and Iraq became the object of Britain's foreign policy interest, simply due to its relative location in respect to India. To stretch a point: if Iraq, with all the same resources, political structures and population, had been in South America, it would have been of little interest to Britain, and any interest would have been of a quite different nature.

Such ideas feed easily into Mackinder's Heartland theory. He too stressed the importance of the geographical location of an area. Mackinder was convinced that the region of Euro-Asia was the pivot region of the world's politics – the meeting place between the sea-powers of Europe and the land-power of the Asiatic 'Heartland' – and such a view certainly seems to give some insight into the position of the Near East in the global political manoeuvrings around the First World War. His theory stressed that the world at that time had become an almost closed system of states after the huge technological advances in communications, with the balance of advantage and disadvantage, oscillating between land power and sea power. It seems obvious therefore, why such a struggle should be transferred to one of the only regions left in the world where the system had not yet fully closed. The political system within the Near East was still malleable, and each of the Great Powers wished to shape it to their advantage. In this sense, we see that a significant element of the importance that each power attached to this region, was purely due to thwarting the interests that *others* held there.



Leading up to the First World War, it could be argued that this imperative of maintaining the balance of power in Europe lost some of its importance. Another factor was becoming dominant:

*“By 1914, the outstanding element in determining the attitudes of the Great Powers towards the Near East was prestige. Neither the protection of the routes of empire nor economic interest nor even the balance of power in Europe weighed, in the end, against prestige. In order that they might remain great, Great Powers demanded to be treated as great...The integrity of the Ottoman Empire was like a bank on which the Great Powers could draw to make up the balance of their prestige. When the bank was exhausted there was no longer an easy line of credit in the Near East; such was the fate of Austria and Russia in 1914.”*<sup>52</sup>

Even with the issue of prestige, however, we can still understand the interest in the Middle East through a geopolitical framework. Old school diplomacy and politics was moving on from bulwarks and fortified positions, and prestige became an important prize on the global stage. This interest in the Middle East can therefore still be seen as individual Great Powers trying to carve out their niche in a region, just to demonstrate their global position. Prestige was simply another method of warning off a potential threat.

## **4.5. Specific Histories of the Great Powers in the Middle East: Before 1915**

### **4.5.1. Anglo-Russian Relations**

A period of modest co-operation between Russia and Britain in the Near East broke down in 1854 with the outbreak of the Crimean War. Russia sought to control the Orthodox Christian population of the Ottoman Empire, whilst Britain and France backed the Ottomans. The war ended in 1856, and resulted in the formation of a European coalition against Russia, and the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire was guaranteed by the major European powers. The Black Sea was neutralised, and banned to all warships, including Russian.

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<sup>52</sup> Yapp, M.E. 1987, p.92.

The Russians moved their attentions to the regions east of the Ottoman Empire, and conquered the Caucasus, moving on to extend into Turkestan. Such advances by Russia in Central Asia began to cause concern again in Britain and India.<sup>53</sup> This profound suspicion of Russia climaxed in the Eastern Crisis of 1875-8. This was similar to other 19th century eastern crises involving the Ottoman Empire, in that disturbances within the Empire attracted the interest of outside powers.

The Crisis had two important impacts on Britain. Firstly, there was the emergence of anti-Ottoman public opinion that acted as a major constraint upon policy in the East. Atrocities committed against the Bulgarians had raised very strong feelings against the Ottomans, and this antipathy was to have considerable influence in the future, especially during and after the First World War.

This Eastern Crisis was also the first time that the problem of security of routes to India had been clearly stated in connection with the fate of the Ottoman Empire – notably in Lord Derby's (the British foreign secretary), note of 6<sup>th</sup> May 1877,<sup>54</sup> in which he summarised British interests in the issue. Now the fate of Mesopotamia was given greater significance in relation to Russian advances in eastern Asia Minor and the routes to India.

The Indian government was very concerned about an emerging Russian spearhead from Central Asia towards Afghanistan or Tibet, leading to the security of this Gulf-Tibet Crescent being the cornerstone of Indian foreign policy. Such an Indian view of Russia at the turn of the century is demonstrated by Lord Ronaldshay, the biographer for Lord Curzon.

*"Whose the grey-clad sentinel through all the clash of conflicting interests stands threateningly on the shores of the Eastern Sea, a menace to British commercial aspirations and to the peace of the nations of the world? The answer is for ever the same – Russia's!"*<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> see Yapp, M.E. 1987, p.75.

<sup>54</sup> mentioned in Yapp, M.E. 1987, p.81

<sup>55</sup> Earl of Ronaldshay, 'On the Outskirts of Empire in Asia', (Blackwood & Sons, London, 1904), pp.320-321.

Such a view was consistent with that of Lord Curzon himself, who stated in his 1892 work on Persia: "*I should regard the concession of a port upon the Persian Gulf to Russia by any Power as a deliberate insult to Great Britain, as a wanton rupture of the status quo.*"<sup>56</sup>

This issue was set to divide opinion, with the main fault-line running between the priorities of the British and the Indian governments. However, even Godley, the Permanent Under-Secretary in the India Office leant more towards the 'defeatist' side of the argument, believing that Russia was bound to gain a port in the Gulf sooner or later, and therefore there was little point in trying to undermine this 'inevitability'. "*If we retain the command of the sea, the fact of Russia's having a port in the Gulf, though disagreeable, will not be a vital matter: and if we do not retain it, we shall not retain our dominion in India, or our trade with the East.*"<sup>57</sup>

Curzon however, remained adamant that letting in the Russians would spell disaster for Britain, and stated his views strongly in his famous dispatch of September 21, 1899. In this dispatch he analysed British interests in the Persian Gulf, examined the challenges facing Britain from Russia, France, Germany and Turkey, suggested future avenues for British policy, and also discussed the respective responsibility of the British and Indian governments in this affair. Curzon's clear message was that more naval power was needed in the region and Britain's entire stance on the issue had to be reinforced. Protection of British interest and position, if necessary by the expansion of official governmental responsibility, was the core of his policy throughout his viceroyalty. It was not a policy that could be accepted without question at Home. Hamilton, the Secretary of State for India, back in London, displayed the rift developing between India and Britain regarding foreign policy. He explained to Curzon in a private message that the Gulf and Persia were parts of an extreme bastion, and that if Britain pushed too far in that direction, she may force the rise of a European combination directed against her.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Lord Curzon, 1892, p.465. Also quoted in Busch, B.C. 1967, p.115

<sup>57</sup> Godley private to Curzon, March 15, 1899, *Curzon Mss.*

<sup>58</sup> See Hamilton private to Curzon, Jan 26 1900, *Curzon Mss.*

Hamilton also signed an important memorandum in which his views on the issue were clearly set out.

*"In our constant struggle against the growth of Russian influence in Turkey, China and Persia, we recently have not sufficiently acknowledged the changed conditions under which the contest proceeds. As Russia annexes territory she contrives with adroitness and determination to so assimilate the territory absorbed that in a short time it becomes a reliable stepping-stone for a fresh move. Our base of operations is the sea. We remain where we are: Russia steadily moves on. Our influence stands still: Russia's progresses...In the past we were more successful because sea communication gave us a power of concentrating naval force at any given spot on the coast which no one nation could withstand. Railways now give to a great military power on land the advantages that we used to enjoy on the sea: but we have not seriously attempted to adapt our policy to the changed circumstances of modern locomotion. We are constantly proclaiming interests in territories more extensive than we can absorb, utilise or protect...Have we the right to say that the civilised world is to be deprived of the benefit of railway access to the Persian Gulf, because it will impinge upon the monopoly of sea-borne traffic we there possess? Can we say that, because Persia is next to Baluchistan and Baluchistan next India, therefore no one is to have any part of Persia, or any port in the Gulf, lest such a possession might facilitate the invasion of India or disturb our political prestige? ...Let us concentrate our attention on that which is essential to us, which we can hold, and let us not interfere with Germany getting her foot into this region. Let us, without in any way encouraging Russia to get a port in the Gulf, avoid basing our whole policy upon the idea that we ought to and can ultimately prevent her from accomplishing this object."*<sup>59</sup>

The above extract offers an insight into the changing power structure at the turn of the century. Sea power was perceived to be losing its edge (as claimed by Mackinder in 1904), and therefore Britain had to accept that its far-flung empire could not receive the same support as before. Many echoed Hamilton's stance:

*"What right have we to stop (the creation of rival interests)...except the right of might? What might have we with our army locked up in S. Africa? [sic]...It is*

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<sup>59</sup> Memorandum, signed G.Hamilton, March 1900, *FI* 338/00. Cited in Busch, B.C. 1967, pp.237-238

*undoubtedly a peril to India, and therefore to us and to our overseas dominions, that the illusion which we have long cherished of the Persian Gulf being under our control should be shattered. But the claim rested upon nothing except the tolerance or indifference of European powers, and our overwhelming Navy. These however are no longer indifferent, nor is our Navy what it was in relation to others. We cannot stop, nor have we the right to stop, the creation of rival interests.*"<sup>60</sup>

The matter eventually resolved itself with Lansdowne's dispatch to Lord Hardinge, the Secretary of Embassy in Petersburg, in which he clearly indicated the British position. Britain would present no obstacles to the efforts of Russia to establish commercial bases for her trade in the Gulf, but they warned Russia that any attempt to acquire a military or naval station in the Gulf must be seen as a challenge to Great Britain and her empire.<sup>61</sup>

#### **4.5.2. Anglo-Ottoman Relations**

It is inaccurate to think that to Britain and possibly France, goes all the credit or blame for the modern political structure of the Gulf and Levant's Arab states. This underestimates the role of the Arab leaders, and more importantly, "*completely ignores the role played by the most important regional state in the pre-World War I period, the Ottoman Empire.*"<sup>62</sup>

Any discussion about the Great Powers in the Middle East before the First World War would be incomplete without an examination of the Ottoman Empire. Although often thought of as a decaying, failing power, the 'Sick Man of Europe', the Empire had actually begun a revival under the Tanzimat reform era. It was the choice to join forces with Germany in the First World War that sealed its fate. The Ottomans had attempted to absorb the Arabian peninsula again in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, to act as a bulwark defence against foreign encroachment. In the years preceding 1870, the world had begun to undergo startling changes. The revolution in communications had

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<sup>60</sup> Lee-Warner minute, November 26, 1901. *FI 1276a/01*

<sup>61</sup> Lansdowne to Hardinge, January 6, 1902, *Brit. Doc.*, IV, No.321a.

<sup>62</sup> Anscombe, F. 1997, p.1. However, this thesis argues that the *dominant* shaping forces were external *push* factors, but that certain internal forces should also be recognized. For other viewpoints on this see Karsh, E. & Karsh, I. 'Empires of the Sand,' (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1999)

brought the world within "*easy striking distance of the Ottoman Empire.*"<sup>63</sup> The new, rapid transit of messages, men and material greatly increased European pressure on these once remote provinces.

The Ottomans saw that order in Najd would help to subdue a hinterland that provided a refuge to tribes beyond the jurisdiction of the Sherif of Mecca, and would secure direct land links between Iraq and the Hijaz. A base in Hasa would allow a quicker reaction to the threat of Wahhabis from Riyadh, who in the past had raided Iraq, Syria and the Hijaz. If foreign powers established bases in the south, they could easily agitate the unchecked tribes of the interior. Security for the shipping lanes between Basra and Jiddah also gained importance as Iraq became a major supplier of grain to the Hijaz after 1864.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the scope of British interests, as perceived by the Ottomans, "*seemed to threaten Ottoman supremacy not only in the southern Gulf, but in Iraq as well.*"<sup>65</sup> The Ottomans suspected well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Britain wished to establish a land link from India to Egypt. In fact, the laying of telegraph cable in the 1860s from India to Fao at the southern tip of Iraq, "*confirmed official British interest in strengthening ties to the Gulf.*"<sup>66</sup>

To meet these challenges on the state's southern borders, the Ottomans made vigorous efforts to expand their effective control over territory and land, and make Asia a complete unit of their empire by overhauling their defence and administration. Thus the Ottomans brought eastern Arabia within the empire's boundaries due to concern over British influence in a vulnerable border region. Perceptions and mis-perceptions of British activities and intentions affected changes within Ottoman strategic and administrative policies throughout the 4 decades of their rule south of Basra. The irony is that this neurosis regarding Britain actually contributed to the Ottomans' poor performance in the Gulf. "*Overblown suspicion often diverted scarce resources to meet unlikely outside threats instead of to fix problems caused by maladministration.*"<sup>67</sup> Even more ironic was the fact that although Britain was interested in Iraq, and the stability of the Gulf region, "*Britain was concerned with*

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<sup>63</sup> Anscombe, F. 1997, p.16.

<sup>64</sup> Lorimeer, J.G. 1908, p.1448-9.

<sup>65</sup> Anscombe, F. 1997, p.19.

<sup>66</sup> Anscombe, F. 1997, p.19.

<sup>67</sup> Anscombe, F. 1997, p.2

*maritime affairs, and if the Ottomans had governed the mainland effectively, Britain would not have become entangled in the territories... ”<sup>68</sup>*

For Britain, the greatest concern before the First World War was the security of India, and one of the most direct routes from Britain and India ran along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and through the Persian Gulf. Therefore, it was not by coincidence that Iraq was the site of the first and longest-running campaign of <sup>the</sup> First World War in the Middle East. The British needed freedom of movement on this route, and thus negotiated agreements with Arab shaikhs who controlled coasts close to shipping channels. The extension of Ottoman power down the coast as far as Qatar alarmed Britain, as it seemed to threaten its web of agreements. *“As apparent Ottoman indifference to issues of maritime peace and trade increasingly irritated them, the British grew ever more willing to widen the scope of their policies.”<sup>69</sup>* If the Ottomans had been an effective power for the prevention of piracy, and the maintenance of policing on the Gulf, Britain would gladly have divested herself of these duties.<sup>70</sup> Britain did not want to overtax India’s limited resources in the Gulf.

It is important to note that the causes of Anglo-Ottoman tensions in the Gulf during this period were largely due to *perceived* weaknesses in their regional positions, and due to these misinterpretations of the other’s attitudes and intentions, each empire felt impelled to act more offensively than circumstances might have dictated. In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain’s attitude gradually hardened into a position of challenging Ottoman authority throughout Arabia. The long-standing piracy problem spurred Britain into an increasingly aggressive stance. For example, they decided that, although tacitly accepting Qatar as under Ottoman rule, it would deal with pirates without reference to the Ottoman’s territorial water limit – despite breaking international law.<sup>71</sup> This was a crucial step towards Britain’s eventual, northward-creeping denial of Ottoman claims to sovereignty over certain points on the coast. An added catalyst to this was Britain’s increasing worry about the entrance of new powers in the region, such as Russia’s plan to build a railway from Syria to Kuwait at

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<sup>68</sup> Anscombe, F.1997, p.1

<sup>69</sup> Anscome, F. 1997, p.3

<sup>70</sup> Lorimeer, J.G. 1908, p.896 – from the Indian government Secretary of State and Foreign Affairs to the Iranian minister in London.

the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *“If realised, the scheme threatened to penetrate the carefully constructed buffer around India.”*<sup>72</sup> Thus in 1899, Britain concluded a nonalienation bond with Mubarak of Kuwait, which secured Britain’s position.

In 1910, the Ottomans finally began negotiating with Britain to establish recognised spheres of influence in Arabia, within broader talks about the Baghdad Railway and Iraq. Agreement was reached on May 6, 1913, with Istanbul renouncing claims to Qatar and Bahrain, and Kuwait becoming an ‘autonomous’ kaza of the Ottoman Empire. In return, Britain recognised Hasa as Ottoman.<sup>73</sup> It was hard for the Ottomans to accept a withdrawal from Muslim lands, *“but it was worthwhile if it secured a defensive line south of Iraq that could be tenable until the empire’s fortunes rebounded.”*<sup>74</sup>

#### **4.6. Moving Towards Partition**

The most crucial concern of British foreign policy at the turn of the century, in the Middle East as elsewhere, was *“should England stand alone in isolation or search for allies – and, if the latter, which allies? Put another way: should concessions be made to this or that power, including concessions in the Gulf, to win friends for diplomatic issues of a higher order?”*<sup>75</sup> The pre-war decades were characterised by old-school diplomacy, which dealt more with the tangibles of protectorates, spheres of influence, and fortified strategic positions, than in the more modern concerns of local goodwill or compromise. The era where great powers could stand alone seemed to coming to an end. In a sense, this was the global system becoming closed even in this part of the world. The room for manoeuvre for the Great Powers was shutting down. (See Map 19).

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British military Indian policies were run with the increasing likelihood of a Russian invasion in mind. Such a pressure prompted Britain

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<sup>71</sup> See: Lorimeer, J.G. 1908, pp.977-999. At that time, the international territorial water limit was three nautical miles.

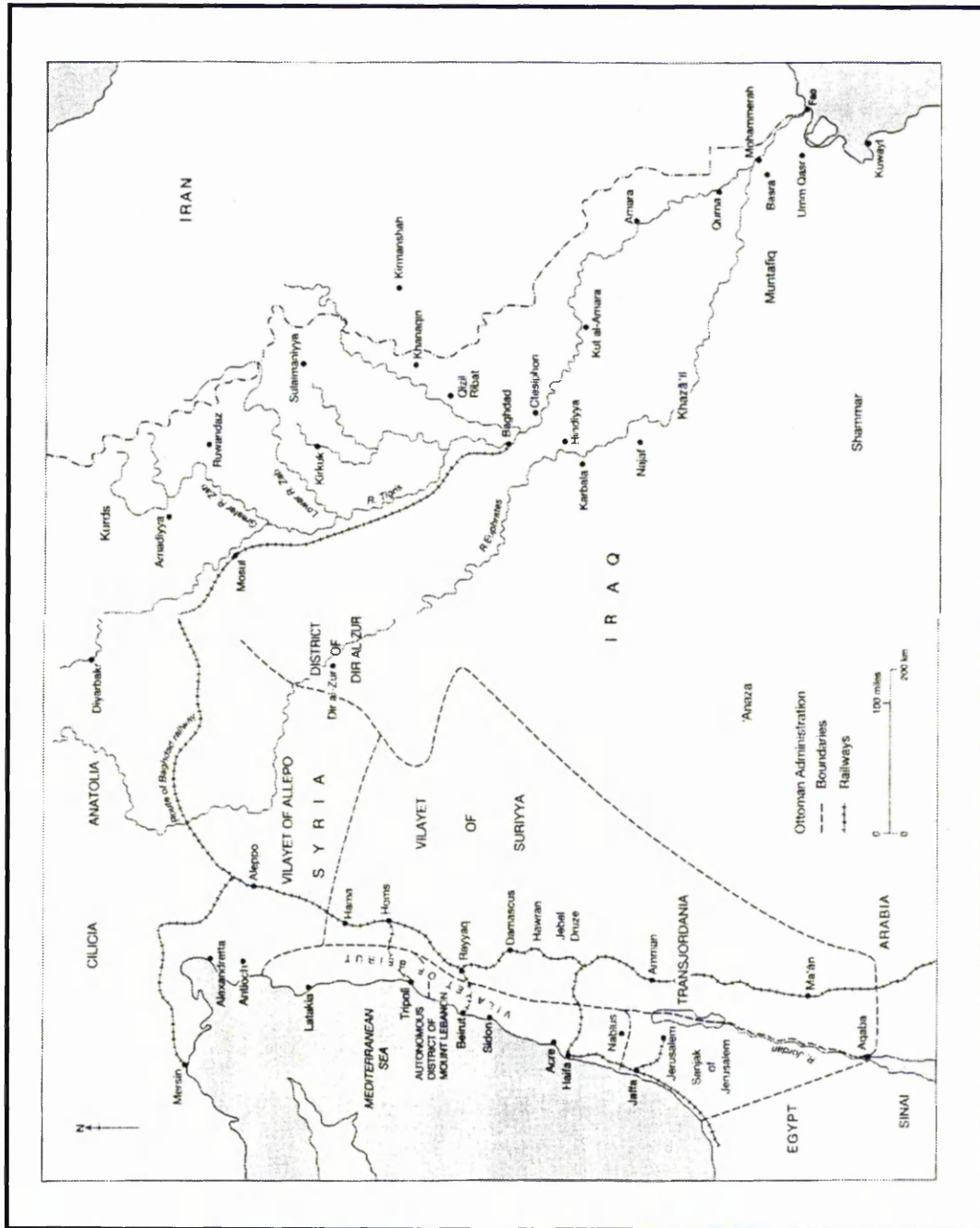
<sup>72</sup> Anscombe, F. 1997, p.110.

<sup>73</sup> For details see Busch, B.C. ‘Britain,’ 1967, pp.319-40; Finnie, D.H. ‘Shifting Lines in the Sand: Kuwait’s Elusive Frontier with Iraq,’ (Harvard University Press, 1992), pp.35-38.

<sup>74</sup> Anscombe, F. 1997, p.165.

<sup>75</sup> Busch, B.C. 1967, p.235.





**Map 19. Syria and Iraq on the Eve of the First World War**  
 Source: Yapp M.E., 'The Making of the Modern Near East 1792 - 1923', (Longman, London, 1987)

to reach agreement with Russia in 1907. This resolved nearly all of the great disputes between them, and it was hoped would halt the advance of Russia in Central Asia and prevent the collapse of British power in India. Iran was divided into spheres of influence, and the Russian threat seemed to subside. However, the Indian government was not consulted over the 1907 Agreement, and did not agree with it. This again displays European interests taking precedence over the affairs of India.

Radicals in Britain also opposed the treaty as an accord "*concluded with the most despotic autocracy in Europe.*"<sup>76</sup> Proponents of the Accord pointed to the fact that Britain had gained an ally against Germany, and that the danger of a Russo-German alliance against Britain had been temporarily removed.<sup>77</sup> Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, wrote about the Accord, saying: "*The gain to us was great. We were freed from an anxiety that had often preoccupied British Governments; a frequent source of friction and a possible cause for war was removed; the prospect of peace was made more secure.*"<sup>78</sup>

However, the agreement did prove disappointing for Britain, as Russia continued its advances in Asia. Britain felt unable to challenge Russia for fear that they may side with the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Thus, a policy of conciliation began, and the preservation of friendly relations with Russia became paramount to Britain in the years leading up to the First World War. Anglo-Ottoman relations must be seen within this context. Even whilst Britain remained generally committed to preserving the Ottoman empire, "*when pressed to do so by the Russians, they repeatedly sacrificed Ottoman (and indeed British) interests to the greater imperative.*"<sup>79</sup> For example, in 1906-7, the Russians were pressing for more access to the Straits and Britain responded favourably, desperate to preserve good relations, and despite upsetting the Ottomans. Issues in the Balkan wars also initiated a similar response from Britain to Russian demands. British policy seemed almost

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<sup>76</sup> Busch. B.C. 1967, p.368.

<sup>77</sup> see Busch, B.C. 1967, pp.368-369. Also see Monger, G. 'The End of Isolation: British Foreign Policy, 1900-1907.' (Nelson, London, 1963), p.282

<sup>78</sup> Viscount Grey of Fallodon. 'Twenty-five Years, 1892-1916.' (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1925), Vol.I, p.154.

<sup>79</sup> Macfie. A.L. 1998, p.117

wholly determined by the wish to keep on friendly terms with Russia.<sup>80</sup> “So pronounced indeed, was Britain’s support for Russia in this period that Djemal, the CUP leader, wondered if the British had not already agreed on a policy of partition.”<sup>81</sup> Here, it can be argued again that it was not the Middle East that was of importance to these Great Powers: it was purely their relationships to each other. Such a stance is of importance, as it could be argued that the Ottoman entrance into the First World War on the side of the Central Powers, can be partly explained by this British policy to please Russia at all costs, and not simply to do with the influence of Germany over the Ottoman Empire.

#### 4.6.1. The Constantinople Agreement, March 1915

In November 1914, following the entry of the Ottomans into the War, the British, concerned that the Russians may withdraw forces from the western front to attempt to seize Constantinople and the Straits, sought Russian assurances that they would refrain. Russia agreed on condition that she receive assurances from her western allies that she would gain all that she claimed with regard to the Straits – which may or may not mean the partition of the Ottoman Empire after the war.<sup>82</sup> In March 1915, the Russians demanded that Britain and France acknowledge the Russian possession of the Straits and the incorporation of Constantinople into the Russian Empire. In return, they would accommodate whatever demands Britain and France would put forward regarding their interests in other parts of the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere.<sup>83</sup> She also made it clear that if they did not support Russian ‘national aspirations’ in that area, the consequences would be dire. Britain and France took this to mean that Russia would break off their relations with the western allies, and broker a deal with Germany. Thus, on March 8, 1915, France responded favourably, and Britain followed on March 10. A more precise definition of French and British designs on the region would have to await further consideration.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Hinsley, F.H. (ed.), ‘British Foreign Policy Under Sir Edward Grey.’ (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977), p.345.

<sup>81</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.118; Heller, J. ‘Britain and the Armenian Question, 1912-1913: A Study in Real Politik.’ *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 16, no.1 (1980), pp.3-27; Djemal Pasha, ‘Memoirs of a Turkish Statesman.’ (Arno Press, New York 1973), p.69.

<sup>82</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1993, Ch.2. Also See Sir F. Bertie to Foreign Office, FO 371/2449

<sup>83</sup> See Sir Buchanan to Sir Edward Grey, March 27, 1915, FO 371/2449. Includes 3 enclosures, including a statement from the Russians.

<sup>84</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1993. p.54-66.

The conclusion of the March Agreement in 1915, forced the western Entente Powers to undertake a radical re-evaluation of their ambitions in the Near and Middle East. Britain decided that to protect her empire in Asia against the threat posed by the strong Russian position, it would be necessary to create a strategic line of defence, running from the Persian Gulf (Baghdad maybe, or Basra), to the Mediterranean (Alexandretta). Lord Kitchener, the British Secretary of State for War explained this position in a memo:

*"the area which is here proposed to incorporate undoubtably offers a prolonged flank to Russia for possible attack from the side of Armenia and Kurdistan, and to this extent it produces an unsatisfactory strategical situation. But it seems to be a choice of evils. It is a question of gaining complete control over the great line of communications to India...or to leave that line permanently to another Great Power or Great Powers, which would thus dominate the Mediterranean terminus. It should obviously be no part of our programme to create a frontier coterminus with that of Russia; but it is to be hoped that sufficient remains of the Ottoman Empire will be left to ensure a Turkish or Armenian buffer state stretching from Anatolia to the Persian border. But, even a frontier coterminus with Russia, with all its grave drawbacks, would be preferable to a Franco-Russian domination of the line from the Gulf of Iskanderun to the Persian Gulf."*<sup>85</sup>

Unfortunately for Britain, France had already staked out her claim in Syria and Palestine.<sup>86</sup> In April 1915, the De Bunsen Committee was set up to consider British *desiderata* in Asiatic Turkey.<sup>87</sup> Britain had still not fully decided on the principle of partitioning the Ottoman Empire. The De Bunsen Committee considered 4 possible solutions to the problem:

- 1) a policy of outright partition, with the survival of only a small Ottoman state in Anatolia.

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<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Macfie. A.L. 1993, p.71; Such a threat is also mentioned in the de Bunsen Committee report, June, 1915. CAB 42/3, para. 43, in which the committee states: '*With Russia as our immediate neighbour in Mesopotamia we should have to make provision for the defence of the annexed territory against a nation which put in the field in Manchuria an army exceeding three quarters of a million men.*'

<sup>86</sup> See French Ambassador in Petrograd to Russian Foreign Minister, 14 March 1915, FO 371/2449

<sup>87</sup> De Bunsen Committee Report, June 1915. CAB 42/3

- 2) The preservation of the Ottoman Empire, subject to the exercise of Great Power control in zones of political and commercial influence.
- 3) The preservation of the Ottoman Empire in Asia as an independent state.
- 4) The creation of a de-centralised Ottoman state in Asia, reconstructed along federal lines, possibly including 5 semi-autonomous units of Syria, Palestine, Armenia, Anatolia and Jazirah-Iraq.

To the Committee, their analysis of British interests in the region, "*shows how the Persian Gulf and the growth of our position there dominate our policy, and compel us for good or ill to claim our share in the disintegrating Turkish Empire.*"<sup>88</sup>

The Committee in particular "*identified Iraq as the centre of British aspirations, seeing that region as a logical extension of the existing British position in the Persian Gulf.*"<sup>89</sup> The de Bunsen report emphasised the importance of Mesopotamia to the British position in the region. "*Commercial and strategic considerations therefore combine to make the committee regard the vilayets of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul as the area of greatest interest to Great Britain in the event of a partition of Turkey.*"<sup>90</sup>

However, the Committee favoured the 4<sup>th</sup> option, (as long as they could have an influence over the unit of Iraq), which they believed would best meet the needs of British imperial defence, and the communities involved.<sup>91</sup> But, by this time, the momentum leading to partition, all too evident in the de Bunsen analysis of the problem, had become unstoppable.

#### 4.6.2. Anglo-French Relations

In December 1915, Sir Mark Sykes, an assistant secretary in the British War Cabinet, member of the de Bunsen Committee, and an enthusiastic convert to the principle of partition, began talks with Francois Georges Picot, a French diplomat. The resulting agreement of Jan 1916 became known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement.<sup>92</sup> In this, they delimited the territories in which, in the event of a victorious outcome to the war and

<sup>88</sup> De Bunsen Committee Report, June, 1915. CAB 42/3. Para. 14.

<sup>89</sup> Yapp. M.E. 1987, p.276. Also see the de Bunsen Report, June 1915. CAB 42/3, 'Preliminary Considerations', para's. 1-16, in which the importance of Mesopotamia to Britain is highlighted.

<sup>90</sup> De Bunsen Report, June 1915. CAB 42/3. Para. 28

<sup>91</sup> For more about the deliberations of the de Bunsen Committee, and British designs on Iraq, see Klieman, A.S. 'Britain's War Aims in the Middle East in 1915.' In *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 3, no. 3 (1968), pp.237-253; PRO, London, CAB 42/3/12 Asiatic Turkey, Report of a Committee.

a Russian occupation of Constantinople and the Straits, Britain and France might exercise direct and indirect influence and control. The French felt that they were to be the biggest losers should the Ottoman Empire be destroyed, and so wished to be properly compensated for the loss of her privileged economic and social position within the pre-war Ottoman empire. This compensation, they decided, should be Syria – where French cultural, political and religious interests were greatest.<sup>93</sup> The British focus was very much on retaining control in Mesopotamia.

*“In the Baghdad-Basra region of lower Iraq, Britain, it was agreed, might exercise direct control; in the Syrian littoral, France. In the remainder of the Fertile Crescent and the Syrian desert, Britain might exercise indirect control in the south, France in the north. Britain would in addition obtain control of a small enclave on the Palestinian coast, including Haifa and Acra, possible termini of a railway linking the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean. The rest of Palestine might be placed under an international administration.”*<sup>94</sup>

These Anglo-French negotiations were held up for some time by an issue that seemed to fundamentally divide them – that of Arab independence. As early as 1915, the British had impressed upon the Russians that whilst they would consider Russian demands in the Ottoman territories, *“His Majesty’s Government have stipulated that the Mussulman Holy Places and Arabia shall under all circumstances remain under independent Mussulman dominion.”*<sup>95</sup> The British were worried about provoking the hostility of the Ottoman sultan-caliph and his effect on Muslims everywhere.

Therefore it was desirable to have a pole of Muslim attraction in a British sphere of influence. An added incentive was that a loyal Arab following may weaken France’s position in the region, to Britain’s advantage. As early as November 1914, Horatio Kitchener, the British War Minister, foresaw the possibility of using British-controlled Arabs to oust France from Syria:

*“Supposing that the Arabs took up against the Turks, I think it would be our policy to recognise a new Khalif at Mecca or Medina...and guarantee the Holy Places from foreign aggression as well as from all internal interference. If this were done there*

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<sup>92</sup> The Sykes-Picot Agreement, L/P&S/18/B259

<sup>93</sup> Briand to Picot, Nov. 2, 1915, AAE, serie: Guerre 1914-1918, vol. 871, fols. 32-36.

<sup>94</sup> Macfie. A.L. 1998, p.166.

<sup>95</sup> Aide memoire communicated to M. Sazanof, 12 March, 1915, enclosed in Sir Buchanan to Sir Grey, 27 March. FO 371/2449

*appears to me to be a possibility for allowing Syria to be organised as an Arab state under the Khalif but also under European consular control and European guidance as regards Government.*

*France would be greatly weakened by having Syria which is not a remunerative possession and which from its geographical position must lead France astray from her real objective: Tunis, Algeria, Morocco.*"<sup>96</sup>

Sir Reginald Wingate, the British governor-general of the Sudan, elaborated on Kitchener's proposals, and again emphasised England's role in the future Middle East, at the expense of the French position. It was not

*"impossible that in the dim future a federation of semi-independent Arab states might exist under European guidance and supervision, linked together by racial and linguistic bonds, owing spiritual allegiance to a single Arab Primate, and looking to Great Britain as its Patron and Protector.*"<sup>97</sup>

Therefore, to keep the French position in the future Middle East as reduced as possible, and to retain a loyal Muslim of importance under British influence, Britain always insisted that Arabia should remain under independent Muslim rule, and looked there for an ally of standing. They found him in Hussein Ibn Ali, the Sherif of Mecca, and the recognised guardian of the Muslim Holy Places in Mecca and Medina. Hussein was already discontented under the Ottomans, and responded well to British overtures. Britain promised Hussein an independent Arabia, but he demanded more. He wanted an independent Arab state, *"bounded on the north by Mersina-Adana up to the 37° of latitude, on which degree falls Birijik, Urfa, Mardin, Midiat, Amadia Island, up to the border of Persia; on the east by the borders of Persia up to the Gulf of Basra; on the south by the Indian Ocean, with the exception of the portion of Aden to remain as it is; on the west by the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea up to Mersina.*"<sup>98</sup> Such demands put Britain in a difficult position. To consent would not only jeopardise England's military and imperial position in Mesopotamia, but would

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<sup>96</sup> Kitchener to Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary, Nov. 11, 1914, Papers of Sir Edward Grey, Foreign Office Papers, PRO, London, 800/102. This letter is also quoted in Kedourie, Elie, 'In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: The McMahon-Husayn Correspondence and its Interpretations, 1914-1939.' (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1976), p.32.

<sup>97</sup> Wingate, 'Note,' Aug. 25, 1915, FO 371, vol. 2486, file 34982, paper 138500.

<sup>98</sup> Sherif of Mecca to Mr. Storrs, 14 July 1915, L/P&S/18/B222. More details of these negotiations: Kedourie, E. 1976, chpts. 2-3.

also fatally undermine Anglo-French relations. Such a dilemma was noted by George Clerk, head of the war department at the Foreign Office on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1915:

*"It is difficult to challenge the position which France claims, and to some extent has secured by acquiring special interests, in the northwestern portion (Lebanon-Syria) of Arabia as now defined by the Arabs. But we cannot win the Arabs unless we can reconcile French and Arab claims and the position must be clearly understood from both the French and the Arab side from the outset, or we shall be heading straight for serious trouble."*<sup>99</sup>

However, the path that Britain chose is still highly controversial, and certainly did not allow the British position to be 'clearly understood from both the French and Arab side.' On October 24, Sir Henry McMahon wrote to the Sherif of Mecca, explaining Britain's position on the issue of future Arab boundaries.

*"The districts of Mersina and Alexandretta and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Hama, Homs and Aleppo cannot be said to be purely Arab and should be excluded from the proposed limits and boundaries.*

*With the above modification, and without prejudice to our existing treaties with Arab chiefs, we accept those limits and boundaries, and in regard to those portions of the territories wherein Great Britain is free to act without detriment to her Ally,*

*France...Subject to the above modifications, Great Britain is prepared to recognise and support the independence of the Arabs within the territories included in the limits and boundaries proposed by the Sherif of Mecca.*

*Great Britain will guarantee the Holy Places against all external aggression and will recognise their inviolability...*

*...With regard to the Vilayets of Baghdad and Basra, the Arabs will recognise the established position and interests of Great Britain necessitates special measures of administrative control in order to secure these territories from foreign aggression, to promote the welfare of the local populations and to secure our mutual economic interests."*<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Clerk, Minutes, Oct. 19, 1915, FO 371/2468, 34982/15290.

<sup>100</sup> This letter, along with the rest of the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence, can be found in Kedourie. E. 1976, pp.97-115. Also see L/P&S/18/B222



At no time did McMahon and Hussein agree on the actual boundaries of the proposed Arab state, and therefore, Hussein's reward remained ambiguous. McMahon had essentially promised Hussein an independent Arab state including Syria. However, this state was limited to those territories that were unclaimed by France. France, Britain knew, already claimed Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, thus the future Arab state would in fact only exist in the Arabian peninsula. It was within this context that Britain and France conducted their negotiations through Sykes and Picot.

Picot greeted the Anglo-Arab proposals about an independent Arab state with amazement.<sup>101</sup> He argued that no French government could survive politically if it surrendered French claims in Syria. However, Picot believed that Arab tribal rivalries would prevent political unification, and that therefore British promises to the Arabs would never succeed. *"What the British want is only to deceive the Arabs. They hope to accomplish this by offering them a lot while admitting that the building they are constructing will probably not last beyond the war."*<sup>102</sup>

Precisely because the French believed that the possibility of an independent Arab state was so remote, Picot announced on December 21 that France, as Britain's loyal ally, would accept Britain's proposals, and make do with a protectorate over Syria, rather than direct control. The vagueness of the agreement did not worry Briand or Picot, as precision on the question of where sovereignty lay in the future Arab state was unnecessary when they believed that such a state could never be created. If it were created in the area under a French protectorate, it would be powerless to resist French pressure.

Another agreement that these two allies reached was regarding the establishment of a national Homeland for the Jews in Palestine. Britain and France feared the possibility that Germany would promise Palestine to the Zionists, and such a move would win support for Germany from the American Jewish community. The impact on the U.S. government could be decisive. *"If the Jewish financial community of New York should side with the Germans, all that could weigh heavily on the decisions taken by*

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<sup>101</sup> See Lord Charles Hardinge, Indian Viceroy, to A. Nicolson, Dec. 28, 1915, Papers of Sir Arthur Nicolson, PRO, London, F.O. 800/380.

<sup>102</sup> Picot to Briand, Dec. 2, 1915, AAE, serie: A Paix, vol. 129.

Mr. Wilson. "<sup>103</sup> Such a worry on the part of the Allies demonstrates the new importance of America on the global political scene. In November 1917, therefore, Britain issued the Balfour Declaration, promising the Jews a 'national home' in Palestine.<sup>104</sup>

However, France would not initially endorse this document, as circumstances had now changed. By the time that the Balfour Declaration was issued, the U.S. was already committed to the Entente. Added to this, France's Jewish population was highly assimilated, and anti-Zionist, and therefore France felt it was more expedient to satisfy the demands of French Jewry. Possibly the most important factor however, was that France worried that Zionism may be a liability to France's post-war designs on the Middle East.<sup>105</sup> They were concerned that she may alienate the Arabs of the region if she supported the Balfour Declaration. It would be better, advised Picot, to have such Arab hostility directed solely against Great Britain.<sup>106</sup> On advice from their High Commissioner in America, who stressed the fact that some of the U.S. President's closest advisers were Zionists, the French agreed that Palestinian Jews would be "*given administrative autonomy within the framework of an international state.*"<sup>107</sup>

The Sykes-Picot Agreement did not mark the end of rivalry and mistrust between the two Great Powers. The British and the French, although allies, were keenly aware of the threat that each posed to the other. The pattern of relations was on the whole, one of conflict with each other, or at least of bickering, at many levels: "*The British and the French against the rest; the British and French against each other; the British and French against themselves.*"<sup>108</sup> France remained worried that their paucity of troops on the ground in the Middle East would mean Britain would take advantage and squeeze them out. Should the Sherifian Revolt succeed with too little support from France, French prestige in Muslim Syria would decline, with Britain's

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<sup>103</sup> Memo by Jules Cambon, Sec. Gen. Of Quai d'Orsay, Mar. 11, 1917, AAE, serie: Guerre 1914-1918, vol. 1198, fol. 117.

<sup>104</sup> Quai d'Orsay. Nov. 1917, AAE, serie: Guerre 1914-1918, Vol.1200.

<sup>105</sup> Pichon to Andre Tardieu, French High Commissioner to the United States, Jan. 26, 1918, AAE, serie: Guerre 1914-1918, vol. 1200, fol. 205.

<sup>106</sup> Picot to Pichon, Nov. 27, Dec. 6, 1917, *ibid.*, fols. 61-62, 79.

<sup>107</sup> Pichon to Tardieu, Feb. 14, 1918, *ibid.*, fol. 171.

<sup>108</sup> Lewis, Bernard, 'Epilogue to a Period.' in Dann, U. 1988, p.422.

popularity there being enhanced at French expense.<sup>109</sup> France's main concern was the situation in her North African Muslim territories. The Quai d'Orsay realised that what "*happens in Arabia could have the most serious repercussions in all our colonies.*"<sup>110</sup> French mistrust over Britain's motives was vindicated when it became clear that Britain wished to thwart French ambitions in Syria, and install the Sherif's son Feisal as its independent ruler.<sup>111</sup> Why would England support Feisal at France's expense? The Foreign Office considered France the greater threat to British economic and imperial interests:

*"If we support the Arab movement we shall destroy Turkey with much less risk of arousing against us the permanent antagonism of Islam; and we shall knit up our Empire by establishing a link between Egypt and India, without being compelled to take France into partnership, and placing her in a position to break our newly-won territorial continuity. On the other hand, if we allow the Arab movement to fail, and Syria to pass from Turkish to French domination...we shall place ourselves and France in a position in which our traditional rivalry in the East, which has been removed only with great difficulty, will be bound to arise again in an aggravated form."*<sup>112</sup>

It is important to remember that British policy was itself subject to great internal bickering. The build-up to the 1907 Agreement with Russia had highlighted the difference in opinion between the Indian and British governments. British policy in the Middle East was therefore not monolithic. Policy was a culmination of the interaction between many separate institutions within the framework of the British Empire, each with their own vested interests in the Persian Gulf. There was "*a multiplicity of bureaucratic factions, departments and services, divided by social origins and by conflicting interests and purposes, all of which helped to influence and determine what is nowadays known as the decision-making process.*"<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Quai d'Orsay memo, July 31, 1916, AAE, serie: Guerre 1914-1918, vol. 1683, fol. 60; DeFrance to Briand, Aug. 18, 1916, *ibid.*, vol. 1684, fol. 46.

<sup>110</sup> Memo by Bruno de Margerie, chief of Quai d'Orsay commercial and political division, 'Note pour le president du conseil,' July 19, 1916, *ibid.*, vol. 1682, fol. 185.

<sup>111</sup> See Balfour to Pichon, Oct. 8, 1918, AAE, serie: Levant S-L-C, vol. 2, fol. 184.

<sup>112</sup> Arnold Toynbee, 'Memorandum on French and Arab Claims...to British Interests,' Dec. 19, 1918, F.O. 371/3385, 747/191229. Toynbee was a member of the Intelligence division of the F.O.

<sup>113</sup> Lewis, B. 'Epilogue to a Period,' in Dann, U. 1988, p.422.

For the British Cabinet, taking account of public opinion was vital, and it was the war in Europe that was important, with the Middle East merely a side-show. They knew little about the situation and relied heavily on advice from men on the ground. To the Indian government, their long-established links and interests in the Middle East remained of paramount significance. They were also developing new concerns in Iraq, and the British government's plans to set up an independent Arab state there, were strongly opposed by the Indian government.<sup>114</sup>

The development of the British Gulf position was thus not accomplished without friction between Home and Indian authorities. In this on-going controversy, India took a progressive line in most instances, sometimes initiating policy without Home Office approval, at least until 1905. The time when Lord Curzon held office in India, was the time when such a stand-off was at its peak. Under his leadership, the Indian government had viewed problems on its frontiers as purely Indian problems – at least to the point that they should have the deciding vote in determining policy. It was inevitable that as the Gulf became drawn increasingly into European affairs, the British government would demand greater control over Gulf policy. If the Gulf was seen as a political whole, then British policy there must be conducted in a co-ordinated fashion.

The British government was clearly mainly concerned with protecting British, not Indian, interests in the Gulf, and such policies were born out of a greater awareness of Britain's new position in international affairs. Gone was the era when British influence in the Gulf was so predominant that all her interests could be safe-guarded. Britain now had to manoeuvre amongst many Great Powers, to secure those interests that were of most concern to her. Her priority was always to protect her position in Europe. The advent of war in Europe, despite Britain having made Near Eastern Agreements with the Ottomans, and with the Germans over the railway issues, only serves to highlight the obviously greater influence of European diplomatic pressures upon events in the Gulf, than of Gulf affairs upon international relations.

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<sup>114</sup> For details see Yapp. M.E. 1987, p.280.

## 4.7. Conclusion

This examination of Great Power interests in the Middle East highlights the important role that geography played. The region seemed to hold little inherent interest for them, but rather held an indirect interest courtesy of its relative location on the world map, and positioning between different competing powers. The possible exception from this was France, who did hold strong cultural interests in the actual population of Syria and Lebanon.

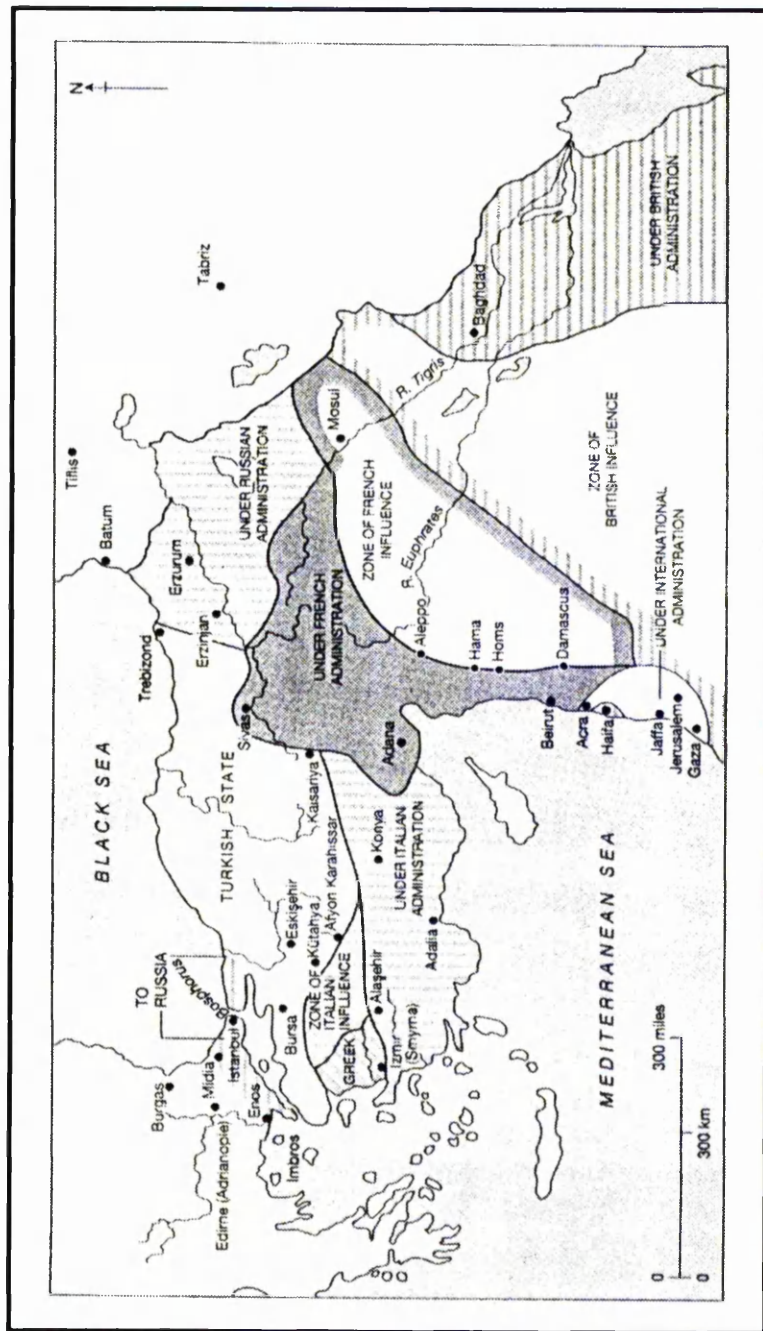
On the whole however, it was the strategic location of the Middle East, and of Iraq, that drew the attention of the Great Powers. Each had their own interests to defend in the region, and each also had their own global position to defend. In a world that was rapidly becoming a closed system, the Middle East provided an opportunity to gain new global leverage and increased prestige. Map 20 shows the proposed partitioning of the Ottoman Empire, as decided by the secret agreements of 1915-1917. *"It is doubtful if one could find in all history a more striking example of child's play with human fate than that presented in the scramble for Turkish territory."*<sup>115</sup>

The region also acted as a cross-roads, where vital interests of these Great Powers overlapped and clashed. For example, the strategic importance of the Straits to Russia was safe-guarded as long as no other anti-Russian power began to overly influence Ottoman policy. When the Germans threatened in this way, the Russians moved to a policy of partition of the Ottoman Empire, to better defend her interests.

We have seen too, how Britain sometimes compromised her own interests in the region, to the greater imperative of maintaining friendly relations with Russia. European antagonisms were being played out on a different arena. Certainly, each of the powers held important interests in the Middle East, but these were subsidiary to their interests in Europe, and coloured by the perceived threats that other powers in the area presented. That is, control of the Middle East became a foreign policy objective for certain Great Powers, simply due to the fact that it was important to another power. Global power struggles were being focused down onto the Middle

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<sup>115</sup> Foster. H.A. 1935, p.44.



**Map 20. The Partitioning of Turkey According to the Secret Agreements of 1915 -17**  
 Source: Reproduced from Macfie A.L., 'The End of the Ottoman Empire: 1908 - 1923', (Longman, London, 1994)

Eastern region. For Britain, her focus was drawn increasingly to Iraq, which, due to the presence of other Great Powers in the region, they regarded as a last vital stronghold of British authority in the Gulf.

It was in this way that the geo-strategic character of the region was developed, being fashioned largely out of these more European power machinations. The focus of the European world and the Ottoman Empire was being focused down onto this vital area between Russia and Europe, Britain and its strongholds in India and Egypt, and the Ottomans and the Arabian deserts. This was the perception of the region at the moment of Iraq's crystallisation, and such designs on the area certainly had immense repercussions on the State that was established in Iraq.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE POST-WAR SETTLEMENT: CREATING THE STATE OF IRAQ

#### 5.1. Introduction

In 1921 the new State of Iraq was to emerge as a result of the various peace settlements after the First World War. It consisted of the three former Ottoman *vilayets* of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, and was held under a British mandate 'until such time as it could stand alone.' The *vilayets* of Basra and Baghdad had been under direct British control and administration throughout a significant part of the First World War, and during this time, they had been organised along the lines of a province of British India. Until this time, the geography of the territory had assisted the people of Iraq to resist the imposition of any real authority not of their choosing.<sup>1</sup> Although technically under Ottoman administration, the Iraqi provinces were unruly, and Ottoman authority sometimes did not extend far beyond the towns. The mountains in the north had provided an almost impenetrable fortress for the Kurdish population, whilst the desert confederations and Shi'i tribes of the southern river valleys generally overcame military expeditions sent by the Ottomans to subdue them to increase tax revenue. However, a new era of nation-state building was underway, and the international community had decided that the land of Mesopotamia was to be forged into an independent state. It is necessary to distinguish two separate problems with respect to the post-First World War peace settlements as they affected Iraq: the physical, geographical delineation of the state, and the nature of its political system. This chapter will concentrate on detailing and analysing the territorial delimitation of the new state.

Crucial to the geopolitical form that Iraq was to assume from its inception, is the question of who ultimately had the power to determine how 'Iraq' should be defined.



Who and what gave it its final territorial limits, and who was responsible for defining those limits? What arguments were used to justify them, whose interests were they meant to protect, and what impact did this all have on the nature of the crystallizing Iraqi state? New territorial frameworks were established throughout the Mesopotamian region, and the nature and impact of these must be examined. In the previous chapter, we have seen how the imperatives of the Great Powers were coming to have an immense impact on the Middle Eastern region as a whole. Through the cataclysm of the First World War the previously unthinkable partition of the Ottoman Empire gained unstoppable momentum. It was the geographical location of the region that lent it an importance in the eyes of these competing external powers. It was also clear that the British focus was concentrating increasingly on maintaining a stronghold in Iraq. How was this British ambition transferred into actual power and control? This chapter analyses how Britain came to hold the mandate for Iraq, how the limits of this new state were defined, and what impact these changes had on the geopolitical nature of the emerging state.

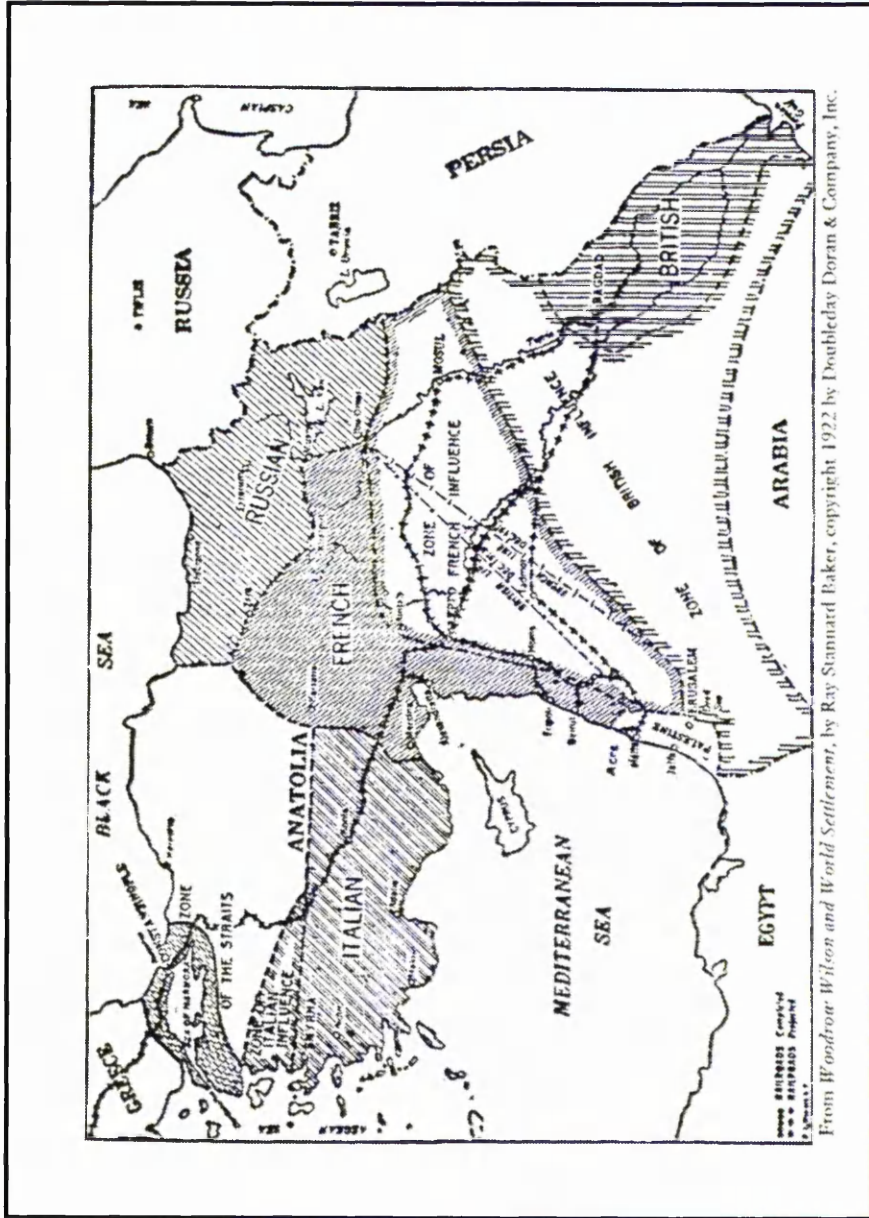
Britain's interest in Iraq had been clearly outlined in all her agreements and treaties with the other powers. (See Map 21). Her interest had also been mentioned increasingly frequently in the war years. In her communications with the Sherif of Mecca during the war, Britain had stated repeatedly that "*With regard to the vilayets of Baghdad and Basra, the Arabs will recognise that the established position and interests of Great Britain necessitate special measures of administrative control in order to secure these territories from foreign aggression, to promote the welfare of the local populations and to safe-guard our mutual economic interests.*"<sup>2</sup> Britain believed that these interests had been sufficiently safe-guarded by her treaties with the Arabs, and with her French ally.

However, as evidenced by the rift between Britain and France even after the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, "*no sooner had the Entente Powers concluded their elaborate and in parts inconsistent series of secret treaties and agreements than the*

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<sup>1</sup> "During the long period of Ottoman administration (1534-1918), the local authority of tribal leaders was never successfully challenged for long periods of time by the central government." Sweet, L. 1968, p.253

<sup>2</sup> Storrs to the Sherif of Mecca, 24 October 1915, L/P&S/18/B222



**Map 21. How Turkey was Carved up by Six Secret Agreements**  
 Source: Foster H.A., 'The Making of Modern Iraq: A Product of World Forces',  
 (University of Oklahoma Press, Oklahoma, 1935)

*treaties and agreements began to unravel.*"<sup>3</sup> In April 1917, the new Russian cabinet, installed after the March revolution, issued a declaration denouncing the policies of conquest and annexation adopted by the previous regime. In November they renounced all claims to Constantinople and the Straits. They also made public to the peoples of the Middle East, some of the treaties of which they had previously been unaware: notably the Balfour Declaration and the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Britain tried to placate an angry Sherif Hussein regarding the Sykes-Picot Agreement, explaining that the documents "*did not constitute an actually concluded agreement.*"<sup>4</sup> In response to a document that became known as the Declaration of the Seven, prepared by seven leading Syrians living in Egypt, Britain stated "*that in territories which had been free and independent before the outbreak of war, and in those liberated from Turkish rule by the actions of the Arabs themselves, the British would recognise the complete and sovereign independence of the Arabs. In the territories liberated from Turkish rule by the action of Allied armies, on the other hand, they would seek to create governments based on the 'principle of the consent of the governed', while in territories still under Turkish rule they expected that the oppressed peoples would 'obtain their freedom and independence'.*"<sup>5</sup>

It is significant that none of these statements called into question the principle of partition on which the secret treaties and agreements had been based. The paradox here is that in the closing months of the war, the Entente Powers remained committed to policies based on a principle that had been enshrined in the 1915 Constantinople Agreement with Russia as a concession to Russian ambitions, despite the fact that the original Russian claim to Constantinople and the Straits, which had given rise to these policies of partition, had been abandoned. "*Great Power policy with regard to the Ottoman Empire, in other words, once shaped by considerations of long-term strategic interest, was now being driven merely by events.*"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Macfie. A.L. 1998, p.170.

<sup>4</sup> Holt. P.M. 'Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, 1516-1922: A Political History.' (Longmans, London 1966), p.275.

<sup>5</sup> Holt. P.M. 1966, pp.276-7.

<sup>6</sup> Macfie. A.L. 1998, p. 172; also see Macfie. A.L. 1993, pp.81-85.

## 5.2. The Peace Treaties and Conferences After the First World War

### 5.2.1. The Armistice of Mudros

In 1918, British Indian Forces were occupying Basra and Baghdad,<sup>7</sup> and in October 1918, the British Cabinet, foreseeing an Ottoman collapse, ordered the British commander to advance on Mosul – which was eventually occupied one week *after* the armistice. Such a decision was justified on military grounds, and the need for law and order. “*But in the minds of the British authorities in Iraq, Mosul was required to make a viable state of Iraq in the future.*”<sup>8</sup> They were also concerned that the disappearance of Russia as a power in the region, would lead to a power vacuum, which would especially threaten areas contiguous to the vanished Russian sphere. “*Whatever solution be reached in regard to the above mentioned area, it must modify the situation in Upper Iraq and Mosul, to which it is contiguous.*”<sup>9</sup> However, no decision had been taken in London that there should be a state of Iraq, and the future of Iraq remained a very open question.

The Cabinet was also divided over the terms of the armistice with the Ottomans. Curzon and Austen Chamberlain wanted harsh terms imposed. As Ronald Graham put it: “*It is absolutely essential for us, if we wish for future peace and order in India, Egypt and the Muslim World, to show with unmistakable clearness that the Turk is beaten and is forced to accept such terms as we choose to offer.*”<sup>10</sup> Others, such as the chief of the Imperial Defence Staff, Henry Wilson, wanted far milder terms.

Ultimately, under the impression that the Germans and Austrians would go on fighting into 1919, Henry Wilson was prepared to pay a high price to secure the immediate withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire from the War. This would release half a million imperial troops, mainly Indian, to the western front. Also, it would get the

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<sup>7</sup> Slugglet, P. 1976, p.23, gives clear insight into how established the British Civil Administration in Mesopotamia had *already* become. Also see: Gertrude Bell, London, 1920, Vol. II, esp. pp.90-100; House of Commons Debates, 23 July 1918, quoted in Wilson, A.T. ‘Mesopotamia, 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties. (London, 1931), p.99

<sup>8</sup> Yapp. M.E. 1987, p.294.

<sup>9</sup> Memo by Sir Mark Sykes to, undated, 1918, FO 371/3384.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Rothwell, V.H. ‘British War Aims and Peace Diplomacy.’ (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1971), p.240.

Straits open to Allied shipping, so that Entente forces could move through Romania to Austria.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, the camp urging milder conditions won out, and out of some twenty clauses sent by the British government to their chief negotiator, he was advised that only the first four were imperative, and that the rest could be sacrificed if necessary.

Ironically, the Ottoman negotiators were inexperienced, and unaware of the importance that Britain attached to getting the Straits opened as soon as possible. If they had known, they could have come away from the Armistice with significant concessions. However, communications with Istanbul were poor, and their brief had been simple: as long as the Greeks were kept out of Istanbul, they would accept any conditions. Therefore they agreed to comply with all of the clauses that the Entente put forward. Naively, the Ottoman delegation pre-supposed that Britain and her Allies would be willing to conclude a peace that would secure the survival of the Ottoman Empire – albeit in a decentralised form. They believed that British foreign policy was concerned with the preservation of a stable power in the area, capable of opposing the advance of Russia. In his view therefore, the British would be keen to ensure the integrity of a strong and independent Ottoman Empire. *“It was to prove a fatal misunderstanding, for as events were later to show the British and her Allies had in fact every intention of partitioning the Ottoman Empire, including those parts of the empire which had remained unoccupied at the end of the war.”*<sup>12</sup>

The Armistice of Mudros was signed on 30 October 1918. The terms finally agreed upon, especially those to do with the rights of the Allies to occupy various parts of the empire, remained significant, as they helped to shape the situation in the post-war period. The destruction and partition of the Ottoman Empire was now inevitable.

### **5.2.2. American Influence**

Another influence was to enter the global arena, and have a significant impact on the post-war settlement in the Middle East. This was the entrance of the United States of America into the equation – *“the last Western frontier of liberalism, where, in a*

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<sup>11</sup> PRO, ADM 116/1823. Conditions of an Armistice with Turkey arranged in order of importance.

<sup>12</sup> Macfie. A.L. 1998, p.181.

*detached and disinterested position, human interests as a whole stood out in somewhat clearer and broader outline.*"<sup>13</sup> We have already seen that Britain issued the Balfour Declaration in 1917 in the hope of winning support for the Allies within the American Jewish community, as the impact of this community upon the United States government could be decisive.<sup>14</sup> This demonstrated that U.S. opinion mattered to the Allies, and that the U.S. was taking its place among the Great Powers. President Woodrow Wilson, seeking to discover a set of principles that might form the foundation of the peace settlement, published his 'Fourteen Points' document, point 12 of which suggested that the Turkish portions of the Ottoman Empire should be 'assured a secure sovereignty,' while the other nationalities living under Ottoman rule "*should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.*"<sup>15</sup> He decried the exploitation of people under imperial control, and championed the concept of self-determination. This ideology of self-determination was at odds with the old imperialist ideologies of France and Britain, and they realised that their pre-war plans for the Middle East must be adapted to fit in with this new global situation. "*It followed that if the needs and ambitions of Great Powers were to be satisfied, new devices must be found to disguise their gains.*"<sup>16</sup>

The First World War had seen a dramatic break away from the notion of multinational empires to a recognition of the principle of nationality, and the rights of these nations to self-government. Therefore, there came into prominence the concepts of treaties with independent states, spheres of influence, and mandates: "*an invention designed to reconcile the wants of Great Powers with the hopes of aspirant nations or, as some cynics put it, to cast a garb of respectability over the desire of the Great Powers to get their teeth into their former enemies' colonies. Although the latter proposition often more justly represented the reality it would be wrong to discount the element of moral fervour in those who made and carried out the settlement.*"<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Foster. H.A. 1935, p.87. What an irony this is, in view of current United States 'realist' attitudes to the setting up of an International Court to try war criminals.

<sup>14</sup> See Memo by Jules Cambon, Secretary General of the Quai d'Orsay, Mar. 11, 1917, AAE, serie: Guerre 1914-1918, vol. 1198, fol. 117.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, A.S. 'The Eastern Question, 1774-1923' (Macmillan Press, London 1966), Doc. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Yapp. M.E. 1987 p.302.

<sup>17</sup> Yapp. M.E. 1987 p.302.

Under a mandate system, the new ideology of self-determination could be safeguarded, without France and Britain losing total control over the regions in which their interests were greatest.

### 5.2.3. The Paris Peace Conference, 1919

Under the changed international atmosphere that followed the Armistice, outright annexation of territory was no longer acceptable, and other methods of maintaining control had to be sought. British policy had to be tailored not only to serve British interests, but also to satisfy President Wilson's vision of self-determination and equality of international opportunity for all powers. The system of Mandates was an attempt to reconcile these two conflicting interests. On January 30, 1919, the Allies agreed to a British-sponsored proposal that the former Ottoman territories should receive administrative and political advice from a mandatory power until these states were considered economically and politically mature enough to stand on their own. As a concession to Wilsonian principles, the native populations would receive the right to choose their own mandatory. The mandate system was a means to satisfy the Allies' territorial ambitions without incurring the taint of annexation and the wrath of President Wilson.<sup>18</sup>

Britain desperately wanted to have some form of control over Mesopotamia, and yet was aware that a direct territorial claim may show her in a bad light. She therefore resorted to highlighting her involvement and effort in the war, claiming that the whole of the burden of operations which led to the destruction of the Ottoman Empire had fallen on Britain. Mr. Balfour explained that: "*The British Government does not mention these facts in order to establish a territorial claim, but it does not think that in forming a judgement on the situation they can be ignored.*"<sup>19</sup> Following this, he reiterated Britain's acceptance of the proposal to send a Joint Commission of Representatives of the Powers to examine the situation in Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia, to advise the Conference as to the wishes of the people, and the best distribution of mandates throughout the region. However, despite the disclaimer,

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<sup>18</sup> See Pichon to Balfour, Feb. 6, 1919, AAE, serie: Levant S-L-C, vol. 9, fol. 89; Quai d'Orsay Memo, 'Accord sur la Syrie-Cilicie,' Mar. 17, 1919, AAE, serie: Levant S-L-C, vol. 25, fol. 108.

<sup>19</sup> Memo by Mr. Balfour, 31 May, 1919. CAB 21/153

Britain must have felt that they did indeed have territorial claims to Mesopotamia, and the fact that they had such a developed Civil Administration already established there,<sup>20</sup> must have made them confident of receiving the Mesopotamian mandate.

#### 5.2.4. Sharpening of British Interests in Mesopotamia.

Britain began sharpening its focus on what their major designs were within the Mesopotamian region, even before the mandatory awards were to be made. Their main competitors in this respect were the French, and delimiting their separate spheres of influence became a major foreign policy objective for both countries throughout 1919 and 1920. A memorandum written by Lt. Col. W.H.Gibbon of the War Office summed up this situation: *It is presumed not to be our policy to offend France. If this is the case, we must not allow our relations with her to be displaced by our relations with the unstable Arabs, and the problem which remains is to make the best arrangements for the British Empire between the French and the Arabs. This must be an arrangement which will enable us to maintain our relations with France without detriment to the strategical position which we have acquired in this war. That is, we must retain the possibility of direct air, railway and oil routes between Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean.*"<sup>21</sup>

In regard to these interests in Mesopotamia, the British were sensitive to any French influence: *"the paramount consideration, from a British point of view, is the feasibility of constructing railway communication and a pipe line for oil outside of territory which may fall within French influence."*<sup>22</sup> Britain requested, and was given the vilayet of Mosul by the French. *"The advice on which he (the British P.M.) had based his request for Mosul was that Mesopotamia was of very little use without Mosul. Now he wanted an outlet from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean."*<sup>23</sup> The reason given for the French acceptance of the British request for Mosul, was that they recognised *"that Mosul was geographically and economically part of*

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<sup>20</sup> Burgoyne, E. 'Gertrude Bell: From Her Personal Papers 1889-1914,' Vol. II, (Ernest Benn, London 1958), pp. 75-79.

<sup>21</sup> Memo. To War Office, Lt. Col. Gibbon, June 6, 1919. CAB 21/153

<sup>22</sup> Appendix II of Notes of a meeting held at Trouville, Sept. 9, 1919. CAB 21/153

<sup>23</sup> Notes of a meeting held at Trouville, Sept. 9, 1919. CAB 21/153.



*Mesopotamia.*"<sup>24</sup> In fact, there is evidence to suggest that the real French interest lay in securing Tangier, and Mosul was simply a useful bargaining chip.<sup>25</sup> This again reinforces the fact that the Middle East was part of a larger power struggle, in a global arena. Decisions were being made about the future territorial lay-out of the region, yet the foundations of these decisions were often far from local.

Britain was also willing to make small sacrifices to French demands, but only when it did not impinge on British interests. "*As regards Mesopotamia, it is not essential to include the oasis of Tadmor within the British zone, since the water supply of Tadmor is sulphurous...The line can, therefore, be drawn somewhere east of Palmyra, and on this side there should be no special difficulty in meeting the French wishes.*"<sup>26</sup> Thus, the boundaries of Mesopotamia became gradually more and more defined. Such delimitation of territory was the hallmark of the nation-state ideal that both Britain and France were seeking to create in the area. The League of Nations was to sanction the setting up of 'independent nations' in the region, as the best resolution to the issue of former Ottoman territories, and the ideology of nation-states demanded fixed geographical limits.

Britain issued an *aide memoire* on September 13, 1919, in which it clearly laid out its developing policy in regard to Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia. In this, it promised the immediate preparation of the evacuation of British troops from Syria and Cilicia, leaving them in French hands. Britain stated that its troops would be pulled back from Syria, but would remain in Palestine and Mesopotamia: "*Until the boundaries of Palestine and Mesopotamia are determined, the British Commander-in-Chief shall have the right to occupy outposts in accordance with the boundary claimed by the British Government.*"<sup>27</sup> They also made an outright claim for the Mesopotamian mandate, including Mosul.<sup>28</sup> They justified the inclusion of Mosul in a Foreign Office document, which claimed that: "*North Mesopotamia has been occupied more recently than Syria by the British forces, but it is already evident that the Arabs of Mosul*

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<sup>24</sup> Lloyd George to Clemenceau, Oct. 18, 1919. Enclosed in Kerr to Foreign Office, Oct. 20, 1919, FO 371/4184, note 7.

<sup>25</sup> See Adam to Crowe, Oct. 9, 1919. FO 371/4184, note 3.

<sup>26</sup> Appendix II of Notes of a meeting held at Trouville, Sept. 9, 1919. CAB 21/153

<sup>27</sup> Minutes of War Cabinet Meeting, Foreign Office,, Sept. 22, 1919. CAB 21/153

<sup>28</sup> *Aide Memoire* Regarding British Policy in Regard to Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia. Paris, Sept. 13, 1919. CAB 21/153

*desire union with the rest of Mesopotamia.*"<sup>29</sup> It is noteworthy that only the wishes of the Arab population of Mosul seem to be of interest to the British at that time.

The problem facing Britain and France, as prospective mandatory powers, was exactly how to present their interests in the region, and how to delimit the proposed territorial units in the light of Wilsonian principles. The areas that they were to delimit were to be independent nations, provisionally recognised by the international community, and each being supplied with a mandatory only until such time as they could stand alone. These important issues were tackled in Mr. Balfour's memorandum respecting Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia, in 1919. In this, he made several fundamental points regarding the delimitation of the territories: "*In the first place, I would lay it down that frontiers should be determined by economic and ethnographic considerations rather than strategic.*"<sup>30</sup> Such a stance seemed imperative if these chrysalis states were ever to be viable independently. Balfour continued: "*We have three coterminous areas to consider – Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia. Their frontiers may be doubtful, but the great central core of each is disputed by no one... Mesopotamia is essentially the region watered by the Tigris and Euphrates. What we have got to do is to make such international arrangements, economic and territorial, as will enable each region to develop itself to the best advantage without giving occasion for jealousies or disputes.*"<sup>31</sup> Balfour admitted that such issues would be better dealt with by experts who had more knowledge of the situation than he possessed. However, he did include a precis of his ideas regarding the economic needs of Mesopotamia, which he saw as dominated by issues relating to water and access.

As regards the population, President Woodrow Wilson had naively demanded an Allied Commission be sent to the former Ottoman territories, to determine the wishes of the newly liberated peoples. This appears to have been the last of his efforts directly in line with their interests. "*The failure to send this commission is further illustrative of the fight by France and Great Britain for the old colonial system. Whatever obligations to the principle of self-determination these states had assumed,*

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<sup>29</sup> Foreign Office Memorandum on 'French and Arab Claims in the Middle East in Relation to British Interests'. Dec. 19, 1918. CAB 29/2.

<sup>30</sup> Memo by Balfour, August 11, 1919, enclosed in Balfour to Curzon, Sept. 19, 1919. FO 371/4183

*whether on the basis of the entrance of the United States into the war, of the terms of the armistice, or of their declarations to the Arabs, seemed not to trouble their imperial consciences.*"<sup>32</sup> After two months of waiting for the dispatch of the proposed Allied Commission, Woodrow Wilson decided to send his own King-Crane Commission.<sup>33</sup> Both France and Britain opposed this, which indicates their fears as to its findings.

However, the King-Crane Commission did not even visit Mesopotamia, but met representatives from there, who presented a program for their country. It seemed clear from this that the Mesopotamians wanted America as their mandatory, and had strong feelings against Britain.<sup>34</sup> However, the Commission noted that the British had made an effort to canvass the wishes of leading Mesopotamians as regarding a mandatory, and that they had also found good evidence of opinion favourable to a British mandate, although, as Foster states, as this opinion was "*being reported to British officers, it was somewhat more favorable than it would otherwise have been.*"<sup>35</sup> Therefore, despite the wishes put forward by the Mesopotamian representatives, the Commission recommended that Britain get the mandate, as the United States had already been recommended as the mandatory for Syria Asia Minor.<sup>36</sup> The commission also recommended that the unity of Mesopotamia be preserved. "*It should probably include at least the vilayets of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. And the southern Kurds and Assyrians might well be linked up with Mesopotamia. The wisdom of a united country needs no argument in the case of Mesopotamia.*"<sup>37</sup>

### **5.2.5. The San Remo Conference of 1920, and the Consequences**

At San Remo on 25 April, 1920, the Supreme Council conferred the Ottoman mandates upon Great Britain and France. The Ottoman Government would formally

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<sup>31</sup> Memo by Balfour, August 11, 1919, enclosed in Balfour to Curzon, Sept. 19, 1919. FO 371/4183.

<sup>32</sup> Foster, H.A. 1935, p. 89

<sup>33</sup> See 'Report of the King-Crane Commission on the Near East.' *Editor and Publisher*, Vol.LV (Dec. 2, 1922), No.27, Supplement, pp.i-xxviii

<sup>34</sup> 'Report of Commission,' in *Editor and Publisher*, Vol. LV, No. 27 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; December 2, 1922), p.viii

<sup>35</sup> Foster, H.A. 1935, p.91

<sup>36</sup> See 'Report of a Commission,' in *Editor and Publisher*, Vol. LV, No. 27. (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.; Dec 2, 1922), p. viii.

<sup>37</sup> 'Report of a Commission', *ibid*, 1922, p.xi.

surrender all of its former non-Turkish territories, and an Ottoman delegation was made to sign this officially at Sevres on August 10, 1920. France gained the mandate for Syria, whilst Britain retained Mesopotamia. This decision symbolically meant that France and England shared equal status in the Middle East, and that England would have to acquiesce to any action undertaken by the French in Syria.<sup>38</sup> The spirit of the Sykes-Picot agreement had therefore suffered little infringement, and consequently, little regard was had for the wishes of the indigenous populations.

It was also a fundamental decision in that new states had been created: *"It was decided to include in Peace Treaty with Turkey Articles recognising Syria and Mesopotamia as independent subject to the assistance of a mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone."*<sup>39</sup> The form of these new countries was clearly vulnerable to the self-interest of the mandatories. Also in the hands of the mandatories were decisions regarding the geographical extent of these new entities. *"The boundaries of these States will not be included in the Peace Treaty but are also to be determined by the principal Allied Powers."*<sup>40</sup>

The Allies seemed worried about the Arab reaction, should mandates be awarded, and boundaries decided upon, all at the same time and without Feisal's presence. They thought that stalling the geographical fixation of these new states until a token Arab input could be made, would appease the Arabs – perhaps a case of being 'seen' to value Arab input. At the meeting of the Supreme Council at San Remo, *"The Powers were most desirous that Peace should reign in those regions, and that a modus vivendi should be reached with Feisal...he had a strong backing, and it seemed certain that he would emerge shortly as the Head of a new State. If the Allied Powers now fixed the boundaries without him they would be creating great difficulties for themselves in the future...The Emir Feisal would almost certainly be coming to Europe very shortly, and Lord Curzon urged that it would be better to await his*

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<sup>38</sup> See Hardinge, Permanent Undersecretary of State at the Foreign Office, to Allenby, July 16, 1920, BD, 1<sup>st</sup> series, vol. 13, no. 284, p.313.

<sup>39</sup> Curzon (at San Remo) to Foreign Office, April 26, 1920, FO 371/5035

<sup>40</sup> Curzon to Foreign Office, April 26, 1920, FO 371/5035

*arrival before the Council definitely committed itself. To fix boundaries now was unnecessary, in the first instance, and unwise in the second.*"<sup>41</sup>

Negotiations with the French regarding the delimitation of their respective mandated territories, started immediately. Mr. Vansittart, the British Envoy in Paris, wrote to Curzon, emphasising that the major issues to resolve with the French related to the Tigris-Euphrates water supply, the Mesopotamian railway, and its access to the Mediterranean. He enclosed to Curzon certain draft articles for insertion in the French-Anglo Agreement, that would resolve these issues. It was proposed that: "*the frontier between the French and British mandatory areas, eastwards from the point at which the eastern frontier of Palestine as defined by the Palestine mandate reaches the Yarmuk valley from the north shall follow in principle the line laid down in the Anglo-French agreement of 1916 to reach the Euphrates at Abu Kemal.*

*Nevertheless the French Government agree to the appointment of a special commission who, after studying the ground, may adjust the above-mentioned line in the Yarmuk Valley, as far as Deraa in such a way as to enable a British railway and pipeline to pass entirely within the British mandatory area, connecting Palestine with the Euphrates valley.*"<sup>42</sup> Should the British pipeline and railway have to pass through French territory, "*the French Government will recognise the perpetual right of the British Government to transport troops along such a line at all times.*"<sup>43</sup>

Exchanges such as these highlighted the fact that any boundary decisions were being negotiated bilaterally between France and Britain, in accordance with their interests, and were informed very little by the wishes of Feisal, let alone the rest of the population. A preliminary draft mandate for Mesopotamia was sent by Vansittart to Curzon in August 1920, and whilst it detailed plans for the proposed administration and the beginning date for organic law, it seemed that there was no real haste regarding boundaries. It stated that "*a Boundary Commissioner shall be appointed by the mandatory to trace on the spot, in co-operation with a Boundary Commissioner*

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<sup>41</sup> Extracts from British Secretary's notes of a meeting of the Supreme Council, San Remo, April 25, 1920, FO 371/5244.

<sup>42</sup> Enclosure in Vansittart to Curzon, 27 July, 1920, FO 371/5245

<sup>43</sup> Enclosure in Vansittart to Curzon, 27 July, 1920, FO 371/5245

*appointed by each of the Governments of Palestine and Syria, the portion of the boundary laid down in the annex between Mesopotamia and those countries.*"<sup>44</sup>

### 5.3. The Nature of Boundaries

*"The precise determination of the territorial extent of a state is crucially important in determining the extent of its jurisdiction..."*<sup>45</sup> However, the nature of these boundaries could vary widely. Hartshorne<sup>46</sup> and Boggs<sup>47</sup>, two American geographers, each attempted to categorize land-boundary types. Boggs' classification contained four categories of boundary: physiographic, geometric, anthropogeographic and complex. Whilst Boggs' system stressed the physical characteristics of a boundary, Hartshorne's classification put more emphasis on the cultural backdrop of a boundary. Drawing on the evolutionary models current in fluvial geomorphology at the time, (notably Davisian),<sup>48</sup> he contended that there were five major categories of boundary: pioneer, antecedent, subsequent, superimposed and relict.

Examples of some of these different categories can be found in the Levantine region. However, Schofield contends that at the time of the post-First World War settlement, *"conventional wisdom dictated that a natural (or physiographic) boundary should be adopted wherever possible."*<sup>49</sup> Such a claim is backed up by the fact that two of the Governments of India's most influential administrators, Lord Curzon and Colonel Thomas Holdich (who headed the Indo-Persian Boundary Demarcation Commission in the mid-1890s), had each publicly advocated the use of natural boundaries. Holdich wrote in 1916 that no more perfect boundary could be devised than that of

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<sup>44</sup> Declaration Constituting the Mandate for Mesopotamia, enclosed in Vansittart to Curzon, 2 August, 1920. FO 371/5245

<sup>45</sup> Joffe, G. *'Territory, State and Nation in the Middle East and North Africa.'* In Schofield, R.N. and Schofield, C.H. (eds.), *'World Boundaries in the Middle East and North Africa,'* (Routledge, London 1994), pp.1-20.

<sup>46</sup> See Hartshorne, Richard. *'Suggestions on the Terminology of Political Boundaries,' Association of American Geographers, Annals 26, (1936) pp.56-57*

<sup>47</sup> See Whittemore Boggs, S. *'International Boundaries: A Study of Border Functions and Problems.'* (Columbia University Press, New York 1940)

<sup>48</sup> See Chorley, R.J. et al (eds.), *'The Life and Work of William Morris Davis,'* (Methuen, London 1973), Vol.II

<sup>49</sup> Schofield, R. (ed.), *'Territorial Foundations of the Gulf States.'* (University College London Press, London 1994). See p.15. Also see Schofield, R. *'Kuwait and Iraq: Historical Claims and Territorial Disputes.'* (Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, London 1991), p.85.

mountains and rivers combined.<sup>50</sup> Although such a standpoint has since been discredited, Schofield reminds us that it was hugely influential at the time, and that administrators coming up through the system in the 1910s and 1920s, would obviously have had their attitudes coloured in this respect. Subsequently, distinctive natural features, despite their scarcity throughout the region, were adopted where possible in the early 1920s. In many cases however, boundaries in this region had to be drawn through desolate terrain that presented very few distinctive features, and therefore, different strategies had to be exercised. Along much of the Saudi-Iraq boundary, many straight-lines segments, or *geometric* boundaries were utilised to link the infrequent natural features. *Anthropogeographic* boundaries, those which followed tribal, ethnic or religious boundaries seem very *under-used* in relation to 1920s Iraq.<sup>51</sup> It was only in the late 1950s, with respect to the Trucial Coast, that British boundary-makers began to make efforts to delimit the region with respect to such anthropogeographic considerations.<sup>52</sup> Until that time, it seems that ethnic and religious considerations were seen as secondary to 'natural' ones, or only utilised when the resulting ethnic or religious mix was seen as advantageous to the British. For example, the largely Sunni Kurdish population of Mosul were eventually included within the new State of Iraq, because the British wanted them to offset the influence of the Shi'i majority.

In Hartshorne's original terminology, his *superimposed* boundary referred to the principle by which river systems established at one period on a particular strata might cut their way through onto different strata, thus creating a river system which reflected the influence of the earlier surface geology, now gone. However, the term can also be used very effectively to describe those boundaries that are arbitrarily imposed by an outside agency, which are also otherwise hard to explain in the context of their present surroundings. In this sense, it can be argued that any linear boundary can be viewed as *superimposed* within the Levant region. Fixed and rigid delimitations were drawn upon a cultural landscape for which they arguably held no relevance. Ideas of territoriality within the region pre-1920s were traditionally fluid and impermanent. The impact of British boundary-making should therefore be fully

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<sup>50</sup> Holdich, T.H. 'Political Frontiers and Boundary-Making.' (Macmillan, London 1916)

<sup>51</sup> This was partly because delimiting anthropogeographic boundaries was difficult in areas where tribes were not sedentary.

understood to truly appreciate the resulting geopolitical nature of the Iraqi state. Boundaries are not simply lines on maps, and are central to understanding political life. As Anderson states: "*Examining the justifications of frontiers raises crucial, often dramatic, questions concerning citizenship, identity, political loyalty, exclusion, inclusion and of the ends of the state.*"<sup>53</sup> He goes on to stress the role of boundaries as markers of identity. During the delimitation of Iraq in the 1920s, what was being marked out was supposedly a 'national' identity. Used in this way, boundaries are part of the political beliefs and myths about the unity of a given 'people', and sometimes the 'natural' unity of a given territory. However, evidence of how such 'markers of identity' were decided upon, may demonstrate that other considerations were of more importance, especially as the decisions were undertaken by Britain, who had interests other than that of the national unity of Iraq to satisfy.

### **5.3.1. The Western Boundary**

The Eastern boundary of Mesopotamia was not a time-consuming issue, as it had always been an international border, previously separating Persia from the Ottoman territories. (See Map 22). The question of boundary fixation was held up by one boundary in particular. It was deciding exactly where the boundaries of Palestine and Mesopotamia should be positioned, and whether they should involve an interim territory, that became a sticking point between Britain and France. Deliberations on this issue seemed to provide three possible options of dealing with these frontiers. The first possibility was making the frontiers of Palestine and Mesopotamia coterminous, but leaving the actual boundaries undefined. Otherwise, the western confines of Mesopotamia could be extended to embrace all of the intervening territory not included in Palestine proper. Finally, the issue could be resolved by fixing mutually agreeable boundaries in accordance with the generally accepted definition of Palestine and Mesopotamia, and that the intervening space should be dealt with as a British sphere of influence, but not as a mandated territory. However, the Committee's meeting on this issue in August 1920 was inconclusive, and the issue was left to

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<sup>52</sup> See Schofield, R. 1994, p.27

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, Malcolm. 'Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World.' (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1996), p.1





**Map 22. Ottoman-Persian Boundary**

Source: O'Shea M., 'Myths, Maps and Reality: Geography and Perceptions of Kurdistan', (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, SOAS, London 1997)

resurface.<sup>54</sup> There was a move however, to treat this intermediate territory of 'Transjordan' as a separate entity, rather than simply adding it on to either Syria or Mesopotamia.

A subsequent meeting was held just a few weeks later in early September 1920 at the Foreign Office. Several important issues regarding the boundary between Palestine and Mesopotamia were raised, mentioning, for the first time, the potential impact on the local population, albeit from a British strategic standpoint. Colonel Meinertzhagen pointed out that: *"the boundaries, even as now drawn, cut through the recognised territories of several Arab tribes. It was clearly undesirable that more than one Power should be responsible for the control of a single tribe. Each tribe should be able to appeal either to Damascus or to Bagdad, [sic] but not to both. In the case of divided authority the Arabs would be inclined to play off one Power against another."*<sup>55</sup>

Major Marrs added that the boundaries as now drawn *"would place certain friendly Arab tribes, who had remained loyal to us even under the present difficult conditions, under French administration. He considered that this would have a very bad effect."*<sup>56</sup>

Again, it was finally decided that the Committee would recommend that the line defined in the French mandate as being the eastern and southern boundary of Syria should be adopted as far as Deraa, but that no further attempts would be made at that time to define the boundaries of Mesopotamia. The manner in which these discussions were carried out, with the population being mentioned solely when it affected the British position, demonstrates a clear lack of any wish to base the proposed independent state around some local consensus. The British were clearly hoping that any unity that the future state was to have could be imposed from above. This was to have a fundamental impact on the nature of the emerging state, as its geopolitical identity and form were being determined by a European Power, for largely European reasons. Once such European interest had gone, would the resulting state be able to function independently, or have a viable place in the global state-system?

When the final declaration constituting the Mandate for Mesopotamia was released, the article dealing with frontiers had not progressed from the simple statement that a

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<sup>54</sup> See Minutes of Meeting held at Foreign Office, Aug. 17, 1920. FO 371/371/5245

<sup>55</sup> Minutes of Meeting held at Foreign Office, Sept. 3, 1920. FO 371/5245/11316

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

Boundary Commissioner would be appointed by the mandatory power. The only decision was that the British Government accepted the frontier between Syria and Mesopotamia as that laid down in the French draft mandate for Syria. However, the wranglings over the frontiers between Palestine and Mesopotamia, and the status of the intervening territory continued. *"A possible course would be to define the boundaries of Palestine proper and of Mesopotamia proper in the mandates, leaving the intervening territory for future arrangement, but this would at once raise the question of the status of the intervening territory, and might deprive us of the power to safe-guard British political dominance in that area.*

*For the present therefore, it is considered that we should define the boundaries of –*

- 1) Palestine, only so far as they march with Syria and Egypt.*
- 2) Mesopotamia, only so far as they march with Syria, Persia and the Persian Gulf, leaving the eastern boundary of Palestine and the south-western boundary of Mesopotamia for subsequent definition when the situation as regards Arabia has developed further.*"<sup>57</sup>

This statement highlights the state of flux in the region at that time. Countries were being created, but their final limits were awaiting further regional developments.

### **5.3.2. The Southern Boundary**

As the British started to delimit the new post-Ottoman Mesopotamian state, the Civil Commissioner in Baghdad pointed out that the boundary between the new state and Kuwait would have to be delimited with the consent of the Shaikh of Kuwait.<sup>58</sup> Britain had already decided that no attempt would be made to treat the former Ottoman provinces of Mesopotamia, and the nominally Ottoman *qadha* of Kuwait, as one entity. A Foreign Office memorandum in 1918 reminded <sup>the</sup> British Government of its November 3rd 1914 promise to the Ruler of Kuwait that the shaikhdom would be recognised as an independent principality under British protection.<sup>59</sup> Thus, a new international boundary between the two had to be delimited.

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<sup>57</sup> Curzon to Vansittart, Sept. 30, 1920. FO 371/5245

<sup>58</sup> Fone, C.T. 'Foreign Office Memorandum on the Iraqi-Kuwaiti frontier: Events Preceding the Exchange of Notes of 1932', 1938, India Office Library and Records, London, R/15/5/207

<sup>59</sup> Foreign Office, 1918, 'Memorandum respecting the settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula', p. 6, India Office Library and Records, London, L/P&S/18/B302

Britain however, felt that the southern Mesopotamian frontier with the emerging Saudi State was a more pressing issue. They were keen to protect the integrity of the Mediterranean-Persian Gulf overland route which they now controlled by courtesy of their mandates for Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine. Ibn Saud's regional power was seen as a very real threat to this strategic link. The British High Commissioner in Baghdad, Sir Percy Cox, felt that his prime territorial concern in north-west Arabia at that time was to stabilize tribal unrest in the ill-defined southern Iraqi territories, which merged into the expanding Saudi region. To address this issue of tribal allegiances in the border zone, Cox first signed the Treaty of Muhammara with Ibn Saud on May 5, 1922.<sup>60</sup> Sovereignty over the nomadic Muntafiq, Dhafir and Amarat tribes was assigned to Iraq, and that of the Shammar Nejd to Nejd.<sup>61</sup>

Cox and Ibn Saud then went on to negotiate and sign the Uqair Protocol of December 2, 1922. Cox imposed an Iraqi-Nejd boundary that ran from the Batin in the east to Jabal Anaizan in the west. Assurances were included that oases and wells close to each side of the boundary would not be used for military purposes, and that nomadic tribes to the south of the line would be guaranteed access to watering places within Iraqi territory. Also as part of the protocol, the two delegations agreed upon a 'neutral zone' – which was placed over the eastern-most section of the Iraqi-Nejd boundary. Within this area, tribes from both states shared equal rights to pasture and water.<sup>62</sup>

Now Saudi expansionism from the south had been curbed, Cox felt able to tackle the issue of the Iraq-Kuwait boundary. In a dispatch to the Colonial Office in December 1922, Cox suggested that the 'green line' as set out in the 1913 Anglo-Ottoman Treaty, should be accepted as the Iraq-Kuwait boundary.<sup>63</sup> Britain encouraged Shaikh Ahmad of Kuwait to claim this in full as his northern boundary, and in April 1923, he stated that the territory which he claimed ran: "*From the junction of the Wadi al-Aujah with the Batin; eastwards to the south of the wells of Safwan, Jabal Sanam and*

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<sup>60</sup> See Schofield, R. 1991, Chpt. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Translation of Treaty of Muhammara of May 5, 1922, India Office Library and Records, London, 'Arabia: Nejd-Iraq and Nejd-Kuwait Boundaries, 1922-1923: L/P&S/10/937

<sup>62</sup> Annotated text of Iraq-Nejd boundary protocol, dec. 2, 1922, can be found in despatch from Sir Percy Cox to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, dated Dec. 19, 1922, L/P&S/10/937

<sup>63</sup> Despatch dated Dec. 20, 1922, from B.H.Bourdillon for the British High Commissioner for Iraq, India Office, London: R/15/1/523

*Umm Qasr, to the shore of the islands of Bubiyan and Warbah, and along the coast to the present Najd-Kuwait frontier. Included in this are the following islands of the sea: Maskan, Failakah, Auhah, Kubbar, Karu and Umm al-Maradim. These are the boundaries of Kuwait which I claim.*"<sup>64</sup>

Major John More, the Political Agent in Kuwait, then informed Cox in Baghdad that the Shaikh claimed the northern section of the 'green line' of the 1913 Anglo-Ottoman Agreement as his boundary with Iraq. Cox responded that: "*the Shaikh could be informed that his claim to the frontier and islands indicated is recognised in so far as His Majesty's Government are concerned.*"<sup>65</sup> Despite this settlement being simply supported by the decisions of two British political officers, with no input from the new government of Iraq or its King, as far as Britain was concerned, this particular border was now settled. Maps 23 and 24 show the Kuwaiti region and its territorial definition.

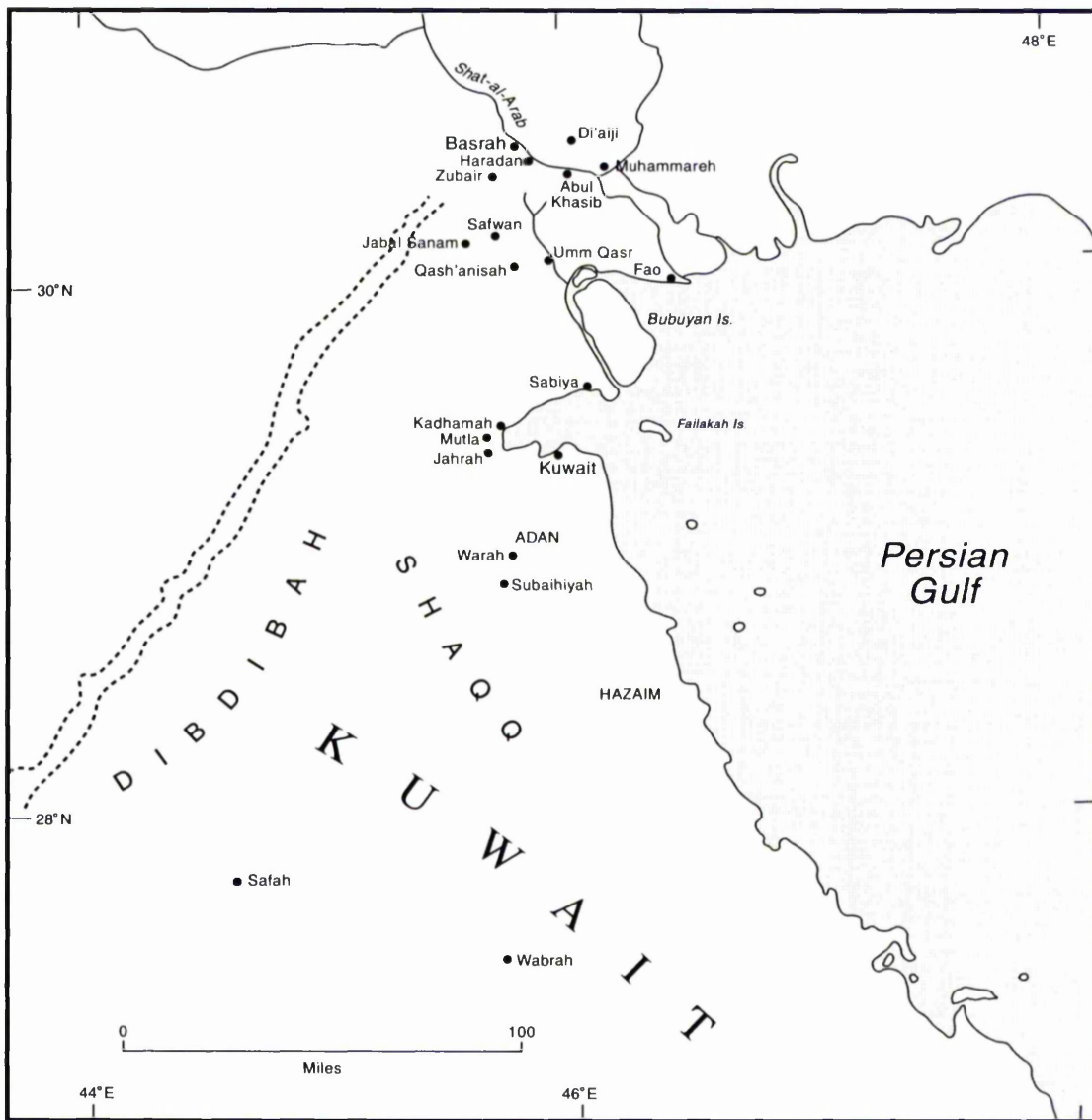
Considering the wranglings over the other boundaries of Iraq, the British seemed relatively unconcerned about Iraq's southern boundary with Kuwait, and did not fight to retain the strategic islands of Warbah and Bubiyan for the new Iraqi State. This becomes clear when the extent of the British influence over Kuwait is examined. Unlike the western frontiers of Iraq, the border with Kuwait was not contested with another Allied Power, but was a negotiation between two British Political Officers, over two British controlled territories. In this sense, the local advantages and disadvantages to each state as an individual entity, was lost in the desire to simply safe-guard Britain's *overall* position. Britain's decision to recognise Warbah and Bubiyan as Kuwaiti islands stemmed from Lord Curzon's policy at the turn of the century to keep the Gulf free of other imperial powers. This was to protect British routes to India, and also to prevent the Ottoman Empire from having any developable coastline on the Persian Gulf. Curzon actively wanted the Ottomans to be 'squeezed out' of the Gulf.<sup>66</sup>

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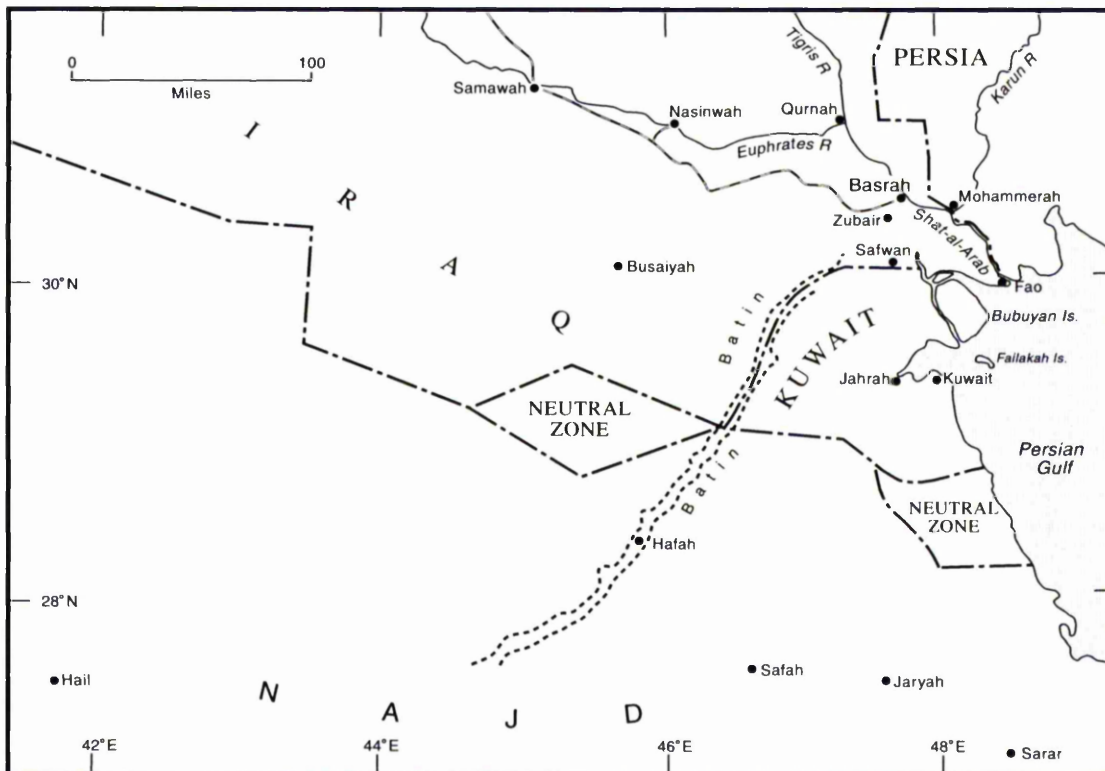
<sup>64</sup> Letter of April 24, 1923 from Ruler of Kuwait to Political Agent, Kuwait, R/15/1/523

<sup>65</sup> Cox to More, April 19, 1923, PRO, London, FO 371/8952

<sup>66</sup> Schofield, R. 1991, p.15



**Map 23. The Region Surrounding Kuwait as it Existed in the Nineteenth Century**  
*Source:* Schofield R., 'Kuwait and Iraq: Historical Claims and Territorial Disputes',  
 (Chatham House, London, 1991)



**Map 24. Approximate Territorial Definition and Extent of Kuwait, and the Neutral Zones After the Border Conferences and Agreements of 1922 and 1923**  
 Source: Schofield R., 'Kuwait and Iraq: Historical Claims and Territorial Disputes', (Chatham House, London, 1991)

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain had noted that there were advantageous natural anchorage possibilities on the Khor Zubair at the site of the modern port of Umm Qasr, which may provide a useful location for a railway terminus.<sup>67</sup> It was the perceived threat of this development by any rival European power that persuaded the Government of India to support the Shaikh of Kuwait's claim to Bubiyan, and encourage him to extend this claim to the more northerly island of Warbah. The government of India knew that the Khor Zubair would be almost impossible to develop successfully by the Ottoman Empire if another power – under British influence – held sovereignty over these islands. Thus, this decision was made before the British ever had any control over Mesopotamia, and as their interests were satisfied by Kuwait controlling the islands, they gave little thought to the future geopolitical impact on the state of Iraq. Britain's wish to 'squeeze out' the Ottomans from the Gulf was ultimately successful, and was a legacy that Iraq was left to inherit, with a significant impact on its own perceived strategic interests as an independent state.<sup>68</sup>

### 5.3.3. The Northern Boundary

The northern boundary of Iraq also took many years to determine – years that could only hinder the development of a strong sense of unity within the country. The new state of Iraq was to include the *vilayets* of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, yet defining Mosul proved problematic. As a condition of the armistice in 1918, the Turks had to evacuate all of Mesopotamia, defined as these three provinces. But no final treaty had been signed with Turkey and so the precise frontier remained undefined. Mosul had originally been within the intended French sphere of influence, as agreed in the Anglo-French treaty of 1916 and the Sykes-Picot negotiations. However, the French were willing to surrender Mosul to the British, in return for a share of Iraqi oil

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<sup>67</sup> Lt. Col Lewis Pelly, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, Report dated May 15, 1866, In Saldanha, J.A. (ed.), 'Precis of Koweit Affairs, 3'. (Simla: Government of India, 1904). Also see Schofield, R. 1994, p.42.

<sup>68</sup> For more detailed research into the Iraq-Kuwait boundary, including more recent consequences, see Schofield, R. 1993; Finnie, D.H. 1992.



revenues, as their main interests lay elsewhere.<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile, the British were keen to stress that Mosul was “*naturally, economically and ethnographically part of Iraq.*”<sup>70</sup>

British interest in controlling Mosul as a part of Mesopotamia was shown as early as 1915, in the de Bunsen Report. The Committee noted that Mosul would provide a useful defensive frontier for Mesopotamia. Indeed, “*such a frontier can only be found along the ranges of hills to the north of the Mosul vilayet.*”<sup>71</sup> The possession of Mosul would also provide good hill stations for troops, whilst its local Kurds and Arabs were thought to be good material for recruits. Mosul also promised other benefits: “*oil again makes it commercially 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. Mosul too secures the full command of the area which will eventually come under irrigation and of the water supply for that purpose; its possession is therefore called for if we are to take full advantage of our opportunity to create a granary which should ensure an ample and unhampered supply of corn to this country.*”<sup>72</sup>

Thus, the logic that Mosul would prove to be a beneficial economic part of Mesopotamia seems clear. That it was ‘ethnographically’ a part of the new state is far less sustainable. As we have seen, the population of the Mosul *vilayet* was in marked contrast to the *vilayets* of Baghdad and Basra, as it contained a very large Kurdish element, and many other smaller ethnic minorities.<sup>73</sup> This Kurdish population was also in constant struggle for at least some measure of cultural autonomy. With the advent of Wilsonian principles of self-determination, many Kurds were even seeking their own separate state, a goal that seemed attainable as even Britain spoke of ‘Kurdistan’ as a region.<sup>74</sup> The British Government had included Kurdistan as a geographical entity on its maps for the earlier part of the century. Major

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<sup>69</sup> See notes of a Meeting held at Trouville, Sept. 9, 1919. CAB 21/153; Adam to Crowe, Oct. 9, 1919. FO 371/4184; Lloyd George to Clemenceau, Oct. 18, 1919, enclosed in Kerr to Foreign Office, Oct. 20, 1919. FO 371/4184

<sup>70</sup> Major H.I.Lloyd, ‘The Geography of the Mosul Boundary’. Paper read at the Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society, March 8, 1926. Published in *The Geographical Journal* Vol.LXVIII, 1926, pp.104-117

<sup>71</sup> De Bunsen Report, June 1915, para. 22. CAB 42/3

<sup>72</sup> De Bunsen Report, June 1915, para. 26. CAB 42/3

<sup>73</sup> See: Cuinet, V. 1892, Vol.II, pp.764-65; Admiralty, *A Handbook of Mesopotamia*, Vol.I, (London, 1916), p.66; FO, Historical Section, *Mesopotamia*, (London, 1919), p.8

<sup>74</sup> See Asquith’s Diary 25/03/1915, cited in Wilson, A.T. 1930, p.83

F.R.Maunsell, Britain's Military attaché at Constantinople until 1905, had mapped Kurdistan during his travels in 1892, and was responsible for the War Office's maps of this area during the period before the First World War.<sup>75</sup> These maps could have served as a useful starting point for the delimitation of a potential Kurdistan, keeping true to the Wilsonian ideal.

There are many reasons why such a state did not appear from the frenzy of nation-state building after the First World War.<sup>76</sup> The claims of the Armenians and those of the Kurds were incompatible, and the strongest world powers, namely Britain and the United States, felt disposed to prioritize the Armenian claims on both humanitarian and political grounds. A lack of consensus between the different Kurdish groups, and the absence of a recognised leader were also major stumbling blocks for the movement. It was therefore not thought that a Kurdish state would prove viable in such an area of mixed territories. It was impossible to satisfy the demands of all 'national' groups or to fulfill all the conflicting expectations raised during and after the war.

Perhaps the most fundamental reason that a unified Kurdistan failed to materialize, was the existence of Great Power rivalries, and, most significantly, the fact that a 'Kurdistan' did not fit in with the interests of Great Britain. The oil potential of Mosul gave the region a special strategic importance, and meant that Britain wanted Mosul to be part of 'their' Iraq. Previous promises that the Allies had made in the region to each other, the Hashemites, the Armenians and the Christians, also meant that any Kurdish territory had to fit in with what was left. However, the Allies had no control over Persian territory, which already encompassed a significant part of the proposed Kurdish state. With the Turkish enemy so close, Britain wanted Mesopotamia to have as short a frontier as possible, so ethnographical frontiers became less important than economic and geographical considerations, and consequently, Kurdistan could not be regarded as a political entity. Britain also wanted the Sunni Kurds to offset the large

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<sup>75</sup> Maunsell, Capt. F.R. 'Kurdistan', *Geographical Journal* Vol.III. No.2, Feb. 1894, pp.81-95

<sup>76</sup> For a detailed analysis of these reasons, see O'Shea, Maria, 'Myths, Maps and Reality: Geography and Perceptions of Kurdistan.' (Unpublished Ph.D., School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 1997)

Shi'i majority within Basra and Baghdad *vilayets*, as they felt that this would make the state of Iraq more governable and viable.<sup>77</sup>

Under the new leadership of Mustafa Kemal, Turkey was re-consolidating, and also stated their claim over the Mosul *vilayet*. Throughout the early 1920s, the Turkish Government openly rejected the British claim to Mosul, and invaded parts of 'Iraqi' territory.<sup>78</sup> To counter this claim, the British encouraged Kurdish nationalism as a weapon against the Turks, as they believed that a strong nationalist movement would force Kemal into a negotiated settlement favourable to the British. Shaikh Mahmoud was chosen as the leader of the movement, and, initially, was given a large measure of British support. However, when this emerging Kurdish nationalism began to get so strong as to threaten British interests, the British were quick to clamp down. By 1923, Shaikh Mahmoud was so out of British control that the Royal Airforce was given orders to mount considerable operations against him and other Kurdish insurgents, until the Iraqi army re-occupied Mosul in 1924. This demonstrates how Kurdish nationalism was only encouraged when it fitted in with the greater imperative of frustrating Turkish ambitions in the region. The Churchill-Cox correspondence of 1921 gives an insight into just how subordinate the Kurdish policy was to the Turkish policy, just as it had previously been subordinate to Mesopotamian policy.<sup>79</sup>

The July 1923 Treaty of Lausanne recognised the new nationalist Turkish state, and most of its territorial demands. Such a ruling dealt a final blow to both Kurdish and Armenian hopes for independence. However, the British still refused to concede the *vilayet* of Mosul to the Turks, and the matter was left to the League of Nations to decide. In 1924, Mr. Branting, the head of the League of Nations sub-committee, laid down the status quo line, a temporary border, behind which they requested the Turks withdraw. This border became known as the 'Brussels', or 'Branting' Line, and it followed, with minor modifications, the old boundary of the Mosul *vilayet*. It was laid

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<sup>77</sup> See O'Shea, Maria, unpublished Ph.D. 1997, p.227.

<sup>78</sup> For a full account of the Mosul question, see Hussain, F. 'The Mosul Problem – A Study in Anglo-Iraqi-Turkish Diplomacy and Public Opinion.' (Ph.D., University of Indiana, 1952). Also see O'Shea, M. unpublished Ph.D. 1997, pp.227-228

<sup>79</sup> See: PRO CO 730/2, various numbers; Olson, R. 'Battle for Kurdistan. The Churchill-Cox Correspondence Regarding the Creation of the State of Iraq'. *International Journal of Turkish Studies* Vol.5, sections 1-2, 1991, pp.121-137

down in accordance with the natural features as they appeared on the Maunsell sheets, as modified by the War Office.<sup>80</sup>

The League of Nations Commission went to Mosul in 1925 to make a final ruling on this issue. The Commission found that the Mosul *vilayet* should be included in the new State of Iraq, and the Branting Line was declared to be the northern frontier of Iraq. The Kurds around Sulaymania had told the commission that this was their preferred option for trade and economic reasons, although they ultimately preferred an independent option. This reasoning greatly influenced the commission, who felt that economic and strategic considerations should override ethnic ones<sup>81</sup>. The commission also felt that any Kurdish nationalism and solidarity was too underdeveloped to provide the basis for this territorial and political decision. Obviously then, the economic and political leanings of the Kurdish notables who offered most of the opinions to the commission were paramount. However, the Kurds did demand assurances that they could keep Kurdish as their official language, have Kurdish officials, and that the British would retain the Mesopotamian mandate for at least twenty years, all of which was agreed by the League.<sup>82</sup>

This Branting Line was then ratified as the boundary in the Treaty concluded between Britain, Iraq and Turkey in 1926. The British preferred a different boundary, but eventually accepted this Branting Line as the best compromise. Major Lloyd, on giving his paper on the geography of the Mosul Boundary, to the Royal Geographical Society in 1926, conceded: *"It is not the best frontier; the line claimed by H.M. Government at Constantinople in 1924, and at Geneva in September 1925 is undoubtably an ideal frontier consisting of high, almost impassable mountains. It would serve as a good defensive frontier for the weak Kingdom of Iraq, and would make for ease in administration, as the barrenness and difficulty of these mountain masses would effectively deter tribes on either side of the frontier from raiding across*

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<sup>80</sup> See Major H.I.Lloyd, 'The Geography of the Mosul Boundary.' Paper delivered at the Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society, March 1926. Published in *The Geographical Journal* 1926, pp.104-117

<sup>81</sup> Such a decision is fascinating, given the emphasis placed on fostering ethnic self-determination at that time.

<sup>82</sup> The full findings of the League can be found in: 'League of Nations: Report Submitted to the Council by the Commission Instituted by the Council Resolution of September 30<sup>th</sup> 1924.' League of Nations, 1925.

*the line.*"<sup>83</sup> Clearly, a 'natural' boundary was preferred, that would endow the new state with a 'natural' defensive flank. However, although not ideal in the predominant British view, the Branting Line was a reasonable compromise to London, in that the boundary was still largely informed by natural features.

Despite its compromise, the Branting Line was still not ethnically or culturally based. In the discussion following the paper, Sir Arnold Wilson voiced some of his very real concerns over the boundary delimitation. He raised the pertinent point that the Branting Line had been based on the pre-war Maunsell War Office maps, which "*have never been fully replaced by any other series on the same scale (1/250,000), although we have been in the Mosul Vilayet for the last five or six years...I have had sufficient experience of laying down a frontier from bad maps to know the immense importance of having good maps.*"<sup>84</sup> However, for good or for ill, the British now had what they had wanted: Mosul within their control. (See Map 25).

Such a decision was to have a fundamental effect on the form and nature of the Iraqi State. Sir Arnold Wilson, the Acting Civil Commissioner in Iraq from 1918-1920, raised his concerns over disrupting historical population movements and trade within this region. He was unhappy that the Line "*does not give the peoples who are living immediately north of it access to a market. There are 20,000 or 30,000 tribesmen living north of the Brussels Line who cannot obtain access to a Turkish market without great difficulty, and will have almost equal difficulty, owing to their exclusion from 'Iraq, in obtaining access to the town of Mosul or its ancillary towns.*"<sup>85</sup>

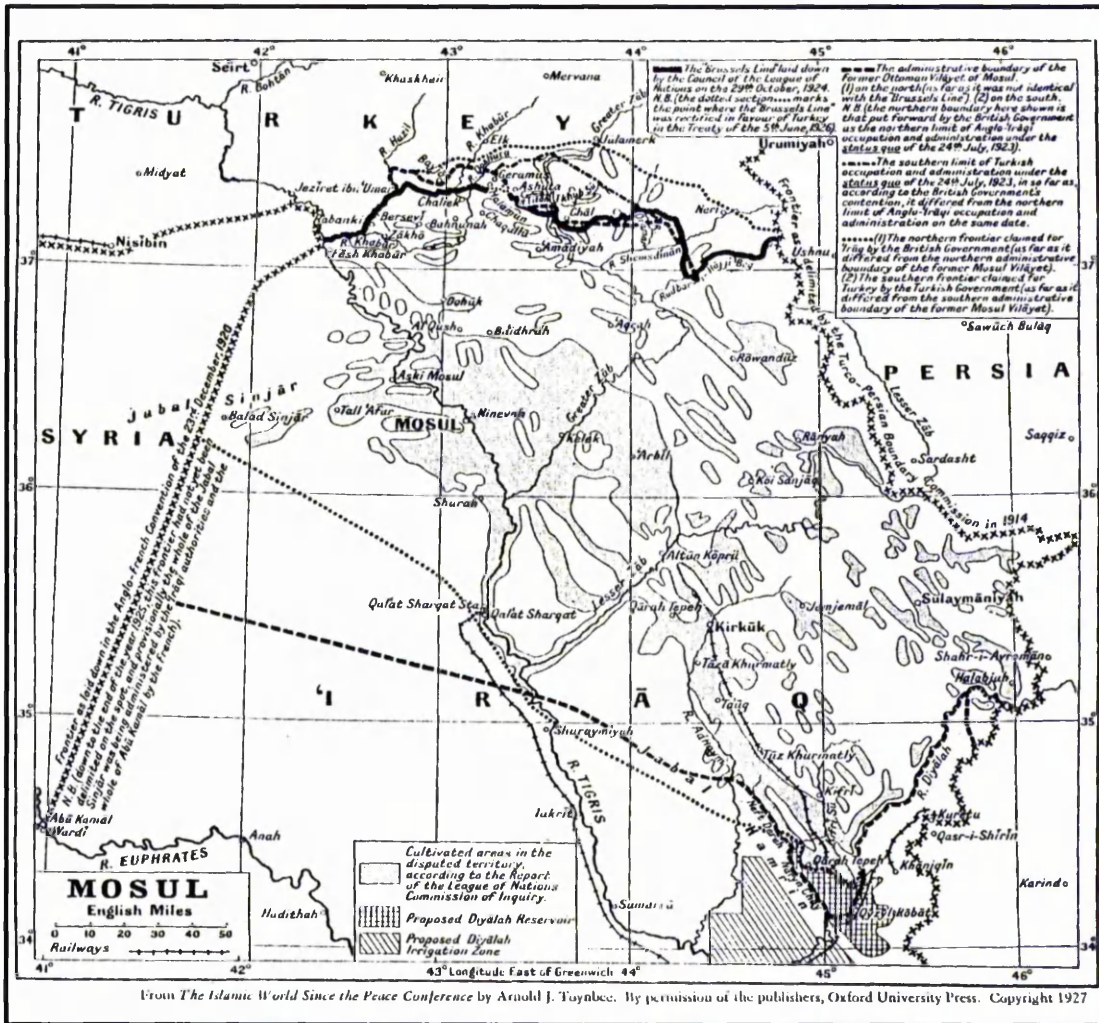
Including this province within the new state of Iraq would also permanently segregate the Kurdish population that lived across the region of present-day south-eastern Turkey, south-western Iran and northern Syria and Iraq. Due to the developed sense of nationhood that the Kurds had acquired, such a situation would prove a powerful divisive force upon the new state, as such intense cross-border affiliations had to be dealt with. This was a vital factor in determining the geopolitical form and function of

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<sup>83</sup> Major H.I.Lloyd. 1926, pp.104-117

<sup>84</sup> Sir Arnold Wilson speaking after the delivery of Major Lloyd's Paper, Royal Geographical Society, March 1926, pp.115-117

<sup>85</sup> Sir Arnold Wilson, *ibid*, 1926



**Map 25. Mapping the Extent of Mosul**

Source: Foster H.A., 'The Making of Modern Iraq: A Product of World Forces', (University of Oklahoma Press, Oklahoma, 1935)

the new state of Iraq. Right from inception, it contained a frustration that would only serve to pull the new state apart and a population that looked across the new boundaries more than it looked in towards Baghdad.

#### 5.4. Conclusion

During the First World War, each Allied nation threw its greatest weight into the particular part of the struggle that touched its own vital interests. "*Allied interests were seen whole only when individual national interests seemed to be otherwise unrealisable. Great Britain has been thought by some almost to have lost the war on the western front to save the Suez Canal and secure Mesopotamia.*"<sup>86</sup> The foreign interest in the Middle East, and in particular the former Ottoman territories, was intense.

After the First World War, Britain found itself in a very dominant position within the region. The Ottoman Empire had been destroyed, Russian imperial might had disappeared, and the German threat had been removed. The Allied Powers were victorious, and Britain emerged as the strongest of these in the former Ottoman territories. In comparison to its pre-war power, France proved of little consequence after the First World War. This had to do with the configuration of European power and ultimately France's dependence on Great Britain in containing the German threat within Europe. What had Britain wanted, and what did they actually get?

Firstly, we have seen that Britain wanted control in the Middle East for strategic purposes, and the reasons offered run from the Middle East as a buffer, a junction, a nodal point in communications, and as a military and political base.<sup>87</sup> Also relevant were the political interests of the rival powers, which, as has been demonstrated, were secondary to strategic considerations. Political gain and prestige became important goals in the scramble for Ottoman territory. There was a pressing need therefore, to deny the area to others. Also of crucial importance to Britain, as to France, was the safe-guarding and stability of their other imperial possessions. Britain was concerned

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<sup>86</sup> Davidson, J.H. 'Political Strategy: Mesopotamia', *The Nineteenth Century and After*, XCII, Nov. 1922, pp. 697-709

<sup>87</sup> See Dann, U. 1988 p. 421

with her position in India, and feared that destabilising forces would come from the Muslim Middle East, unless the people of that region were kept under imperial control or influence. In gaining control of Mesopotamia, Britain hoped such imperatives would be amply protected, whilst also providing a pro-British Arab state in the newly emerging region. Iraq also offered additional benefits in terms of oil and arable potential. It seemed that the way was clear for Britain, and France in Syria, to exercise their power and re-build the Middle East in whatever style they preferred.

The structure of the Middle East that emerged by 1923, however, was the result of compromises between Britain and the other European states, between Europe and an expanding American influence, and between the leading world powers and a resurgent Middle East. Britain had needed American approval for the implementation of its secret treaties partitioning the Levant region, and Wilson had then pressed the mandate idea on his unwilling Allies as a partial fulfillment of his support for self-determination. Europe was still Britain's priority, with the Middle East being peripheral. Also, principles had to be seen to underlie any peace settlement in the 'new world order' of post-WW1. The war had seen a drift of opinion away from the notion of multinational empires to a recognition of the principle of 'nationality' and the right of nations to self-determination. The three Central Powers in the war had been multinational states, and so this nationalism had become a good argument to use against them.

The British gained the mandate for the new state of Iraq in an almost haphazard fashion. The occupation of Baghdad and Mosul had not originally been required by British imperatives. The 1914 occupation of Basra secured all British imperatives in the Gulf, and cheaply. Initially this Mesopotamian campaign had been launched with clearly limited objectives, with the India Office in London simply wanting a holding operation at the head of the Gulf.<sup>88</sup> However, having met so little resistance, the temptation to advance seemed irresistible. In addition, the growing interest in the region from other European powers prompted Britain to stake her claim more explicitly, or risk losing her advantage. By March 1915, the Commander in Chief instructed Sir John Nixon, the commander of the Indian Expeditionary Force 'D' to

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<sup>88</sup> See India Office minute, 26 Sept. 1914. Quoted in 'Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Origin, Inception and Operations of the War in Mesopotamia.' Cmd. 8610, 1917, p.11



prepare plans for the effective occupation of the Basra *vilayet*, and for a “*subsequent advance on Baghdad*.”<sup>89</sup> In 1924, the League of Nations then ruled that Mosul should be included in Iraq. The League was concerned that without Mosul, the British might find the financial burden of Basra and Baghdad too great, and give up the mandate.

By 1921, Britain had been awarded the mandate for Iraq, and a new Middle Eastern Department had been established within the Colonial Office in London to deal especially with the Middle Eastern mandated territories. Influence therefore was moved from the India Office. This was an administrative change which was to have a profound significance for British Middle Eastern policy.

The geographical boundaries decided upon for the new state presented their own problems. The decision had been made to establish the state of Iraq, but it would be the boundaries of this state that would define it, and mark the outer limits of the state’s authority. They would also, by virtue of including some groups and excluding others, determine the new ‘Iraqi’ population, and who would be deemed ‘foreigners’. Such far-reaching decisions were to play a fundamental role in determining the nature and form of the Iraqi state that was emerging. However, it is clear that Britain prioritised strategic considerations, and that, despite the ideological pressure from the United States to create post-First World War states on the basis of a recognized national character and self-determination, ethnic and cultural factors barely figured as defining issues. Even in the areas along the Iraqi border that were not of paramount strategic importance to Britain, natural boundaries were favoured over cultural ones. When it came to marking out a unified cultural or ethnic identity therefore, these boundaries were at a distinct disadvantage from the beginning.

Kurdish populations identifying with other Kurdish communities across a new international border, rather than with the predominantly Arab population of the new state, strongly coloured the geopolitics of the crystallising state. Solidarity and a feeling of nationalism were clearly going to be hampered by such powerful cross-border affiliations. Historically, the provinces of Iraq had proved very parochial, and despite being geographically contiguous, they had had little to do with each other,

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<sup>89</sup> Great Britain, India Office, ‘Mesopotamian Commission Report,’ (London, 1917), p.16.

each being just another province within the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans had encouraged such localism by their weak administrative presence in the region, and their tolerance of local customs and practices. Thus, the three *vilayets* had nothing marking them out as a unit, except for the fact that they lay next to each other.

In the south of the country, the disadvantageous access to the Gulf was also a factor affecting the geopolitical form and function of the new state. Britain had accepted such a boundary, as their interests were safe-guarded by their relationship with the Shaikh of Kuwait.<sup>90</sup> It was the determination of Lord Curzon at the start of the twentieth century, to keep the Gulf free from imperial challenges, that greatly affected Britain's decision to recognise Warbah and Bubiyan as Kuwaiti islands. Thus it was British strategic considerations again driving the boundary-making process. However, such a land-locked inheritance for Iraq was to create a powerful negative consciousness within the bounded territory, and this was another factor in the make-up of the new country.

The fact that such boundaries were largely delineated by foreign powers, and to satisfy foreign imperatives, was in itself a powerful influence on the developing geopolitical form of Iraq. Tribes were included in Iraq if they were 'friendly' to the British administration. It was a foreign creation, and suited foreign interests. Local interests were of concern only in so far as they had an impact on wider British interests. In Iraq's particular case, this could only be a negative inheritance. This is not to say that if Britain had followed the principles of nationalism and self-determination more faithfully, that a foreign-created Iraq could not have thrived. However, Britain was consumed with the constant concern for the safety of her strategic interests in the area, for which by 1920 the creation of an 'independent' state had become a necessary evil. It was due to these specific conditions that the British legacy could only have been a negative inheritance for the Iraqi State.

A population put together in such a manner was likely to feel frustrated, vulnerable and in an inferior position. Hopes of a united Arab community had been dashed, as

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<sup>90</sup> See despatch dated 20 December 1922 from B.H.Bourdillon for the High Commissioner for Iraq, India Office Library and Records, London: R/15/1/523; Despatch dated 19 April 1923 from P.Z.Cox to the Political Agent, Kuwait, PRO, London: FO 371/8952

had dreams of an independent Kurdistan, and therefore there was an antipathy to the new state from many sides. Britain's attitude towards the geographical delimitation of Iraq highlighted the fact that the recognition and consolidation of a strong, viable nation-state in the region, was *not* their priority. "*In brief, nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state – a contingency already formally excluded by the principle in its general formulation – should not separate the power-holders from the rest.*"<sup>91</sup> However, the boundaries of Iraq were patently fashioned by different realities, with the principles of nationalism being subordinate to British strategic necessities. It could be argued therefore that the new borders decided by Britain, would be seen not as protective and inclusive, but as divisive and damaging, especially to communities such as the Kurds and the Shi'is. All this was to be a legacy to the new state.

It was not until the final issuing of the mandates, and then the resolution of the Mosul issue in 1926, that the three areas of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul were officially to be held as a whole. Mesopotamia safe-guarded British routes to India, and provided an important base in the Middle East. The fact that Britain had defined Iraq by the benefits it offered *in relation* to elsewhere, pointed to another impact on the geopolitical form of Iraq. The state was being established as part of Britain's global network of interests, not as a strong local state, fashioned by local considerations, and a natural crystallisation of local power. Its entire reason for existing seemed to be determined by realities elsewhere, and this would make the business of building a coherent and functional state very traumatic for the resident population. Nationalism needed a myth of the 'naturalness' of the nation; a myth that would prove that much harder for the Iraqi to produce, let alone believe in.

The 'unity' view triumphed in the end, albeit partly accidentally. There was a failure of any strong Kurdish leadership to emerge, there was rivalry with France, and their sphere of influence, and there were troubles within Arab politics. Thus, "*Iraq was a consequence of what may be termed a series of logical accidents. Basra was required for prestige and the defence of India, Baghdad for prestige and the defence of Basra,*

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<sup>91</sup> Gellner, E. 1983, p.1

*and Mosul for prestige, the defence of Baghdad and the viability of the whole.”<sup>92</sup>*

Such was the method of nation-state building in the Middle East after the First World War. Maps 26 and 27 demonstrate graphically how the political geography of the region changed from 1914 to 1923. A new system was being established. *“The question was, whether the British would employ the untried mandate system as a thin veil for old-fashioned protectorates.”<sup>93</sup>*

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<sup>92</sup> Yapp, M.E. 1987, p.333

<sup>93</sup> DeNovo, 'American Interests and Policies in the Middle East 1900-1939.' (Minneapolis 1963), p.173

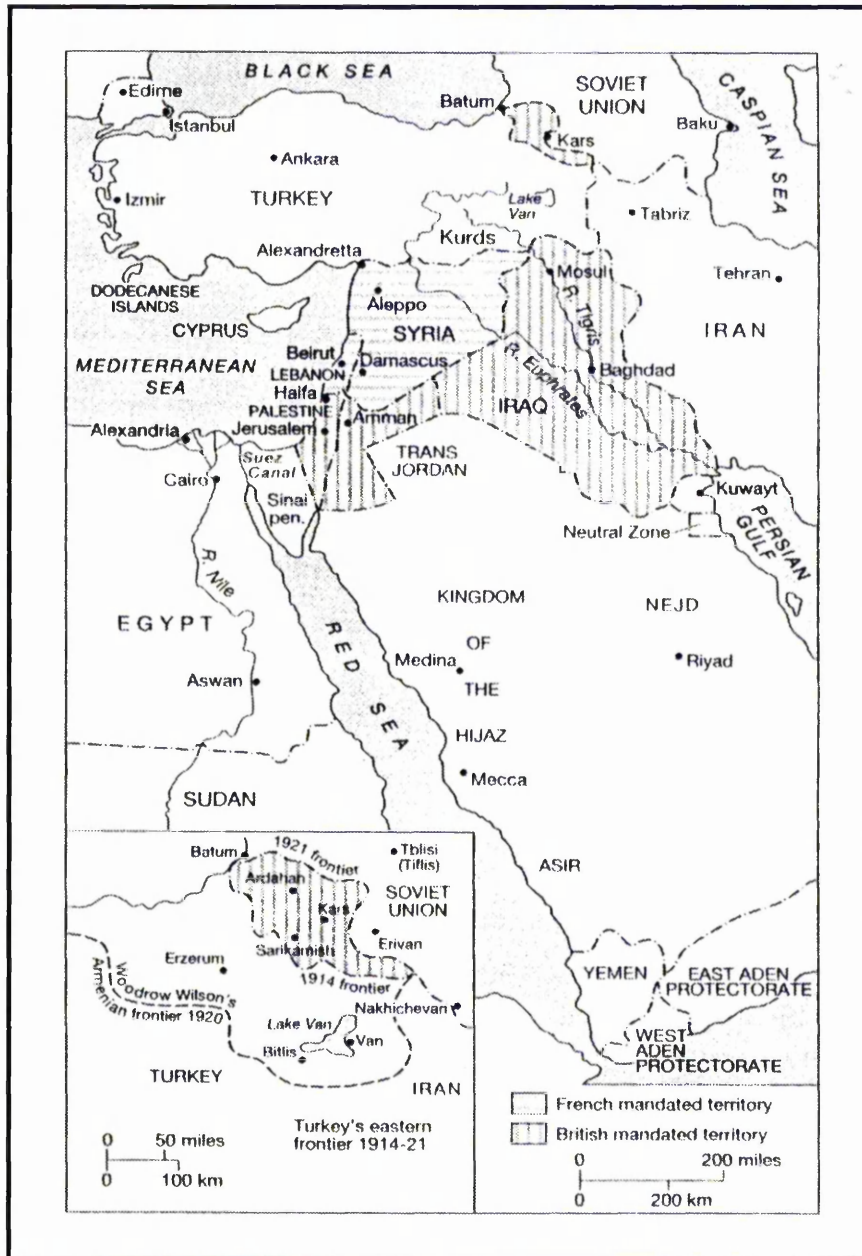


LEGEND: Thick red line Vilayet Boundary  
Broken red line Sancak Boundary  
Thin red line Caza Boundary

**Map 26. Syria and Mesopotamia: Approximate Vilayet, Sancak and Caza Boundaries**

*Source: War Office 1919, Located at Public Records Office, London, F.O. 925/41156*





**Map 27. The Near East in 1923**

Source: Reproduced from Yapp M.E., 'The Making of the Modern Near East 1792 - 1923', (Longman, London, 1987)

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE POST-WAR SETTLEMENT: CREATING IRAQ'S POLITICAL SYSTEM

#### 6.1. Introduction

After having determined the geographical extent of Iraq (finalised in 1926), and gaining the mandate, Britain had to decide on the appropriate political system for Iraq. Just as with the boundaries of the new state, such decisions were to be the product of British self-interest, international opinion and the character of local power bases. The previous chapters have detailed how the British focus between 1917 and 1923 was concentrating increasingly on defending their strategic interests in Iraq. How was this British interest transferred into actual power and control? This chapter will focus on the character of the nation/state as developed in the creation of an independent Iraq structured to meet British needs. Was the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity solely a result of British interest in the region? To what degree was Britain involved in extending Baghdad's writ to the provinces? What was Britain's role in promoting Sunni hegemony, and how did this influence the developing geopolitical form of Iraq? Did the new territorial integrity of the state imply the *cultural* integration of the resident population, and how did Britain influence the delineation of an embryonic Iraqi identity?

The newly formed states after the First World War were set up, under American influence, as 'nations in formation', "*in which all the different communities forming their heterogenous populations rally around the idea of nation – as it is defined and diffused by a nationalistic doctrine.*"<sup>1</sup> This therefore was the principle upon which Britain had to build in her mandated territory. The theory presupposed that such nationalist ideals would function as a glue, integrating groups and persuading their members to work together in the process of building a state. Once accomplished, the task of 'inventing' a nation is more easily achieved, as the process of political,

cultural and economic integration of the population lays the ground for a common national identity. The reality of course, is very different however, with many complexities involved in such a 'process'. With such a doctrine being adopted for Iraq, it is important to investigate how widespread was any indigenous support for the British vision of statehood, what other visions existed, and what impact these had on the emergent state.

Clearly, any decisions regarding the political framework for Iraq, would also affect the *identity* that the new state would develop. Within the Mesopotamian region, there were many well-defined identities which could have been viewed as alternative nationalisms. Why did these proto-nationalisms not succeed? The presence, and persistence of such deep-rooted identities are vital factors in the geopolitical crystallisation of Iraq, and this chapter will discuss such identities and their fate within the system chosen for Iraq.

## **6.2. Constraints on British Plans for Iraq**

Britain did not have an entirely free hand when it came to decisions over the political framework for the Iraqi State. After the First World War, and before the announcements of the mandates at San Remo, Britain's problem in Iraq shifted from one of military control to civil administration. The question of how best to approach this was complicated, as many divergent views had to be reconciled. British public opinion on colonial and imperial questions was in a state of fundamental change, and the British government, sensitive to the change, tried to accommodate it, but with an uncertainty of policy and a lack of real conviction. This was coupled with a serious anti-mandate movement within Iraq. The United States also registered serious opposition to the proceedings at San Remo, and there remained the fundamental issue of what real authority the League of Nations had in the distribution of mandates. "*It was evident that, if there were to be an Iraq at all, it must, under the complexity of existing circumstances, be nothing less than a world-made Iraq.*"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p.2

<sup>2</sup> Foster, H.A. 1935, p.99



### 6.2.1. The Position and Role of the League of Nations

The contested position of the League in this complicated situation is illustrated by the following extract from the *Manchester Guardian* in June 1920:

*"We are supposed to have or to be about to acquire a mandate for Mesopotamia. According to Mr. Lloyd George we are to receive the mandate from 'the Powers' presumably that signed the Turkish treaty. The Prime Minister in so many terms repudiates the contention of Mr. Asquith that mandates are to be given by the League. If that is the intention of Article 22 of the Covenant, we can only say that a situation has been created which is so anomalous that every well-wisher of the League must strive to bring it to an end. It is perfectly true that the words of the article are not explicit. It does not say who are to appoint mandatories, but simply speaks of 'advanced nations' which are to exercise tutelage over others 'as mandatories on behalf of the League', or, as the French version has it, 'in the name' of the League. Now whose mandatory are we to be in Mesopotamia – the mandatory of the League or of the Allies? To which are we responsible? Of this there is no question, for article 22 goes on to prescribe that the mandatory is to render an annual report on the territory commended to its charge to the Council of the League, and the Council is to have a commission to advise it on the observance of mandates. The position, then, taken by Mr. Lloyd George is that we are the mandatories of one set of people, but responsible to another set of people for the execution of the mandate. That is a double position, incompatible with the notion of a mandate, and will not work."*<sup>3</sup>

### 6.2.2. The American Influence

The League found itself in such a position largely due to the new political ideas and standards emanating from America. President Woodrow Wilson's 14 Point Plan was responsible for great changes in the political system that unfolded after the First World War. Wilson effectively introduced the idea of national self-determination, the principle that any 'national' grouping of people had an innate right to control their own political destiny. Such an idea was ground-breaking in a world of multi-national imperial states. It was an essentialist argument, that nations should be *recognised*, not

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<sup>3</sup> *Manchester Guardian* June 26, 1920, p.10

created. That is, such national groupings already existed, and the principle should not be used to 'create' them where expedient. This was a completely different way of viewing the world and the place and role of world powers on the global scene. Indeed, rather than conquer and colonise, certain world powers, namely Britain and France, were now being called on to tutor and disengage. A new idea was being championed, which had an inherent mass appeal, and therefore could not be ignored by imperial powers. People were being told that they now had a right to design and control their own collective political futures, which was in marked contrast to old British paternalistic imperialism. America at that time was still a rising power, and fell far short of the global power it was to become. However, although Britain was a great power in terms of military strength, political dominance and extent of territorial control, America was challenging this position through the power of ideas, and a seemingly 'higher' political morality. Born out of the perceived failures of European diplomacy the Americans interpreted as responsible for the First World War, such ideas were highly appealing to millions that lived under imperialist control, threatening unrest and dissension in areas that affected Britain and France. The catastrophe that had overtaken European-style balance-of-power politics, severely weakened the European powers' global influence. Therefore, Wilson's statements had an immense impact, espousing principles which had to be seen to underpin any post-First World War settlement.

### **6.2.3. British Concerns Over European Relationships**

Britain felt strongly that influence over any of the proposed new territories, should not be shared by more than one Power. Rather, each of the Great Powers should have an exclusive sphere of influence. Their reasons for this were that they felt that "*The Arab...is an [sic] adept at playing off one Government against another,*"<sup>4</sup> The British worry about this situation was not that this would hinder the stability of the new states in formation, but rather, "*This state of relations would be a serious danger to international relations between the French and ourselves.*"<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this concern about the French helped to determine many British policies within Mesopotamia. For

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<sup>4</sup> Memorandum on Possible Future Boundary Between British and French Spheres of Influence in Arabia. Unsigned and undated. FO 371/4178, point 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* point 4.

example, Hirtzel, the under-Secretary in the India Office in London, was worried about how the French would react if they felt that Britain was forcing a particular candidate for king on the Iraqis. "*If the French remain in Syria we shall have to avoid giving them the excuse of setting up a Protectorate.*"<sup>6</sup> It is evident therefore, that British policies and decisions were influenced by this European rivalry, and this would influence the resulting system they installed in Iraq.

#### **6.2.4. Local Moves Towards Self-Determination**

Britain also had to contend with local moves towards self-government. The forms that these took, and their relative successes, had a fundamental impact on the resulting state. In addition to the European realities already mentioned, the British were all too aware of the desire for self-determination that had been growing among the populations in the region. They knew that such desires must be accommodated, or at least be seen to be accommodated, if a stable situation was to emerge. Balfour wrote to Cambon in October 1918, that: "*We seek, as has often been said, a lasting peace and such a peace must be based not on any considerations of finance or political advantage for this or that Power, but on the principle of giving to each people as far as possible the Government which is most in accord with its desires and most likely to secure for it stability and prosperity, having regard to all relevant historical, geographical and strategic considerations.*"<sup>7</sup>

Gertrude Bell stated in *The Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*,<sup>8</sup> that many of the leading men in Feisal's army fighting under General Allenby in the Syrian Campaign were of Mesopotamian origin, with many from Baghdad. They claimed to have been fighting for the liberation of Mesopotamia, and the British could not afford to underestimate the strength of this feeling. In 1913 a Mesopotamian Society had been founded, called *Ahd al-Iraqi* – some of the founders being commanders in the Turkish army right up until the end of the war. From a stronghold in Dair al Zor on the upper Euphrates, this society conducted considerable propaganda, whipping up support for the establishment of an independent

<sup>6</sup> Hirtzel, Minute of 1 February 1919. LP&S 10 4722/18/1919/1/551.

<sup>7</sup> Balfour to Cambon, October 25, 1918. FO 371/3384/176523

Mesopotamia without Western interference, and with a view to uniting the country with an independent Syria under the Sherifian family from Hejaz.<sup>9</sup> Such ideas had first been proposed in 1905, when Najib Azuri had published a book entitled 'The Awakening of the Arab Nation'. "*That these developments indicated a change in the nature of Arab opinion regarding the place of the Arab provinces in the Ottoman Empire is not in doubt; but it may be doubted whether they constituted a movement which could as yet justly be described as an Arab National movement.*"<sup>10</sup> Nationalist they certainly were, though not yet national, but Britain could ill afford to ignore such developments.

#### **6.2.5. Divergences of Opinion Within British Policy-Making**

Britain decided that their only option was to build up an Arab state in accordance with the criteria for nationhood being advanced by the League. Hirtzel impressed this upon Arnold Wilson, the Acting Civil Commissioner in Iraq, but matters were further complicated by the fact that Arnold Wilson was a product of Britain's imperial past in India, and could not conceive of Arab self-determination. He complained sarcastically to Hirtzel in September 1919: "*Your statement that we are going to have an Arab state whether Mesopotamia wants it or not is the first indication I have had as to the real significance of self-determination for this country.*"<sup>11</sup> Thus, British policy-making was further complicated by divergences of opinion between India and London, the India Office and the Foreign Office, the India Office and the Residency in Baghdad, within the India Office itself, and within the Baghdad residency also. The Indian Government had different priorities to the London Government, and different populations to answer to. This often resulted in disagreements and local policy which was in conflict with British Government policy. For example, the security of the Indian forefield, such as the Persian Gulf, was a far higher priority to the Indian

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<sup>8</sup> British Government, India Office, 'The Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia,' (London, 1920)

<sup>9</sup> Hoepli, Henry, U. 'England Im Nahen Osten', (Erlangen, 1931), p.31. Also see Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.93

<sup>10</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.94

<sup>11</sup> Wilson to Hirtzel, 12 September 1919, LP&S/10/4722/18/1919/3/6202.

Government, whilst the London Government, especially while at war in Europe, had more immediate security concerns.<sup>12</sup>

Official policy also had to take account of public opinion, and the rising anti-imperialist feeling on the international scene. Political morality aside, many British politicians also felt that too much money had already been spent in Mesopotamia, money that was needed more at home. At the Paris Peace Conference, there was substantial British opinion against any further extension of the empire. It was seen as large enough, and *"this sentiment was reflected among some of the most responsible British representatives at Paris."*<sup>13</sup>

Arnold Wilson however, was unable to move with the great changes developing on the international scene. To his mind, the best course for Mesopotamia was to rule it along the lines of India, as he regarded the Mesopotamians as incapable of making decisions in their own best interests. He therefore felt it his duty to make the decisions for them, and be responsible for their welfare. He believed that *"any attempts to introduce institutions on the lines desired by the Sunni politicians of Syria would involve the concentration of power in the hands of a few persons whose ambitions and methods would rapidly bring about the collapse of organised government...the results would be the antithesis of democratic government."*<sup>14</sup>

Hirtzel however, was more than aware of the impossibility of using old imperialist policies in Iraq. He understood that the international community, and the resident population, would no longer accept any form of annexation, and he understood why. *"But let us grasp the fact that this is not an administrative but a political question. If Iraq al-Jazira were really an island somewhere in mid-Pacific, then Colonel Wilson's constitution might do, for a time. But it is unfortunately in the middle of a continent."*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed account of the divergences in opinion between London and representatives in Iraq, see Slugglet, P. 1976, pp.25-41.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, D.H. 'The Origin of the Mandate System.' *Foreign Affairs* VI, January 1928, p.281

<sup>14</sup> Despatch by Wilson to the India Office, mid-November 1919. Quoted in Slugglet, P. 1976, p.26

<sup>15</sup> Hirtzel, undated, 1919, quoted in Slugglet, P. 1976, p.27

British policy was left to drift as the debate over how best to rule Iraq dragged on. This in itself caused restlessness and frustration among the population. Shuckburgh commented from the India Office: *"how can the local population settle down when we won't tell them what we are going to do? ... We must either govern Mesopotamia, or not govern it."*<sup>16</sup> Hirtzel once again explained that there was no question of 'governing' Mesopotamia. An entirely new system had to be developed. Hirtzel wrote to Arnold Wilson throughout 1919 and 1920, trying to impress upon him the urgency of constructing an Arab state in Mesopotamia, as only a Mandate along these lines would have a chance of being approved by the League of Nations.<sup>17</sup> However, his stance was hardly ideological, but rather, sharply practical.

*"What we want to have in existence, what we ought to have been creating in this time is some administration with Arab institutions which we can safely leave while pulling the strings ourselves; something that won't cost very much, which Labour can swallow consistent with its principles, but under which our economic and political interests will be secure."*<sup>18</sup>

Such practicality clearly demonstrates how British strategic concerns were being given priority over local considerations. This British attitude had an important influence over the nature and function of the state that was being established.

### **6.3. British Decisions Regarding the Form of Government for Iraq**

The British had, in fact, long been preaching a message of self-government to the Arabs. However, this was not due to any moral belief in the right of self-determination for the people of Mesopotamia, but had been used first to enlist Arab help in overthrowing the Turks, and then in order to keep the peace within the troubled provinces once the Ottoman Empire was disintegrating. This qualitative difference in *motivation* would have a profound impact on the geopolitical form of Iraq.

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<sup>16</sup> Shuckburgh, undated, quoted in Sluglett, P. 1976, p.36-7.

<sup>17</sup> Minute by Hirtzel. 8 July 1919 LP&S/10/4722/18/1919/2/4019

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Marlowe, J. 'Late Victorian: The Life of Sir Arnold Talbot Wilson', (Cresset Press, London 1967), pp.182-3

Upon the occupation of Baghdad, General Maude claimed that the British had come not as conquerors but as liberators. The proclamation contained many important promises to the Arab people:

*"But you, the people of Baghdad, whose commercial professions and whose safety from oppression and invasion must ever be a matter of the closest concern to the British government, are not to understand that it is the wish of the British government to impose upon you alien institutions...Many noble Arabs have perished in the cause of freedom at the hands of those alien rulers, the Turks, who oppressed them. It is the determination of the government of Great Britain and the great powers Allied to Great Britain that those noble Arabs shall not have suffered in vain...O, people of Baghdad! Remember that for twenty-six generations you have suffered under strange tyrants who have ever endeavored to set one Arab house against another in order that they might profit by your dissensions. Therefore, I am commanded to invite you, through your nobles and elders and representatives, to participate in the management of your civil affairs, in collaboration with the political representatives of Great Britain who accompanied the British Army, so that you may unite with your kinsmen in the North, East, South and West in realizing the aspirations of your race."*<sup>19</sup>

It is worth noting here that it was Arab solidarity and desires for self-determination that Britain was appealing to, whereas Iraq was composed of many different population groups, who would certainly not regard their own wishes for self-determination to be fulfilled by a purely Arab administration over the region. However, Feisal was satisfied, and thought, idealistically, that *"the future Government of the Arab provinces will be the last lesson to be given by Europe to the East."*<sup>20</sup> He did, however, go on to warn Lloyd George of the grave implications of partitioning the Arab lands. *"Does not Your Excellency perceive that the Moslem World, which is looking for the reward promised to the Arabs for their loyalty to the Allies and sacrifices in their cause, will all rise in a general revolt when it realises that that reward is nothing but the disintegration of the Arab People and the dismemberment of its country...I am certain that the men who represent the 'brain' of Great Britain will not misconstrue the facts and thus cause the rise of millions of their subjects for no other reason than to meet the views of an extremist Commercial party*

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in India Office Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia, (London, 1920), p.32

<sup>20</sup> Feisal to Lloyd George, undated, FO 371/4182

*in some other countries, which party has no right to gamble with the souls and destinies of other peoples when Nature and public interest and justice refuse that such a loyal nation should be so condemned to death.*"<sup>21</sup>

Again, Feisal was envisaging a nation purely Arab in content, despite the other indigenous populations within the proposed territory for the 'Arab Nation'. Such an expansive Arab Nation was never contemplated by the Allies, as their agreements and treaties from 1915 onwards had favoured the partition of the former Ottoman territories, as discussed in chapters 4 and 5. They, rather, supported the idea of creating several new countries along the lines of nation-states within the region, and hoped that developing Arab national consciousness could be attached to each of these smaller units.

Balfour wrote a long missive to Earl Curzon in September 1919, picking out these very points, and morally questioning the Allies' plans for the Middle East. *"The language of the Covenant assumes or asserts that in the regions we are discussing...there are in the advanced chrysalis state 'independent nations' sufficiently 'developed' to demand 'provisional recognition', each of which is to be supplied by the Powers with a mandatory till it is able to stand alone. Where and what are these 'independent nations'? Are they by chance identical with Syria, Mesopotamia and Palestine? If so, the coincidence with the Sykes-Picot arrangement is truly amazing..."*<sup>22</sup> Balfour continued by outlining the interests of the individual powers that led them to conclude their treaties of partition. *"In other words, when they made the tripartite arrangement they never supposed themselves to be dealing with three nations already in existence, ready for 'provisional recognition', only requiring the removal of the Turk, the advice of a mandatory, and a little time to enable them 'to stand alone'."*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Feisal to Lloyd George, undated, 1919, FO 371/4182

<sup>22</sup> Balfour to Curzon, September 19, 1919, enclosing Memorandum by Mr. Balfour respecting Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia, dated August 11, 1919. FO 371/4183/132187



## 6.4. The 1920 Revolt and its Repercussions

Britain had thought that its interests could be fully safeguarded within a dependent State of Iraq, veiled by a token display of Arab self-government. However, they were to have their policies re-fashioned by a strong regional backlash. The years of delay whilst Britain had debated what was the best policy regarding Mesopotamia had facilitated the growth of a frustrated movement within Iraq, whose pressure British policy was ultimately forced to accommodate. Between 1919 and 1920 an acute restlessness developed within Iraq, due to the lack of clear-cut policy coming from the British representatives within the country, the length of the ongoing military occupation, and the resentment that Syrians were seen as capable to run their own affairs, whilst the Iraqis apparently were not.<sup>24</sup> There was also great annoyance about the large percentage of Indian troops and officials present on Iraqi soil. Dissatisfaction spread from the towns to the countryside, and the Sherifians were growing increasingly determined to extend their newly gained independence in Syria to Iraq. Wilson wrote from Baghdad in March 1920, documenting that the chief Shi'i *mujtahid* had pronounced that all service under the British was unlawful.<sup>25</sup> Unrest grew amongst the tribes, and when the news of the San Remo resolutions reached Baghdad in May, attacks began on British outposts as nationalists were now convinced that only force had a chance of securing them independence. Britain had perhaps been naïve in believing that promises of self-determination to Arabs within the partitioned territories could compensate for their frustration at losing their vision of one great Arab Nation.

The ensuing Revolt lasted throughout the summer and into late autumn 1920, and heavy losses were suffered by both sides.<sup>26</sup> Civil administration ceased to function outside of the towns, and "*more than once*" wrote Gertrude Bell, "*a complete breakdown in the administration seemed imminent.*"<sup>27</sup> The situation increased the

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> For a full analysis into the causes of the 1920 Revolt, see: Vinogradov, A. 1972, pp.123-139.

<sup>25</sup> Political, Baghdad, to S/S India, 18 March 1920. LP&S/10/4722/18/1920/2/2211

<sup>26</sup> A British military report estimated that 2,269 British and Indian troops were killed or injured. Arab casualties were estimated at 8,450 killed or injured. This document can be found in Haldane, A. 'Chaos in Iraq. The Insurrection in Mesopotamia.' (edited by Paul Rich). Allborough Middle East Classics, Vol.5, (Allborough Publishing, Cambridge, 1922)

<sup>27</sup> British Government, India Office, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, (London, 1920), p. 112

calls for evacuation from those in favour of pulling out of Iraq. By October the Revolt was under control, and the return of Sir Percy Cox marked the end of Arnold Wilson's regime in Iraq. However, many Britons seemed incapable of grasping the vital issues and the strength of feeling that underlay the Revolt. Lloyd George stated in the House of Commons that he was at a loss to understand the cause of the revolt, and this provoked an angry letter from T.E Lawrence to the *London Times*. He wrote: "*The Arabs rebelled against the Turks during the war not because the Turk government was notably bad, but because they wanted independence. They did not risk their lives in battle to change masters, to become British subjects, or French citizens but to win a show of their own...It is not astonishing that their patience has broken down after two years. The government that we have set up is English in fashion, and is conducted in the English language. So it has 450 British executive officers running it, and not a single responsible Mesopotamian. In Turkish days 70 per cent of the executive civil service was local. Our eighty thousand troops there are occupied in police duties, not in guarding the frontier. They hold down the people...This situation is galling to the educated Mesopotamians. It is true we have increased prosperity – but who cares for that when liberty is in the other scale?*"<sup>28</sup>

Vinogradov provides an important insight into the role of the tribes in the 1920 Revolt.<sup>29</sup> Although Shi'i dominated, he contends that the Iraqi Revolt was a primitive, yet genuine, 'national' response to fundamental dislocations in the political and socio-economic adaptation of the tribally organised rural Iraqis – brought on by the encroachment of the West. It was he argues, 'national' in the sense that disparate communities within the Iraqi territorial region rallied around a core ideal in defiance of a common foreign enemy. After seizing Baghdad in 1917, the major aim of the British administration was simply to maintain order in the area, until the future of the country was decided upon. Thus, public statements regarding policy were often cryptic, and tribal policies tended to be *ad hoc*. This added to the frustration of the tribal Iraqis, and contributed to the Revolt. Alarmed by the violence of the uprising, Sir Percy Cox and Gertrude Bell, aided by many political officers, "*proceeded to paint a native façade over the British apparatus in Baghdad, and a provisional*

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<sup>28</sup> T.E.Lawrence's letter, *London Times*, July 23, 1920, p.15

<sup>29</sup> Vinogradov, A. 1972, pp.123-139

government was established,"<sup>30</sup> hoping that this would prove enough to placate the population.

This is indicative of Great Britain's attitude to state-building. Rather than having a strong ideological standpoint on the issue, they used it where expedient. Such an attitude towards the Middle East region in general is also highlighted by a statement by Churchill in regard to the present day state of Jordan: "*It would be preferable to use Transjordan as a safety valve, by appointing a ruler on whom he could bring pressure to bear, to check anti-Zionism. The ideal would be a person who was not too powerful, and who was not an inhabitant of Transjordan, but who relied upon his Majesty's Government for the retention of his office.*"<sup>31</sup> Indeed such a standpoint was to be the new focus of the British administration, as local realities forced them to rethink their policy within Iraq.

## **6.5. The Cairo Conference of 1921: Choosing a King for Iraq**

In February 1921, Churchill succeeded Viscount Milner as Colonial Secretary, and his goal was to implement a comprehensive, cohesive policy for the Middle East, which would then permit the demobilisation of the huge British battalions stationed there. The key was provided by the 'Sherifian Plan,' the brainchild of T.E.Lawrence, who believed the family of the Sherif of Mecca to be "*the oldest, most Holy, and most powerful family of the Arabs.*"<sup>32</sup> Elevation of the Hashemites to overlords of the Middle East also held out practical advantages to the British. It would help to fulfill, in small part, the promises that Britain had made to the Sherif and his sons at the outset of the war. Also, as extraneous leaders imported by the British, the Hashemites would undoubtedly be indebted to them. As Churchill himself expressed at the Cairo Conference on 12 March 1921, the gains of each of the Hashemite branches might be held for ransom against each other. "*A strong argument in favour of Sherifian policy was that it enabled His Majesty's Government to bring pressure to bear on one Arab sphere in order to attain their ends in another.*"<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Vinogradov, A. 1972, p.138

<sup>31</sup> Gilbert, M. 'Churchill,' Vol. IV, (Heinemann, London 1971), p.553

<sup>32</sup> Garnett, D. 'The Letters of T.E.Lawrence.' (New York, 1939), p.267

The Cairo Conference in 1921, and then the British Cabinet, adopted the main lines of the Sherifian Plan, which would “*preserve British interests in the Middle East for the next two to three decades.*”<sup>34</sup> The cost of the Revolt had forced a British rethink, and had raised serious questions over imperial economy – issues which were all addressed at this conference. Gertrude Bell in Baghdad forwarded the minutes of the Proceedings of the Council of Ministers, from a meeting held in late 1920, to the India Office, Foreign Office and the War Office. These encapsulated the British concerns regarding money, but highlighted the perceived duties that Britain now had towards Iraq. The British Chamber of Commerce in Baghdad, “*fails to understand on what principles Great Britain can retain the province of Basrah by force while evading her responsibilities further north, and questions the feasibility of this course. It goes on to point out that having destroyed the only form of Government which Iraq has known for centuries, we cannot leave it without any government worthy of the name and thus abandon the whole country to chaos. While recognising the urgent need of lessening the burden of the British tax payer, the Chamber believes that this end can be attained with safety and honour along the lines at present contemplated, that is to say the formation of a stable Arab Government.*”<sup>35</sup>

The Revolt alone had cost the British tax payer an estimated £20 million.<sup>36</sup> However, the curtailment of expense in Iraq would involve the further relinquishment of British control there. It was decided that this could most safely be done by hastening the establishment of a national government, to prevent an entire loss of control in the event of another uprising. The Sherifian Plan however, would enable an indirect form of control to continue. It was decided that Iraq should have a King, and it was essential that whoever was chosen by London should not be widely opposed in Iraq. However, Britain also wanted to chose a king who would be content “*to reign, but not govern.*”<sup>37</sup> After considering Abdullah, the elder brother of Feisal, quite seriously, the British were forced to rethink when he suffered an ignominious defeat at Maysalun.

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<sup>33</sup> Gilbert, M. 1971, p.545

<sup>34</sup> Dann, U. 1988, p.94

<sup>35</sup> Bell, Gertrude, ‘Mesopotamian Intelligence Report No. 4, 31 Dec. 1920’ includes the Proceedings of the Council of Ministers in Baghdad, para. 13, CO 730/1

<sup>36</sup> Foster, H.A. 1935, p.94

<sup>37</sup> Minute by Bullard on Intelligence Report of 30 Nov. 1920; Minute dated 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1921. CO 730/1/9829, p.31

With Feisal now throneless after his removal from Syria by the French, the British began to favour his candidature.

Feisal was a leading member of the Hashemite family, and had already had many dealings with the British throughout the Arab Revolt. Also, Mesopotamians returning from Syria offered active support for such a Sherifian emir. They sent a telegram to Sherif Hussein, "*begging him to send one of his sons as a candidate for the throne of Iraq.*"<sup>38</sup> Although a Sunni Muslim, he was known for his tolerance in matters of religion, which would be necessary in an Iraqi leader if he were to rule effectively over such a large Shi'i population, as well as other minorities. In early 1921, Cox made it clear that, although understanding that a ruler should not be imposed, he believed that the people of Iraq would welcome a British lead, and urged London to state their support for Feisal as the best candidate for the Iraqi throne. "*My belief and that of those of my staff on whose judgement I rely is that such an announcement of fait accompli would be a welcome relief to the majority of the people of Mesopotamia and that it would have the support of the moderate elements among the Nationalists while it would take the wind out of the sails of the young extremists who want to get rid of the Mandate altogether.*"<sup>39</sup>

In July 1921, the Council of State adopted a resolution proclaiming Feisal as "*King of Iraq, provided that His Highness' Government shall be a constitutional, representative and democratic government, limited by law.*"<sup>40</sup> After a farcical survey of Iraq was conducted, designed to demonstrate how such a kingship was supported by popular will,<sup>41</sup> the accession of King Feisal took place on August 23, 1921. Whilst using Feisal in the hope that he may make the ideal of a nation-state possible within Iraq, the British also hoped that this leader of the Arab Revolt would legitimise their own presence in the country. Feisal was very dependent on Britain politically and economically, a situation that Britain knew would prevent him from standing up to

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<sup>38</sup> Great Britain, Colonial Office, *Report of High Commissioner*, (London, 1920-22), pp.10-11

<sup>39</sup> Telegram 148S to High Commissioner, Baghdad, to S/S India 2 January 1921. FO 371/6349

<sup>40</sup> See *Parliamentary Debates*, 1921, vol. 144, col. 1630; also Great Britain, *Report of High Commissioner*, (London, 1920-22), p.14

<sup>41</sup> See Foster, H.A. 1935, pp.95-96; also important is a quote by Lt. Col. Fremantle, speaking in the House of Commons about this plebiscite: "*WE arranged and hope that it is all for the best, but for God's sake let us drop this sham of democratic government for Orientals by themselves.*" (*Parl. Debates*, Vol. 151, cols. 1597-8)

their presence within his new state. Thus Feisal was caught up in a vicious cycle of dependency.

## 6.6. The Political Foundations of the New State

Feisal's candidature could only be justified in the name of 'Arabism', as he was not a native Mesopotamian. The British felt that this was enough, as it laid the grounds for the political separation of the Arabs and the Turks. However, the doctrine of Arabism delineated the ideological framework for possible Arab unity in the future, and thus was a spurious foundation for the new state of Iraq. With such an underlying legitimisation, it was hard to see how the new state of Iraq could be moulded into a cohesive unit, with a developed sense of national identity. Even if all the inhabitants of Iraq had been Arab, they would be more united in trying to overturn the partition of their 'Arab Nation', than making efforts to develop a more limited sense of identity. An added complication was that the population was of course *not* entirely Arab, and the British choice to install Feisal as King shows clearly that they overlooked the non-Arab elements of the state they were creating, and did not recognise the importance of addressing these issues.

### 6.6.1. The 1922 Anglo-Iraq Treaty

Now that the issue of a king was largely settled, Britain turned their attention to the discussing what precise form the constitution should have, and what the exact relationship with Britain was to be. Sir Percy Cox appreciated that the term 'mandate' was in itself offensive to the people of Iraq. As he wrote; "*The mere terms 'mandatory', and 'mandate' were anathema to them from the first, for the simple reason, I am convinced, that the words translated badly into Arabic, or rather were wrongly rendered in the Arabic press when they first emerged from the peace conference... But it was taken in Iraq in its other sense of an authoritative requirement, as by a sovereign; and the 'mandatory' as one who exercised the authority.*"<sup>42</sup> Therefore, British officials in Iraq began to favour a treaty relationship with the new state, which would relieve Iraqi fears, and ease British spending.

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<sup>42</sup> In Lady Florence Bell, (ed.), 'The Letters of Gertrude Bell,' Vol.II, (Ernest Benn, London 1927), pp.535-6

Gertrude Bell wrote in May 1921, that: "*We have always known that Feisal would ultimately insist on a treaty in place of a mandate – now we have the opportunity of making a beau geste and giving of our own accord what we should certainly have had to give later at his request.*"<sup>43</sup> All the difficulties and strong feelings surrounding the mandate, would, it was hoped, be eased by such a gesture.

Certain issues of the degree of control Britain was to have in the new treaty were all cleared with an announcement from the Secretary of State for Colonies that the mandate would lapse as soon as Iraq was admitted to the League of Nations.<sup>44</sup> The Anglo-Iraq Treaty, named a 'Friendship' Treaty, was formally signed on October 10, 1922. Feisal gave a public speech, declaring that "*The Treaty...is based on the foundation of mutual advantage and interest...Great Britain...has undertaken to assist us and has recognised our political independence and respected our national sovereignty. All other agreements subsidiary to the treaty will be based on these principles.*"<sup>45</sup> The treaty covered such matters as British representation of Iraq in foreign countries, the duties of British officials, supervision of the judicial system, and payment for the public works constructed during the period of military occupation. In fact, the treaty allowed for nearly the same amount of British control as the mandate had, but under a different guise. Key advisory positions had to be created for British officials, and their substantial salaries were now the responsibility of the Iraqi Government. Article IV of the Treaty stated that the king of Iraq "*agrees to be guided by the advice of His Britannic Majesty tendered through the high commissioner on all important matters affecting the international and financial obligations and interests of His Britannic Majesty for the whole period of this treaty.*"<sup>46</sup> However, the Council of State for Iraq refused to accept the Anglo-Iraq Treaty unless it was acceptable to the forthcoming Iraqi Constituent Assembly.

The elections for this assembly ran into their own problems. Clause 29 of the 1923 Electoral Law stipulated that the elector had "*an obligation to define himself as an Iraqi National and to declare his intention to remain an Iraqi on a permanent*

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<sup>43</sup> In Lady Bell, 1927, p.593

<sup>44</sup> Report by His Britannic Majesty's Government to the Council of the League of Nations: 'Report on Iraq Administration, April 1922 – March 1923,' (London, HMSO 1924), p.23

<sup>45</sup> Report on Iraq Administration, 1922-3, *ibid*, (London, 1924), p.187. For the texts of the treaty and subsidiary agreements see *League of Nations Treaty Series*, XXXV, 14-151

basis."<sup>47</sup> This therefore disenfranchised voters who did not yet regard themselves as 'Iraqi', which left practically the entire electorate out of the process.

The Shi'i *ulama*, issued *fatwas*, forbidding their adherents participation in the elections.<sup>48</sup> The tone of these proclamations was unmistakable: "*Participation in the elections or anything resembling them which will injure the future prosperity of Iraq is pronounced haram*"<sup>49</sup> by the unanimous verdict of Islam."<sup>50</sup> Such a call had an immense impact on those registering to vote, as more than half of the population were Shi'i. Other inhabitants of Iraq also withdrew from the elections. In the northern districts there was a very real fear that Kemalist victories may lead to the re-incorporation of these territories back into Turkey.<sup>51</sup> In such an event, any participation in the Arab Iraqi government would prejudice their futures. Also, it was impossible to have thought that an 'Iraqi' sense of identity could have been fostered in the short space of time since the partition, especially within the province of Mosul, as its final inclusion within Iraq was not to take place for a further 4 years.

The Iraqi Cabinet dealt harshly with the main Shi'i *mujtahids* who had created disturbances. The main protagonist, in their view, was al-Khalisi, and he was immediately deported as an undesirable alien.<sup>52</sup> Several other leading *mujtahids* then followed in protest. Although this helped to solve one problem, it added to a more fundamental one. Such treatment of the Shi'i leadership by the new Sunni-led government, exacerbated deep-rooted sectarian hostility. This served to make the Shi'i feel excluded from the state and its apparatus. Sluglett writes: "*Throughout the mandate, in attempting to justify their frequently discriminatory policy towards the Shia, [sic] the Iraq Government argued that until Iraq became 'independent' the Shia had no voice at all in politics, no separate courts and no publicly financed educational institutions. In general, however, the obvious imbalance of Shia in the Cabinet, the Chamber of Deputies and in the Civil Service was a constantly*

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<sup>46</sup> See 'League of Nations Treaty Series, XXXV. Article IV.

<sup>47</sup> See: Electoral Law of May 1922, CO 813/1, published in *Iraqi Government Gazette*, 24 November 1924

<sup>48</sup> See 'Report on Iraq Administration, 1922-3', (London, HMSO 1924), p.26

<sup>49</sup> Arabic, meaning 'forbidden'.

<sup>50</sup> Abstract to Police Intelligence, 10 November 1922. Quoted in Delhi, BHCF File 23/15/1, Vol. 1, 'Propaganda and Activities Against Participation in Iraq Elections.'

<sup>51</sup> Report on Iraq Administration, 1922-3, (London, HMSO 1924)

<sup>52</sup> al-Khalisi was a Persian national – as were many of the Shi'i *ulama* in Iraq.



*exploitable source of irritation.*"<sup>53</sup> Indeed, at this time, as Lukitz states: "*the danger of dismemberment from within was far greater than any danger from outside the borders.*"<sup>54</sup>

The relevance of the 1922 Anglo-Iraq Treaty should not be under-estimated. It was not only a political agreement, but affected all spheres of life. It introduced new political and administrative measures, but it also institutionalised Sunni dominance over other sectarian, ethnic and linguistic groups within the country. In effect, the treaty defined the country over which the new rulers would rule, and this definition came from outside rather than from within. Britain's avowed intent was clear: "*we are committed to policy of setting up Arab national state in Iraq and were bound in honour to endeavour to carry that policy through and do our best for the Iraq state.*"<sup>55</sup> That establishing a very Arab regime in Iraq may not prove to be the 'best for the Iraq State,' did not enter British thinking.

Iraq's territorial continuity, along with a friendly regime installed in Baghdad, were the main British imperatives. This was the reason why Britain played such an active role in extending Baghdad's writ to the provinces. This was a government that they could work with, and so the longer term implications of obvious Sunni dominance within a heavily Shi'i populated state, were given little attention. However, this was the very reason why the agreements between the British and the Sunni leaders, although providing the means for Sunni hegemony, were unable to confer the necessary legitimacy for a Sunni minority to rule over a Shi'i majority.

### **6.6.2. The Limiting of the Government of Iraq's Sovereignty**

Despite their support for the Sunni leadership, the Anglo-Iraq Treaty still severely curtailed their state sovereignty – one of the foundations of a true nation-state since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Sovereignty, a state's inalienable right to exercise supreme authority within its own bounded territory, is one of the golden principles of

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<sup>53</sup> Sluglett, P. 1976, p.84

<sup>54</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p.15

<sup>55</sup> S/S Colonies to High Commissioner Baghdad, Telegram, 116 of 3 March 1923. CO 730/46/11818

the nation-state system. A nation is seen as "*inherently limited and sovereign*."<sup>56</sup> It is limited in the sense that it constitutes a clearly defined, bounded territory, over which it has entire and ultimate decision-making power: sovereignty. Thus, sovereignty is linked to territory, as "*Territory is a tangible attribute of statehood and within that particular geographical area which it occupies, a state enjoys and exercises sovereignty*."<sup>57</sup> Such sovereignty allows national groups to exercise the idea of self-determination that Wilson resurrected, within their own limited physical area. The limiting of this sovereignty must therefore have had an impact on the developing state's geopolitical form, function, and indeed place in the world community, as a foreign power still largely dictated its policy. Feisal himself had become deeply suspicious of the true British intentions in Iraq, and had been very reluctant to sign the 1922 Treaty. When he asked for clarification on these points, the British revealed just how they regarded his position. The Colonial Secretary wrote: "*I have come to the conclusion that Faisal [sic] is rather too prone to raise difficult constitutional and foreign questions... why instead of fretting and fussing cannot he live quietly and do his ordinary practical work as a ruler... the enormous cost and burden Iraq has been and still is to us is the important point for him to notice...*"<sup>58</sup>

The Treaty of 1922 was itself a source of frustration. The Iraqi Government was forced into entering agreements that they could not possibly afford, such as payments to Britain for personnel and for works constructed during the occupation; or that were simply humiliating, such as several articles of the Treaty and the subsidiary Agreements. The crux of the problem lay in the obviously subordinate position to which the terms of the Treaty had relegated Iraq's position. The new regime did not even have full sovereignty over its own territory, as Article XVIII of the Treaty stated that "*no territory in Iraq shall be ceded or leased or in any other way placed under the control of any foreign power*."<sup>59</sup> The British clearly did not consider themselves as one of these 'foreign' powers. However, as Britain knew, the new Iraqi Government needed the British. They needed them to help maintain control over a disparate population, and to keep the country's territorial integrity. The Iraqi

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<sup>56</sup> Anderson, B. 1991, p.6

<sup>57</sup> Wallace, R.M.M. 'International Law.' (Sweet and Maxwell: London, 1986) p.81

<sup>58</sup> Private and Personal, Mr. Churchill to Sir Percy Cox, 29 November 1921. Quoted in Sluglett, P. 1976, p.73

<sup>59</sup> See 'League of Nations Treaty Series, XXXV, Article XVIII

Government did not have widespread support from the population, which meant that it had to gain its power from outside until it had evolved a sufficiently strong apparatus of its own. They also needed British support in gaining Mosul, an issue which was not finalised until 1926. Iraq needed Mosul for its economic and political survival, and only British military assistance could secure the area, keep the Turks out, and subdue the Kurds.

From Britain's point of view, guarding their own interests within Mesopotamia was the main concern. Certain British officials had felt all along that "*Arabs should be told what is going to be done, not asked their opinion; they know that we shall be just.*"<sup>60</sup> Therefore, considerable constraints were placed upon the Iraqi Government, to safeguard the British position. For example, the Council of Ministers in Baghdad, were only allowed to "*be free in actions which do not touch the rights of the British Empire.*"<sup>61</sup> In the same report, in a meeting of the Council of State on 18 November 1920, it was decided to ask the High Commissioner of Baghdad, for a definition of the duties of the Ministers.<sup>62</sup>

## 6.7. The Fragility of Iraqi 'National Identity'

In the early 1920s, Iraqi national identity was a very delicate entity, and was certainly not the only communal identity struggling for dominance within the society. Feisal had warned the British about the unrest that would be unleashed if the Arab lands were to be partitioned, reminding them that they had "*no right to gamble with the souls and destinies of other peoples.*"<sup>63</sup> However, the British had decided early on that a unified Arab Nation was an impossibility. Lt. Col. Gribbon of the General Staff commented in 1919, that "*it may be as well to recognise here, once and for all, that a really united Arabia is an illusion and a dream. Arabs never have combined and*

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<sup>60</sup> Memorandum. By W.H.Gribbon, Lt.Col. of General Staff, dated 12 June, 1919. CAB 21/153

<sup>61</sup> Proceedings of a meeting of the Council of State, 29 November, 1920, enclosed in 'Mesopotamian Intelligence Report' no.4, 31 December 1920, CO 730/1, p.45

<sup>62</sup> Proceedings of a meeting of the Council of State, 18 November, 1920, in 'Mesopotamian Intelligence Report,' No.4, 31 Dec, 1920, CO 730/1

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Feisal to Lloyd George, undated, enclosed as an appendix in Summary of the Proceedings in Paris in Regard to the Military Occupation in Syria, Cilicia, Palestine and Mesopotamia, Sept 1919, prepared by the Secretary of the War Cabinet. Appendix I, para. 7, FO 371/4182

*never will combine. No one realised this better than the Turk, who knew that the only way to govern the Arabs was to maintain the balance of power among them.*"<sup>64</sup>

The British were aware however, that their plans for the Middle East, and Iraq in particular, would frustrate these Arab feelings, and necessitate new frames of reference for the populations. However, they were over-confident that this delicate situation could be appeased by nurturing new 'national' identities within the emerging Middle East state system. Cox wrote in August 1921 that "*at present nationalism in Iraq is a plant of disappointingly sensitive and tender material...It is therefore necessary for us to bend every tendril to form and pattern a national state and that this may be accomplished I beg as regards mandate that hand of H.M Government will bear very gently.*"<sup>65</sup> Gertrude Bell explained that in regard to Iraqi national sentiment, "*this is the sentiment which we want to foster and as it is held exclusively by sharifians, [sic] they are the people for us to back as we decided at Cairo.*"<sup>66</sup> The fact that such a sentiment was recognised as 'exclusive' should have highlighted the dichotomy endemic in presenting it as 'national'. British authorities were naïve in thinking that a national sentiment could be fostered from such a exclusive base, especially as the Sherifian form of national sentiment was decidedly 'Arab' in character, whereas any Iraqi national sentiment would have had to be pluralistic in content.

The 1924 'Iraq Report,' again documents the lack of state-based nationalism. "*An Iraqi nationality has hardly yet developed. Men feel the ties of loyalty to their tribe or their town or family more than to their country. A patriotic sense of public duty is often lacking.*"<sup>67</sup> This situation seems hardly surprising, not least because Great Britain, the 'creators' of Iraq, as late as 1923 gave clear indications that they themselves did not regard the territorial integrity of Iraq as a 'given'. A British evacuation from Iraq was debated throughout 1923, and British reasons for remaining ranged from the strategic importance of air bases in Iraq, to the fact that the terrain of the country was ideal for military training.<sup>68</sup> Finally Cox claimed that it would be

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<sup>64</sup> Memorandum by Lt. Col. W.H.Gibbon of General Staff, 12 June, 1919 CAB 21/153

<sup>65</sup> High Commissioner to S/S Colonies, Telegram 376, 10 August 1921 CO 730/4/40185

<sup>66</sup> Lady Florence Bell, 1927, p.592

<sup>67</sup> India Office 'Iraq Report 1922-1923', (London, HMSO 1924), p.17

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Sluglett, P. 1976, p.80.

especially wrong if Britain were to renege on her promises to the people of Basra. Britain should therefore not contemplate evacuating Iraq completely, but if forced to withdraw, should go no further than Basra.<sup>69</sup> – presumably holding this area as a separate territory. How was a national identity supposed to develop under these circumstances?

### 6.7.1. The Position of the Kurds

Further complications to the issue of national identity were added by the presence of many different ethnic groups within the new state. As discussed in the previous chapter, with the final settlement of the partition of former Ottoman territories after the First World War, all possibility of Kurdish self-determination was dashed. (See Map 28). The impact of this on the new state of Iraq should not be underestimated. It can not even be claimed that the British, the people mainly concerned in overseeing this partition, were unaware of the prevailing realities. Lord Curzon, the British Foreign Minister, and responsible for negotiating the Treaty of Lausanne in 1922<sup>70</sup> even commented, "*the whole of our information shows that the Kurds, with their own independent history, customs, manners and character, ought to be an autonomous race.*"<sup>71</sup> Sir Percy Cox, the British High Commissioner in Iraq, wanted to offer the Kurds military and political support against the Turks, but these proposals were rejected by Winston Churchill, the minister concerned.<sup>72</sup> The imperatives of empire, and the urgent need to make a settlement with the Turks became the priorities for Britain, and the Kurdish lands, with the exception of Mosul, were partitioned. The fate of Mosul was left for a later adjudication by the League of Nations, and its status was held in limbo for several years. This delay in itself could only have hindered the development of a state-wide Iraqi identity, as many within Mosul must have felt more of an adjunct to the new state, rather than an integral part of it.

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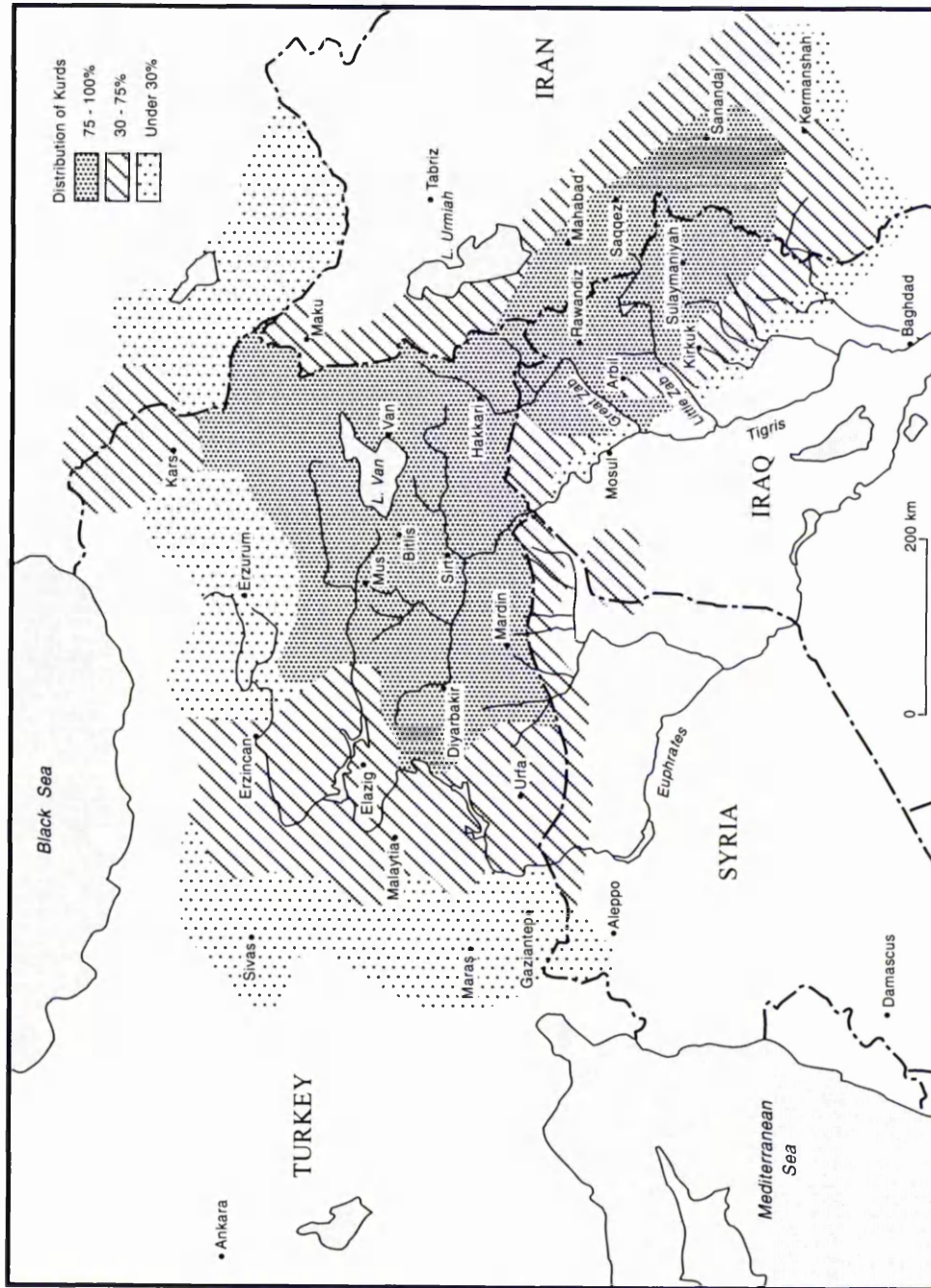
<sup>69</sup> British Cabinet, 'Committee on Iraq,' I.R.Q. 30, 5 February 1923, (London, 1923)

<sup>70</sup> In 1922 in Lausanne, a Treaty of peace was concluded, incorporating the greater part of the Kurdish provinces, but not Mosul, into the new Turkish State. Mosul was eventually attached to Iraq in 1926.

See Olson, R. 1991

<sup>71</sup> McDowall, D. 'A Modern History of the Kurds,' (New York: J.B.Taurus, 1996), p.142

<sup>72</sup> See Olson, R. 1991



**Map 28. Distribution of Kurds Across Turkey, Iran and Iraq**  
 Source: O'Shea M., 'Myths, Maps and Reality: Geography and Perceptions of Kurdistan', (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, SOAS, London 1997)

Mosul was also the home to Christian Chaldeans and Nestorians, Turkomen, Jews, Yezidis and Arabs, although the precise population statistics for these populations were hotly debated by the British and the Turks during their negotiations.<sup>73</sup> The Commission sent by the League in 1925 to make a final ruling on the Mosul *vilayet*, found that “*there was no national Iraqi feeling in the disputed territory,*”<sup>74</sup> – except among the more educated Arabs, and this was more of an ‘Arab’ feeling, “*chauvinistic and anti-alien.*”<sup>75</sup> The Kurds demonstrated “*a growing national consciousness, which is definitely Kurdish and not for Iraq,*”<sup>76</sup> – and this was strongest in the southern part, closest to the Iraqi *vilayets*. However, as we have seen, the decision was taken to annex Mosul to Mesopotamia. This was very pleasing to the mainstream British view, who had demonstrated on occasion a decidedly patriarchal and simplistic view of the situation, and the population dynamic within Mosul. Sir Mark Sykes had written in 1918, that “*establishing an ordered government in the Mosul province where the presence of a strong military force for an indefinite period, which only we can supply, can alone prevent the country from relapsing into a condition of complete anarchy, inhabited as it is by illiterate nomads and savage tribes.*”<sup>77</sup>

Difficulties became compounded in the north of Iraq by the lack of enthusiasm of a large percentage of the population for the whole idea of an Iraqi state, or at least their inclusion within it. The Political Officer in Kirkuk, C.J.Edmonds, suggested inviting popularly chosen representatives from Mosul provinces to Baghdad, to discuss a possible federation along the lines of an Indian Political Agency.<sup>78</sup> However, it was becoming widely apparent to the Kurds that there was no longer any hope for Kurdish independence, but at best a form of limited autonomy within Iraq. In the following

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<sup>73</sup> See Foster, H.A. 1935, p.146. Foster presents the population statistics offered by the Turkish negotiating team, and that given by Lord Curzon. Curzon offers a much higher number of Arabs and Kurds within the Mosul territory, while the Turks stressed the large number of Turkish people resident there.

<sup>74</sup> See: League of Nations Council, ‘Decision Relating to the Turco-Irak Frontier Adopted by the Council of the League.’ Geneva, December 16, 1925. (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1925. G.B. Foreign Office, Misc. No. 17, cmd. 2562, 1925)

<sup>75</sup> Foster, H.A. 1935, p.163

<sup>76</sup> See League of Nations Council, 1925 *ibid*.

<sup>77</sup> Memorandum by Sir Mark Sykes, enclosed in Cecil to Pichon, 8 October, 1918. FO/371/3384/176523

years of upheaval and occupation in Mosul, until the final delimitation of the boundary, even this limited form of self-determination moved out of the reach of the Kurds. The Turks and the Kurds took advantage of the delay in the settlement of the frontier, to keep the area as turbulent as possible, both with their own interests in mind. Kurdish unrest however, backfired, as the Iraqi government felt that they could not now allow independence or even autonomy to be granted to the area.

The British felt that the annexation of Mosul would benefit the new Sunni Iraqi Government. The population of mostly Kurds and Turkomen were largely Sunni Muslim, and thus their annexation to Iraq would prevent Shi'is being the majority within the new state, and safeguard Sunni hegemony over the state. Unrest in Mosul over this decision was combated by the British R.A.F. – who therefore played a fundamental role in extending Baghdad's writ to the provinces.

#### **6.7.2. The Position of the Shi'i**

The position and significance of the Shi'i community of Iraq were important factors in the crystallisation of the Iraqi State. Feisal's new government was forced to realise early on that the need to co-operate with Britain far outweighed any feeling that they should co-operate with the Shi'i leadership. Therefore the Shi'i became another group that was to display unhappiness about the political form and content of the new state. *"...There is a fundamental difference between the Shia [sic] and the ordinary minority position. The Shia, aware that they are both more numerous and better armed than the Sunni Arabs, know that they could destroy the present Government if British forces were not behind it, though they could not replace it without British help."*<sup>79</sup> Approximate censuses, taken in 1920, and again in 1932, show that the Shi'i made up almost 55% of the entire Iraqi population, the Sunni Arabs 22%, and the Kurds 14%.<sup>80</sup> However, despite this majority, both under Ottoman rule and throughout the mandate, the Shi'i were never given the part in politics of government that was in any way proportional to their numbers.

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<sup>78</sup> C.J.Edmonds, Kirkuk, to B.H.Bourdillon, Baghdad, K 847 of 26 October 1922, Delhi, BHCF, 'Events in Kurdistan,' 13/14/Vol. II

<sup>79</sup> 'A Note on the Political Situation to 27/9/27,' by C.J.Edmonds, enclosed in DO 2032, Sturges to Shuckburgh, 1 October 1927. CO 730/123/40465 paper 49.



The Shi'i holy Cities, in particular Najaf and Karbala were within the new Iraqi state territory, and this clearly gave these areas an ongoing link to Persia. This had traditionally served to isolate Najaf and Karbala from centres of Sunni power, and make them semi-independent enclaves within the Ottoman empire. They therefore were accustomed to looking more towards Qum and Mashad in Persia, than towards Baghdad or Basra. "*The most serious difficulty for Iraq in this regard is that while the Shiah [sic] represent more or less of a foreign radical and political element of discord, the Holy Cities which constitute the center of the Shiah influence, are in the very heart of the land of the Two Rivers.*"<sup>81</sup> It is noteworthy that the Shi'is were seen as a 'foreign' element, an unwanted complication in the British desire to build a 'nation-state'.

This demonstrates just how self-serving the British view of nation-state building was, with the establishment of a strong and viable state based on national lines, being very low on their scale of priorities. The British were allies of the Sunni Sherif Hussein of the Hejaz, and their relationship with 'the Arabs' had been built up upon this basis. Therefore, when it came to building an Arab state in Iraq, headed by the Sherif's son, "*Shiah authority would be curtailed.*"<sup>82</sup> Such an attitude is crucial in understanding the nation-state building of the post-World War One period. The idealism of Wilson was heavily diluted with the *real politik* displayed by Britain in their execution of the new self-determination ideas. 'Nations' that fitted in with British strategic imperatives were recognised, others were not. While genuine contenders for nationhood, such as the Kurds, were relegated, artificial contenders were 'created' where expedient for Britain.

The British and the new Iraqi government decided that the Shi'i must be subordinate within the new state system, as they were seen as reactionary and dangerous, and therefore less subservient to British interests. The expulsion of the *mujtahid* al-Khalisi at the time of the Constituent Assembly elections in 1923 only served to compound this feeling. In 1921, R.W. Bullard, a Colonial Office official, wrote a memo on the

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<sup>80</sup> Delhi, BHCF, 'Miscellaneous, Census of Nationalities by Divisions,' File 34/172. 1920 figures: Print no. 270 of Civil Commissioner of 10 March 1920.

<sup>81</sup> Foster, H.A. 1935, p.58

Mesopotamian Report No.5 that he had just received from Gertrude Bell, the Oriental Secretary to the High Commissioner for Mesopotamia in Baghdad. With regard to the Arab Government, and the position of the Shi'i, he wrote that *"The Shi'ahs number half the population of Mesopotamia, but owing to the neglect of secular education among them and to the fact that they have never sought office under the Turks they have no men fit to hold high administrative positions.*

*At the same time they are easily swayed by their learned men, who 1) are nearly all Persians, 2) are very fanatical, 3) have been brought up in the theocratic tradition and consider secular government superfluous, and 4) have everything to lose in money and influence if a stable Government with reasonably honest law-courts and administrative officials is set up."*<sup>83</sup>

The Mesopotamian Intelligence Report itself highlighted the problems that this exclusion caused, and outlined the political make-up of the new state apparatus. *"The discontent of the Shi'ahs at their exclusion from participation in official employment is not likely to be diminished when the proposals of the Council for appointments to administrative posts in the provinces are made known. There is not a Shi'ah among the 5 Mutasarrifs suggested up to date and but 1 among the 9 Qaimmaqams...the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of the new officials will be Sunni. Nor is it possible to see how this can be avoided...As a whole they are more backward than the Sunnis. They seldom attended the Turkish secondary and higher schools which were all Sunni, nor, for the same reason, did they study in the higher schools at Constantinople...Their standard of education is therefore perceptibly lower than in the case of the Sunnis."*<sup>84</sup> This gave the Arab Government a convenient reason to keep most Shi'is out of high office, a situation which would only exacerbate sectarian enmity.

### **6.7.3. The Position of the Jews and Other Minorities**

There were also other significant minorities within Iraq, each with their own deep-rooted identities which could have been used as the core of an 'Iraqi' identity. Some

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<sup>82</sup> Foster, H.A. 1935, p.59

<sup>83</sup> Memorandum by R.W.B(ullard), 5 February 1921, on receiving the 'Mesopotamian Intelligence Report No.5,' from Gertrude Bell. CO 730/1

of these minorities were also at odds with the new Arab Government. When the idea of an Arab emir for Iraq was first put forward, the Jews of Baghdad, the most wealthy portion of the population, and one third of the population of Baghdad, sent a petition to the British. In this they asked to be made British citizens in the event of an Arab State being set up in Mesopotamia. The Mesopotamian Intelligence Report, number 4, mentioned the Baghdadi Jews' apprehension: "*The Jews feel 1) that whereas there is some limit to the Turks' rapacity there is none to the Arabs'. 2) the Arabs have not the ability to maintain that security which is necessary for trade. 3) ...the wealth of the Jewish community...will infallibly lead to its being squeezed by an Arab administration.*"<sup>85</sup> Many Christians, about 4% of the population, were also uneasy.<sup>86</sup>

The British seemed to be very dismissive of such concerns, and calls for autonomy by several minority groups. In response to a request for Assyrian and Chaldean autonomy, sent by the President of the Assyrian National Executive, R.W.Bullard was biting: "*If, having taken up this scheme, H.M. Government found time hung heavy on their hands, they might set about establishing an effective protectorate over the Desert of Gobi.*"<sup>87</sup> Such a flippant remark demonstrates just how little importance Britain attached to calls for self-determination that did not fit in with their own strategic agenda. Perhaps the British should have paid more attention to the plight of these minorities. The Christian Assyrians had only arrived in late 1918 into Iraq, as British-backed refugees. They were therefore hated by the anti-British Arab Nationalists, making their integration into an already unsettled Iraq very problematic.

The massacre of Assyrians at Simmel by Iraqi forces in 1933 was the shocking consequence, and epitomized the complexity of a situation in which the envisaged state-building could only progress via 'nation-destroying.' Britain had subordinated the minorities to the Arab Sunni Government, via political and military means, for the sake of safe-guarding their strategic interests in the region, whilst also being seen to adequately discharge their duties on the international scene. The concerns of minorities within Iraq were dismissed, despite the fact that such worries highlighted

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<sup>84</sup> 'Mesopotamian Intelligence Report No. 5,' 15 January 1921. Para. 9. CO 730/1

<sup>85</sup> Memorandum by R.W.Bullard, para. 9, on 'Mesopotamian Intelligence Report No. 4, 15 Jan 1921. CO 730/1

<sup>86</sup> See India Office, 'Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia,' (London, 1920), p.127

<sup>87</sup> Memorandum by R.W.Bullard, 11 February 1921, p.137 of CO 730/1.

the fact that the identity chosen for Iraq was unrepresentative and exclusionary. A minute written in August 1932 by J. Flood from the Colonial Office seems to emphasise this disregard for prenational feelings present within the area: *“The Assyrians are really seeking what is impossible on general grounds. Their demand is to live in Iraq without taking their place as Iraqi citizens. This is not possible. The aim of His Majesty’s Government is to create an Iraqi state and nation.”*<sup>88</sup>

All these issues would prove to be substantial obstacles to the acceptance of the new political system within Iraq, and the development of an integrated Iraqi national sentiment. In 1921, The Mesopotamian Intelligence Report, number 4 mentioned that *“the chief impression I get is that it will be supremely difficult for the Arab government to assent any sort of authority over the tribes, especially the larger ones such as the Muntafiq, Kharraj, etc..”*<sup>89</sup>

Indeed, for many years the unity of the country was only maintained by British military force, which in itself limited the Government’s authority. In May 1925, Amery wrote about his visit to Iraq: *“If the writ of King Feisal runs effectively throughout his kingdom it is entirely due to British aeroplanes. If the aeroplanes were removed tomorrow the whole structure would inevitably fall to pieces.”*<sup>90</sup> As Iraq’s mandatory, Britain was responsible under international law for the defence of Iraq against foreign invasion. However, Britain also had her own interests to defend, such as protecting the routes to India. Thus, any civil unrest, even if entirely due to mistakes made by the Iraqi Government, also threatened British interests, and Britain would thus intervene to prop up the Government’s authority. Thus, many Iraqis could argue that the military system within their borders was mainly there to serve British, rather than Iraqi interests.

#### **6.7.4. Other Political Obstacles to Iraqi National Solidarity**

Britain had created other obstacles to the development of a modern Iraqi sense of solidarity. The position of the tribal shaikhs, decaying under the Ottomans, was

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<sup>88</sup> Minute by J.E.W Flood, 15 August, 1932. CO 730/178/1, no. 96602, pt. 4.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Mesopotamian Intelligence Report, No. 4’ 15 Jan. 1921 CO 730/1

<sup>90</sup> CP 235 (25), 11 May 1925. CO 730/82/22162

rebuilt by the British, in a mistaken attempt to keep a link with the past, and its power structures. Indeed, the uprising in 1920 has been attributed in part to this policy of rebuilding the power of the tribal shaikhs. "*The decision of individual tribesmen and small tribal shaykhs [sic] to join the revolt reflected their protest against the British policy of re-building and solidifying the power of the paramount shaykhs, which had been in decline prior to the occupation.*"<sup>91</sup> This policy reduced the power of the individual tribesmen, and caused much resentment throughout the countryside.

In 1926, and again in 1928, the High Commissioner, Henry Dobbs, prepared two memorandums which outlined the principles of the land policy that Britain was attempting to introduce. This was an attempt to centralise the system, by granting rights and duties of collecting revenues upon a few tribal shaikhs. Supposed to slow down the disintegration of the tribes, this in fact only led to the concentration of great power into the hands of a few shaikhs. This distorted relations between shaikhs and tribesmen, as it undermined the mutual dependency that had been the foundation of their relationship. Such a situation was compounded by the debt problem in which many rural tribesmen found themselves. The ensuing mass impoverishment of the *fellahin*, led to control of the countryside falling increasingly into the hands of town-dwellers, as more *tapu sanad* land titles were sold as part payment for debts.<sup>92</sup> These town-dwellers were mostly rich Sunnis, who became absentee landlords. Such a situation resulted in "*the economic subordination of the Shi'i countryside to the capital.*"<sup>93</sup> Town-dwellers were able to subdue the large tribes economically, and this shattered the structure of the countryside, whilst at the same time empowering much of the Baghdadi elite.

Obstacles to state-building were also found in the education policy for Iraq. Britain was reluctant to provide a good secondary education system, as they were scared of political agitators. British officials were concerned that by progressing too fast in education spending, a generation of young, enlightened people would be formed, with few appropriate employment opportunities. The belief was that this bottle-neck situation would instigate the politicisation of these groups, with subsequent political

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<sup>91</sup> Nakash. Y. 1994, p.71

<sup>92</sup> See AIR 23/104, Appendix to the Monthly Report on Muntafiq liwa, September 1926, received from the High Commissioner under HQ/1223 in 31, October 1926

unrest. As the 1923 Iraq Report described it, "*Whatever may be thought desirable elsewhere, in this country it is neither desirable or practical to provide secondary education except for the selected few.*"<sup>94</sup>

It could appear from this that Britain had missed the point that state-building, and especially nation-building, required the widespread establishment of primary and secondary education, and that providing it for 'the selected few' would prove more divisive than nothing at all. It was for these very reasons that Smith, the British advisor to the Iraqi Education Ministry resigned in July 1924. With regard to the starvation of education funding by Britain, he naively wrote: "*it is a mistake for us not to keep continually in mind that what we are trying to do in this country is a thing that has never been tried in history, I mean to introduce self-government of the most up-to-date kind into a country which has practically speaking no unity, no patriotism, no political instincts or traditions, no education and no actual wealth.*"<sup>95</sup>

However, not all of the 'us' he referred to agreed with this objective. Indeed, Britain did not 'miss the point', but rather, intended their own particular vision of statehood to be championed and consolidated by this 'selected few.' This goes right to the heart of conflicting visions of statehood, and Britain's purpose in supposedly trying to create a 'nation'. Although Britain's education policy created obstacles to unity within Iraq, this highlights precisely what British priorities were, and what served British interests best: a narrow, Sunni Arab-based vision of nationhood, that did not depend on populist support and that owed its existence largely to Britain. This was the subservience of state-building to British strategic interests, and demonstrates how the establishment of the state of Iraq was little more than a necessary by-product of British strategic policies for the region. Britain never viewed their 'job' in the area to be that of building a nation-state, but rather to pragmatically further their own national interests.

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<sup>93</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p.55

<sup>94</sup> 'Report on Iraq Administration, 1923-1924,' (London, HMSO 1924), p.206

## 6.8. Conclusion

The Ottomans had erected a political structure that had been maintained for over three and a half centuries in the Mesopotamian region. Within this structure, the Iraqi provinces were governed as distinct, outlying parts of the Empire, and not as a unified state. During this time, a political culture had also evolved, in which each knew his position, powers, duties and limits. Although this system had been ailing from the mid-nineteenth century, it had been showing signs of recovery, and was still accepted, albeit passively, probably by most of the population. Such a situation was radically altered by the entrance of the Ottoman Empire into the First World War. The political system constructed within Iraq after partition asked the population to fundamentally alter their frames of reference, and to accept a new political culture almost overnight.

Slugglet contends that academics and politicians today are less inclined to believe that there can be a complete harmony of interests between different people when some are subordinated to others.<sup>96</sup> It is even impossible to speak of a whole people, such as the Kurds, as having a single interest. This is why, during the period of the British mandate, *"in the Kurdish areas, divided between Turkey, Iraq and Persia, for long remote from any form of government control, inter-tribal conflict, sometimes accompanied by rebellion, flourished."*<sup>97</sup>

Not that Britain had had a completely free hand in choosing the political system they wanted for Iraq. They held the League of Nations' international mandate for the territory, and this in itself carried important provisos over what the Mandatory's role was, and was not. Therefore, whilst being able to manipulate policies within Iraq to a certain extent, there was always the public arena of the international community, as represented by the League, to satisfy. The other fundamental factor in determining the government of Iraq was the internal forces of the country itself. Violent resistance to European domination was a feature of the post-war settlement in Iraq, as it was in Syria and Palestine. For Iraq, this had a decisive influence over the form of government that emerged, and what the Iraqis eventually got was an embryonic

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<sup>95</sup> Smith to Dobbs, D.A. Advv/33/19/151, 15 July 1924. Delhi BHCF, 'Education' file 5/1/37. A.L.F.Smith.

<sup>96</sup> Slugglet, P. 1976, pp.1-2

'national' state, built upon self-determination, but profoundly Arab, and Sunni, in character.

Many factors shaped the creation of Iraq. Iraq was created with an inherent dilemma. The whole apparatus of the Iraqi Government was imported from outside, and a dependency upon Britain was necessary in order to maintain it. The constitution claimed that Iraq was a sovereign state, but the Treaty concluded with Britain in 1922 severely limited their sovereignty, and legitimised a very heavy British presence on Iraqi soil. The documentary evidence suggests that this military presence was necessary to maintain an Iraqi government that did not have the required popular support to survive alone. The power base of Iraq was therefore not indigenous, but unity was being imposed from outside, and for foreign reasons. British attempts at state-building seem naïve and simplistic, but were in reality acutely practical, and governed by strategic interests that lay outside Iraq itself. Britain displayed just how little importance they attached to establishing a sense of national identity within the state of Iraq, when this conflicted with British imperatives. The spreading of an Iraqi collective sentiment came secondary to the British imperative of stability within the country. Therefore, it did not really concern them that large groups of the population were dissatisfied or politically frustrated, as long as the situation did not reach a point where British military might would be unable to contain it.

Britain could not avoid making 'self-determination' and 'nationalism' the public foundations of the new Iraqi State. The reasons for this were twofold. In part, it was due to President Woodrow Wilson's ideals, and the reactions they had aroused among ethnic and cultural groups around the world. Perhaps more importantly however, it was because the European nations were unable to resist the 'idealist nationalism' of Wilson because of the failure of European balance-of-power nationalism which had culminated in the First World War. However, how was nationalism conceived by the British? Did they view it as a threat, perhaps to British interests in India, or as an opportunity, for secure government and a route to control or influence? Was it seen as a necessary evil, or as a natural phenomenon, related to race, culture, language or geography? Or was it simply regarded as a geo-strategic reality? Understanding these

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<sup>97</sup> Macfie, A.L. 1998, p.235



issues will help explain the logic of British policies, and also the ramifications for the Iraqi society that was being fashioned. The British were certainly trying to create a certain 'type' of nation, in which some groups clearly fared better than others. This sheds light onto British attitudes towards nationalism and self-determination in respect to Iraq.

For all the propaganda of 'giving the Arabs their freedom', and setting up a modern state-system within the region along 'national' lines, the truth remains that "*Nations do not vie amongst themselves for control over lands...primarily to give justice or to raise the standards of living among the people or suppress disorder per se...If these benefits extend to the natives of the country it is because the latter cannot, in the very nature of the circumstances, help sharing them. If conscious efforts are made to extend improved conditions among the native populations, it is because any increase of their well-being must lead to their increased productiveness and purchasing power and less costly methods of control and administration...In a conflict of interests...it is very natural that those of the mother country should come first and that the good of the people must, in reality, be subordinated to the expected material and political returns.*"<sup>98</sup>

This reality had an immense part to play in determining the nature of the new regime developing in Iraq. It was created as a sovereign state, yet was clearly in a subordinate position to a power whose interests were global, not simply local. Therefore local considerations were often overlooked, and sovereignty limited, which was dangerous when creating an entirely new political and social entity which affected the lives of millions.

The next chapter explores the ramifications for Iraq, of all these geographical and political decisions made by Britain, supposedly on Iraq's behalf. The fact that British policy for Iraq was fashioned by British concerns was to have an immense impact on the subsequent geopolitical function and nature of the Iraqi State.

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<sup>98</sup> Ireland, P.W. 'Iraq, A Study in Political Development,' (Alden Press, London, 1937), pp.34-35

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE IMPACT OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL FORM AND POLITICAL SYSTEM CHOSEN FOR IRAQ: DIFFICULTIES WITH NATIONAL INTEGRATION

#### 7.1. Introduction

“...it would be a miracle of adjustment if all this complex of East and West, thus brought together in Iraq, should fit itself at once into a well-ordered community.”<sup>1</sup>

The foreign interest in the former Ottoman territories both during and after the First World War, was indeed ‘a striking example of child’s play with human fate.’<sup>2</sup> Britain wanted control of Iraq to satisfy strategic aims, as Iraq’s geographical location lent it great importance in the eyes of Britain. International Great Power rivalries were being played out in the Middle Eastern arena. Although the structure of the new state of Iraq was not solely determined by the British, but also by a new climate of international opinion and forces internal to the region itself, Great Britain did retain the dominant voice in the region. The geographical location of Iraq also helps to explain the cultural ‘cross-roads’ nature of the area, containing many distinct communities.

1920s Iraq was considered by the victors of the First World War, as a ‘nation in formation’, in which all of the various communities were supposed to rally around the idea of the ‘nation’, “*as it is defined and diffused by a nationalistic doctrine.*”<sup>3</sup> Thus the populations of the new state would combine to produce a homogenous, collective and state-wide sense of identity, distinct from that of neighbouring ‘nation-states’. This chapter will examine the impact of the chosen geographical form and political system, on the development of national feeling within the territory during the early 1920s, whilst also analysing the factors that can frustrate this process, and hinder

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<sup>1</sup> Foster, H.A. 1935, p.63

<sup>2</sup> Foster, H.A. 1935, p.44

national integration. *“Can a nation be forged from so many disparate elements or is a nation a natural configuration? Must a ‘nation’ evolve or can nationalism be imposed from the top down?”*<sup>4</sup> Iraq’s population was not only composed of several minority groups, but some of these groups held their own strong ideas about the form of the Iraqi state, and their place within it. When these ideas clashed with the form of statehood imposed by an outside European power, populations could feel excluded from the very state that they were now supposed to be part of.

Many of the territorial boundaries of Iraq had been negotiated bilaterally between France and Great Britain, in accordance with their own interests, and were informed very little by the wishes of the population they enclosed. Other boundaries, such as that agreed with Kuwait, were determined by independent rulers of neighbouring states, and a British team speaking ‘on behalf’ of Iraq. It was these boundaries that would define the territorial limits of the new state, and determine the geographical extent of the ‘Iraqi’ population. Such far-reaching decisions greatly affected the geopolitical form that Iraq was to assume. A population being defined by an outside power, and for largely outside imperatives, would feel subordinate and vulnerable in relation to that more dominant power. Various groups within the new state also felt resentful for different reasons. The well-defined Kurdish population held stronger affiliations with communities across the new borders, rather than with the predominantly Arab population of Iraq. With the partition of the Ottoman territories after the War, all hopes for an independent Kurdistan were dashed, and Iraq was left to deal with this dissatisfied population. Many Arabs also felt cheated, as they had been looking for the creation of one Arab Nation, united under a strong local leader. Thus, there was antipathy to the new state from many sides, and right from inception the territory held frustrated communities that would only prove a divisive force upon the new state.

An examination of the history and geography of the region has demonstrated how such distinct communities developed in the Iraqi region. The provinces now constituting the State of Iraq had historically been very parochial. Such localism had

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<sup>3</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p.2

<sup>4</sup> Simon, R. 1997, *‘The Imposition of Nationalism on a Non-Nation State. The Case of Iraq During the Inter-War Period, 1921-1941’*. In Janowski, J. and Gershoni, I. 1997, p.88

been encouraged by the inconsistent Ottoman administration over the region, as well as Ottoman tolerance for different ethnic and religious groups.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, although geographically contiguous, the former *vilayets* of Baghdad, Mosul and Basra shared very few economic and cultural similarities, and constituted distinct units.

Britain was now committed to building a modern nation-state within the territory of Iraq. They wished to establish a strong state apparatus which would then imbue the territory with a strong spirit of nationalism, "*primarily a principle that holds that the political and national unit should be congruent,*"<sup>6</sup> - and based within a clearly defined territorial extent. However, the more 'one and indivisible' the nation claimed to be, the more that heterogeneity within the territory became hard to accommodate.

Building a modern nation-state would require the erosion of parochial allegiances within the area, and the construction of new frames of identification. This was a huge undertaking in Iraq, and would have proved challenging even if the political leadership and inspiration had come from within the culture. The central policy-makers at the time were probably unaware of the social, ethnic, cultural and political complexities involved in such a process. As Lukitz points out: "*The lingering effect of old loyalties is sometimes felt well after the emergence of newer ones. Loyalties are part of the mass of feelings, beliefs and motivations that – like the submerged base of an iceberg – determine the direction and movement of a human group.*"<sup>7</sup> Although old loyalties do not necessarily continue to determine the direction of a community, as new loyalties can prove very powerful, Lukitz does draw attention to the fact that old loyalties must be respected and addressed.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, constructing a 'nation' required the utilisation of the ethnic group's – or *ethnie's*<sup>8</sup> – collective symbols and memories, to emphasise a group's common heritage. However, problems can arise when several distinct ethnic groups, each with their own myths and historical memories, inhabit the same supposed 'nation-state'. The Wilsonian ideal of nationalism assumed that a nation, or a sufficiently strong prenatal feeling, would develop in an area with a homogenous

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<sup>5</sup> See Longrigg, S.H. 'Four Centuries of Modern Iraq.' (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1925); Shaw, S. 1977

<sup>6</sup> Gellner, E. 1983, p.1

<sup>7</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p. x

<sup>8</sup> See: Smith, A.D. 1986.

population. However, the ideological 'problem' of heterogeneity within nation-states had not been properly addressed by the time of Iraq's creation, so little was done to accommodate it.<sup>9</sup> This clearly appears to have been an important factor in the geopolitical development of Iraq. Batatu has demonstrated that at the turn of the twentieth century, the Iraqi people "*were not one people or one political community.*"<sup>10</sup> Not only was Batatu referring to the many racial and religious communities within Iraq, but also the divides between the Arabs of the region, who despite sharing many similar characteristics, "*were themselves in large measure a congeries of distinct, discordant, self-involved societies.*"<sup>11</sup> The multitude of visions for statehood and communal identities underlay the competition for power within the geographical area of Iraq. This chapter highlights the problems that arise when the majority of these are subordinated to a vision that is not universally shared. Just how far the British vision for Iraq tied in with the visions of the local population, proves an important factor in understanding the consequent Iraqi state of the 1920s.

## 7.2. The Effects Upon National Consciousness Within Iraq

The process that the League of Nations envisaged for Iraq, as set down in their mandate, necessitated a rapid passage from traditional, multi-dimensional loyalty, to modern, exclusive loyalty. An even harder concept to grasp, even in theory, was that of 'national identity'. It is an idea that determines a nation's character, by pervading, communal national experiences. This process is supposedly the result of collective cultural traits which gives a nation a unique meaning, and provides the basis for a stable and viable polity. Such a process can lead on from the development of 'proto-nationalism', according to Hobsbawm,<sup>12</sup> and is also the culmination of Smith's *ethnie* development. Although they differ in the terminology used, and the origins of such

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<sup>9</sup> In the present day we can see many examples of the ideological 'problem' of heterogeneity within nation-states, being solved in a variety of ways. There is also a better understanding of the fact that nation-building is a permanently dynamic set of processes. However, the post-First World War era was one of dramatic and chaotic change. Before this war, state-craft and diplomacy had been based upon balance-of-power strategies. After the horror of the First World War, Wilson's ideas were based firmly on principle, and thus were a great break from the past. As with many ideas based on principle, they were set down and championed before all the issues and complexities had been explored.

<sup>10</sup> Batatu, H. 'Of the Diversity of Iraqis, the Incohesiveness of their Society, and their Progress in the Monarchic Period Toward a Consolidated Political Structure.' In Hourani, A. Houry, P.S. & Wilson, M. (eds.), 'The Modern Middle East.' (I.B.Tauris, London, 1993), p. 503

<sup>11</sup> Batatu, H. 1993, *ibid*, p.503

<sup>12</sup> Hobsbawm, E.J. 1990. See chapter entitled: 'Popular Proto-Nationalism'.

feelings, both Smith and Hobsbawm contend that the development of such strong community identity is a pre-requisite for the development of nationalism, although it does not make it inevitable. National identity also implies social cohesion and political unity.<sup>13</sup> This modern concept of national identity, therefore, is supposed to override all other loyalties, without however, implying their total erosion. It is thus a 'rediscovery' of a nation's past, and usually emphasises the common ethnic origins of the population.<sup>14</sup>

Such a political approach to territories such as Iraq after the First World War was a result of Wilson's ideals of self-determination for distinct 'nations'. This was an essentialist belief that nations already existed and were simply awaiting political and legal recognition. Wilson's premise was that groups within the Middle Eastern territories constituted distinct communities, with strong identities that were verging on 'national'. Such communal identities were to be respected and given undisputed political freedom within a bounded territory, because nationalism itself was seen as upholding the principle that the political and national unit should be one and indivisible.

Wilson's 14 Point Plan ushered in a new era on the global political stage, one in which there was no longer a place for imperialism and ethnic subjugation. It was only in such a world, Wilson believed, that political stability could be achieved. People needed to be in control of their own destinies for the global political arena to function fully and fairly. Thus, the post-First World War concepts of nationalism were a mixture of ideological essentialism ('self-determination'), and idealism, with de-colonisation, and antipathy towards two immense multi-national empires that had lost the war: Germany and the Ottomans. The morality and strength of the nation-state principle lay in the idea of allowing unique communities an independent, and self-governed future.

The reality in Iraq, however, presented several major obstacles to achieving such a goal, and highlighted many of the limitations of this nation-state ideal. In Iraq, the concept of a 'national identity' had not been forged out of a long process of a national

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<sup>13</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p.79

<sup>14</sup> See Smith, A.D. 1988

life lived in common, as envisaged by Smith's concept of *ethnie*. Such an experience, which could have laid a foundation at least for the type of proto-nationalism envisaged by Hobsbawm, was notable largely for its absence. Furthermore, in the sudden emergence of opposition to external powers (such as Ottoman, British and French), sentiments crystallised not around the idea of an Iraqi 'nation', but around different factions within the putative Iraqi State.

Iraq was a new state, and was without *common* myths of ancestral territory. Iraq lacked common historical memories to appeal to, as no single past could be used by the various groups of Iraq's population. There was no widespread yearning for collective political redemption, and each group retained its own distinct collective memories, and visions of their 'nation's' collective future. Thus, even if they did subscribe to the idea of an Iraqi state, they may still dispute the content and form that the state should take. Wilson's ideals were too dependent on ethnic homogeneity throughout a territory, to be able to work in reality. Although he felt that people should be in control of their own destinies, who was to decide who 'the people' were? It is here that the role of the British within Iraq became important, as they had their own agenda for the area, and their own interpretation of 'nationalism.' Many in Britain did not share the American-led 'essentialist' view in the first place. More importantly, they also had the political and military power to enable their vision of 'nationhood' to dominate others that may have compromised British interests. In fact, Britain's 'vision of the nation' was constantly interpreted through the prism of strategic interest.

Almost two years passed between the Armistice of Mudros and the arrival of Sir Percy Cox in Baghdad, with a remit to try to stabilise the situation in the wake of the 1920 Revolt. This delay was important as it did allow the growth of an embryonic national movement within Iraq, whose pressure British policy was forced to recognise.<sup>15</sup>

Batatu<sup>16</sup> documents an unprecedented level of Shi'i and Sunni collaboration during the 1920 Revolt. Resistance to British occupation had created, it was thought, a broad

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<sup>15</sup> See Sluglett, P. 1976, pp.25-26

<sup>16</sup> Batatu, H. 1978

base of national sentiment. Although the Revolt was not nationalist in the modern sense, and was mainly a tribal affair, it did enter national mythology and thus eventually became an important factor in spreading national consciousness. Nonetheless, Batatu, and others, such as Nakash and Vinogradov,<sup>17</sup> warn against reading too much into this limited period of Shi'i and Sunni co-operation. The collaboration was encouraged by the fact that the Shi'is and Sunnis at that time held a mutual interest: to force the British out of the country and to prevent the partition of Arab lands - an issue that seemed to provide a point of reconciliation for the two largely Arab groups. The collaboration was short-lived, as with the end of the Revolt, the British backed the Sunni leadership, at the expense of the Shi'i religious leadership, thus again exacerbating the divides between the two communities. Such an episode demonstrates just how difficult it is to pin down 'identity', and communal interests, as such concepts are so intangible and in a constant state of re-alignment. Also, any 'national' consciousness that had been demonstrated was purely Arab in essence, and therefore was also problematic within a heterogenous territory. Just why was heterogeneity within the territory so divisive?

### 7.2.1. The Shi'i Within Iraq

The Shi'is constituted a distinct group in Iraq, and, it could be claimed, still do so today. They held an entirely different ideological base from that of the Sunnis, and had their own religious hierarchical society and rules. Some British officials viewed them as "*a foreign radical and political element of discord,*"<sup>18</sup> who were "*very fanatical.*"<sup>19</sup> Yet, they constituted the majority of the population of Iraq, and were a powerful community group. To understand the impact of the establishment of the State of Iraq, we must ask: what were the basic political aspirations of the Iraqi Shi'is?

Nakash<sup>20</sup> contends that during the nineteenth century, Iraq's nomadic southern tribes began to settle and take up agriculture, and that this development marked the

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<sup>17</sup> See: Nakash, Y. 1994; Vinogradov, A. 1972

<sup>18</sup> Foster, H.A. 1935, p.58

<sup>19</sup> Memorandum by R.W.B(ullard), 5 February, 1921, on receiving the Mesopotamian Intelligence Report, No.5, from Gertrude Bell. CO 730/1

<sup>20</sup> Nakash, Y. 1994



beginning of a process of Shi'i state-formation in Southern Iraq, which had its vague territorial limits built around the Shi'i cities of Najaf and Karbala. The settlement of the nomads fragmented old tribal confederations that had developed over centuries to give political and economic function and form to the nomadic tribal existence. The settlement also increased agriculture and trade. The ongoing conversion of the tribes resulted in the establishment of a more unified religion and a more cohesive value system. At the top of this political hierarchy were the grand *mujtahids* – religious leaders, many of them Iranian settlers, who supervised the urban-rural partnership and controlled resources derived from tax and contributions. Such an emerging political system therefore was religiously based, and so was greatly informed by teachings and culture emanating from Iran, rather than from closer Iraqi centres. Nakash claims that: *“The process of Shi'i state formation in southern Iraq came close to maturing early in the twentieth century, when leading mujtahids formulated a theory defining the nature of the state which they had envisaged and laid foundations for their own representations in politics. The attempts of the mujtahids to establish an Islamic government in Iraq did not materialise however, and the process of Shi'i state formation was aborted following the British occupation and the subsequent formation of a Sunni state in the country.”*<sup>21</sup>

The formation of modern Iraq as a Sunni dominated state dealt a severe blow to the position of Shi'i Islam in the country. The Sunni government eradicated much of the power traditionally held by the Shi'i religious establishment. They reduced the position of Najaf and Karbala in relation to Baghdad, in terms of political status and as a cultural centre. The Shi'i religious establishment was in a position to compete with any government in Iraq over the mobilisation of the population, and was therefore an unwanted danger to the new Sunni authority. *“The conflict between the Shi'i mujtahids and Iraq's Sunni politicians in the early 1920s stemmed from the clash between the process of Shi'i state formation, which had begun in the mid-eighteenth century, and the establishment of the Iraqi monarchy. This conflict manifested itself in the struggle between the two groups over the nature of government as well as the control of the Shi'i population in the new state.”*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Nakash, Y. 1994, p.5

<sup>22</sup> Nakash, Y. 1994, p.75

The added complication that many of the settled Shi'i in Iraq were of Persian origin, created even greater problems for the Shi'i community. Firstly, the creation of modern Iraq forced many Shi'is in the country to assess their 'national' identity for the first time, and make hard decisions regarding their future in the new state. Many Persians had lived in the Mesopotamian region for a long time, and felt bound up in its destiny.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, the Shi'i became increasingly frustrated that many of their legitimate grievances against the Sunni authorities were presented by the Sunni government as sectarianism against the state. Shi'is were painted as 'outsiders', who did not really 'belong'.<sup>24</sup> Thus, whilst the Shi'is were really protesting against the government's very narrow definition of 'Arab' nationalism, the Sunni authorities simply turned to disputing Shi'i Arab origins in an attempt to discredit them. In fact, Shi'i opposition to the government did not necessarily derive from a lack of nationalistic spirit or disloyalty to the Iraqi state, but from their strong feelings of exclusion from the Sunni-dominated form of the state. A Shi'i student in 1931 asked: "*(Have) the Shi'is sacrificed their men, orphaned their children and widowed their wives in order to set up governmental chairs for the Sunnis on the skulls of their martyrs?*"<sup>25</sup>

Paradoxically, many Shi'is resented the fact that Iraq's nationalist program did not involve them *more*. In 1921, not a single Shi'i was included in the lists of candidates for the five positions of provincial governors, and there was only one Shi'i among the nine candidates for district officers.<sup>26</sup> Such a situation was bound to create tension and resentment. As Lukitz describes it: "*The Iraqi Shi'is were not opposed to the concept of an Iraqi State, but to its translation in terms of Sunni hegemony.*"<sup>27</sup> There is strong parallel here to the Muslim/Hindu opinion in 1940s India, just before the establishment of an independent Pakistan.<sup>28</sup>

Also, the idea of authority implied in a nation-state, clashed with the tendency of rebellion and autonomy typical of a tribally-based society. The social structure of

<sup>23</sup> See: Intelligence Report No. 4, 31 December 1920, FO 371/6348/2904

<sup>24</sup> See Kelidar, Abbas, 'The Shi'i Imami Community and Politics in the Arab East.' *MES* 19 (1983), p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> AIR 23/385, S.S.O. Baghdad to Air Staff. Ref: Bd/28, 27 November 1931

<sup>26</sup> Intelligence Report No.5, 15 January, 1921, FO 371/6350/3116

<sup>27</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p.58

Shi'ism and the historical conditions in which it developed were very different to those of the Sunni community. In each case, different symbols, rituals and customs helped to define the members' collective identity. Myths and memories form the fundamental bases of ethnic communities, or *ethnie*<sup>29</sup>, just as they do of consequent 'nations'. To bind an ethnic or religious group, such myths are required to root the community firmly in the past, to give its members a sense of tradition and antiquity. Thus, Shi'i-Sunni tension was not simply a conflict over the 'fruits of office' in the new regime, but was far more fundamental. The two groups clashed on a fundamental level as one's vision of statehood meant the eradication of the other's vision.

Traditional Shi'i motifs often stressed resistance to oppression and the inclination to stand up to temporal authorities. Motifs of combat and martyrdom were also appealing. These motifs held great appeal for tribesmen experiencing increasing hardship. Such ideas therefore pervaded the Shi'i psyche, and could arouse great strength of feeling.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the Shi'is became a community almost *defined* by their being in a state of constant protest against Sunni authorities, or at least any Sunni-dominated authority. This was the situation even before the British arrived.

The Shi'i/Sunni conflict became a struggle over the principles informing the country's entire identity. The Shi'is refused to relinquish their own cultural values, adamant that being Arab, did not mean being Sunni. The more the Sunni regime threatened their position, the more the Shi'i reacted as a consolidated community. Thus differences were enhanced, and divisions compounded. Any developing national feeling then, in 1920s Iraq, was held solely by an exclusive Sunni strand of society.

### **7.2.2. The Kurds Within Iraq**

The British wished to be seen as fulfilling their mandatory requirements to establish self-determination within Iraq, less due to ideological convictions than to considerations of *real politik*. It becomes increasingly clear that self-determination was never the priority, as groups like the Kurds were manipulated to secure wider

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<sup>28</sup> For more details see Wolpert, Stanley, 'A New History of India,' (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977)

<sup>29</sup> A term introduced by Smith, A.D. 1988

strategic aims. For example, despite the fact that Curzon had remarked that "*the whole of our information shows that the Kurds...ought to be an autonomous race,*"<sup>31</sup> the British Government wanted Mosul to be attached to Iraq, as "*Mesopotamia was of very little use without Mosul.*"<sup>32</sup>

An 'imagined political community' is necessary for all emergent nations. Anderson contends that nationalism 'invents nations' by a creative process, where all communities larger than the primordial village must be imagined, as members of such a group will never get to meet all other members. Therefore, a mental image of ethnic and national identity must be constructed to allow an individual to feel part of this greater collective. It is through such an image that the political community can be experienced by its members.<sup>33</sup>

Over centuries of semi-autonomous political and cultural life, the Kurds had constructed their own 'imagined community', which had been distilled down from several such imaginings within the Kurdish region, into one roughly identifiable general 'Kurdish' community.<sup>34</sup> These imagined communities were infused with Kurdish myths and symbols, that created a feeling of shared identity amongst them. The creation of Iraqi national identity would therefore require the destruction, or subordination, of these smaller political communities. However, the British underestimated the importance and resilience of these forms of identification.

In the ideal Kurdish 'imagined community', the relationship between territoriality and nationalism was fundamental. The three strongest themes of this community were language, topography and the rural experience. Also important were shared myths of origins, religion, material culture and the Kurdish world view.<sup>35</sup> Such 'banks' of shared memories are vitally important, as over the last 200 years, all aspiring nations have based their claims to that identity on such a collective mythology. In this sense, the reality stems from the myth. Smith points out that while a common origin is not

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<sup>30</sup> See Lukitz, L. 1995. Also see Nakash, Y. 1994.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in McDowall, D. 'A Modern History of the Kurds'. (J.B.Taurus, New York, 1996), p.142

<sup>32</sup> Notes of a meeting held at Trouville, Sept. 9, 1919. CAB 21/153. See also the De Bunsen Report, June 1915, para. 26. CAB 42/3

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, B. 1985

<sup>34</sup> See O'Shea, M. 1997, unpub. Ph.D. thesis, pp.234-259

<sup>35</sup> See O'Shea, M. 1997, unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Chapter 11

necessary for a sense of ethnic community, a *myth* of common and unique origins in time and place is essential.<sup>36</sup>

A fundamental element of the Kurdish mythology, was that of struggle waged against the host government; an element sharing strong similarities with the Shi'i experience. This is because the Kurds have been split into different states and empires for hundreds of years. Such a mythology helped to inform the reaction to the post-First World War partition, to the extent that the mythologised account of the division of Kurdistan at that time, tends to ignore the fact that Kurdistan was already split between more than one empire. Such strength of communal cultural feeling can override divisions caused by language and religion.

The language theme of Kurdish identity was problematic, as there were in fact many Kurdish languages, which created their own divides. Similarly, although religion was an important motif, not all Kurds shared the same religion. Approximately 85% were Sunni Muslim, whilst in southern 'Kurdistan', many Kurds were Shi'is. There were also two Sufi Muslim orders specific to Kurdistan, the Qaderiya and Naqshbandiya. Yazidism was another religion of the area, unique to Iraqi Kurds.<sup>37</sup> Christian and Jewish Kurds also constituted significant numbers of the Kurdish population, but had a minimal role in the creation of a Kurdish identity, except in that their existence enabled Kurds to claim an identity that partly transcended that of religion.

The Agrarian ideal also defined the Kurdish communal identity, and served as one of the few common threads of culture that united the disparate parts of Kurdistan. This 'rural idyll' was idealised by many Kurds in much the same way that the virtues of nomadic life were championed by many tribal, and even settled Arabs. Kurdish mythology did not contain many images of Kurds portrayed in urban contexts, and to some, the urban culture posed as great a threat to its existence as foreign culture. These idealised mythologies thus build up a distinct 'culture', or 'webs of significance', that are established by men to inform their collective behaviour.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Smith, A.D. 1981, p.66

<sup>37</sup> For more on the Kurdish religions, See O'Shea, M. 1997, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, pp.248-250

<sup>38</sup> Geertz, C. 'The Interpretation of Cultures'. (Hutchinson, London 1975), pp.4-5

Culture thus becomes the total way of life for a group, directing its way of thinking, feeling and acting.

The Kurdish social network was determined by physical and spiritual links, embodied in the role of the *agha*, Kurdish tribal leaders, which characterised a self-sufficient cultural system whose modes of communication and behaviour remained resistant to external ideas. This was why the idea of an Iraqi State, modern, Sunni or Arab, could not appeal to Kurds as a collective. Thus resistance to the state was more than ethnic, but not yet national. It was social and cultural.

All these factors contributed to the unwillingness of distinct groups such as the Kurds, to subscribe to the idea of an Iraqi national identity that was *Arab* in essence. As a hegemonic ideal of national identity emerged, it became inevitable that there would be a clash between the Kurdish and the Sunni Arab communities, due to the refusal of one to submit politically to the other – highlighted by the discontent and instability throughout Mosul in the early 1920s. The Kurds refused to submit politically and economically to Arab-dominated Baghdad. Fundamentally, this was a cultural reaction from the Kurds, as a community with their own deep religious, cultural and social characteristics which had moulded the structure of this group and determined its members' identities.

Such a situation has important geopolitical ramifications. Within an emerging hegemonic state, just as there may be socially and politically dominant groups, so the internal distribution of these groups may be a very significant factor in their access to power. The Kurds were clustered in the northern Iraqi regions, a geographical reality that impacted heavily on their independent political potential, and their political clout within the new Iraqi State. Cohen<sup>39</sup> claims that differences among peoples within a country may have developed or have become accentuated because of isolation caused by the geographical terrain. *"The Kurds, in northern Iraq, are a mountaineering, grazing people, who differ racially, linguistically, and culturally from the Arabs of Mesopotamia. They constitute a separatist element in modern Iraq. Often such differences make it difficult for a state to achieve strong, centralised control."*<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Cohen, S. 1975, p.4

<sup>40</sup> Cohen, S. 1975, p.4

Hemphill also recognises that *“once elected, his (Feisal’s) bane, and that of the Turks before him, was the disunity of his realm and the limits set to governmental authority by geographical and human diversity.”*<sup>41</sup>

Whilst such geographical realities held important geopolitical consequences for the Iraqi administration, it also impacted upon individual groups’ opportunities for power. What was difficult for the Kurds and the Shi’is, clustered in specific geographical regions, was any real access to power. It was overwhelmingly the urban Sunni Arabs of Baghdad who had had the greatest exposure to education and military opportunity in the decades preceding the First World War. After the war therefore, as those with the greatest education and strongest political voice, the Sunni Arabs were favoured by the British administration. This was in part a geographical legacy, which badly affected both the Kurds and the Shi’is of southern Iraq.

### **7.3. The Importance of Different Collective Memories**

History, and its imprint on collective memories (both real and imagined), can aid the understanding of the attitudes of all the main groups within 1920s Iraq, as documented above. It can help to explain why different perceptions of the past lead to different perceptions of the present, and therefore future. Before 1921, partly due to the semi-autonomy enjoyed by many groups under the Ottoman administration, the main ethnic and religious groups within Iraq were insular and distinct, each with different collective memories and varying notions of identity.<sup>42</sup> For example, O’Shea documents a well-developed sense of a Kurdish ‘imagined community’ in the northern parts of Iraq by 1921.<sup>43</sup> The ‘Iraq Report of 1924 also recorded that *“Men feel the ties of loyalty to their tribe or their town or family more than to their country.”*<sup>44</sup>

These communal identities were fashioned by factors internal to each society, such as the myths and shared memories that each community formed around, but also

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<sup>41</sup> Hemphill, Paul. ‘The Formation of the Iraqi Army, 1921-33,’ in Kelidar, A. 1979, p.88

<sup>42</sup> See Batatu, H. ‘Of the Diversity of Iraqis,’ in Hourani, A, Khoury, P, & Wilson, M. 1993, pp.503-525

<sup>43</sup> See O’Shea, M. 1997, unpublished Ph.D. thesis. Chapter 11

<sup>44</sup> Great Britain, Colonial Office, ‘Iraq Report’. (London, 1924), p.17

compounded by opposition to other communities (for example, traditional Shi'i motifs of combat and resistance to oppression), and to the state as established in 1921. Communities such as the Kurds and the Shi'is opposed the state because it represented the monopoly of power in the hands of Sunnis, allowing the political expression of Sunni cultural values, to the detriment of their own.<sup>45</sup> As such distinct cultural and ethnic values were the core around which such communities were constructed, this dissemination of Sunni culture and identity threatened the very existence of the other community groups. The Kurds in particular felt that the strength of their distinct identity warranted an independent state and national home, a hope that was thwarted by the Great Power politics of the post-First World War territorial settlements. The Shi'is however, "*were not opposed to the concept of an Iraqi State, but to its translation in terms of Sunni hegemony.*"<sup>46</sup> Thus, their communal identity did not necessarily demand an independent state, but rather a more balanced role within the Iraqi state, with Shi'i motifs and memories being drawn on as much as Sunni values.

Each community had its own historical 'heroes' that fed into their myths of communal identity. "*Each community promoted different types of heroes who embodied some of the concepts shaping their community's collective identity.*"<sup>47</sup> Such processes of identity development were highlighted by Anderson and Smith, as seen in Chapter Two. They claimed that these myths and legends were fundamental in the creation of pre-nationalist sentiment. However, nation-state building is compromised when this process is hindered within a particular territory due to the pre-existence of several such distinct identities, all clashing with each other. The development of any state-wide form of collective identity would clearly necessitate the choosing of one of these political communities over the others, and the subsequent subordination or destruction of the rest. A situation where state-building may require nation-destruction.

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<sup>45</sup> See Intelligence Report No.4, 31 December 1920. FO 371/6348/2904

<sup>46</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p.58

<sup>47</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p.32



#### **7.4. The Role of Education in Spreading a National Identity**

Just as Anderson claimed that 'print-capitalism' had the power to change people's conceptions of time and community,<sup>48</sup> so the establishment of a strong educational system within a state may help to diffuse a standard nationalist message amongst the population, and encourage nation-building. The situation within Iraq in the early 1920s was not so clear-cut. During the first decade of the monarchy, Shi'is were not well represented in government, or in education, experiencing great difficulty in penetrating the Sunni network of patronage in the state machinery. This meant that educational content was drawn from the Sunni cultural reservoir, and that Sunni values were highlighted. As the influence of education can be so far-reaching, the Sunni-dominance in this sphere was an important issue. With a group's cultural mythology not being reinforced via the schooling of the next generation, their collective identity would be progressively weakened, to the benefit of the Sunni identity. Thus, education could be utilised as a powerful tool by the ruling elite.

Between 1923-7, Sati al-Husri was the Director General of Education within Iraq. There were deep cultural and philosophical divides between the Istanbul-educated Husri, and the Iraqi Shi'is. The Shi'i resented al-Husri, who they regarded as an outsider in Iraq. They felt that his educational philosophy and nationalist ideology ignored the strong tribal attributes of Iraqi Shi'i society, and they opposed his advocacy of allegiance to national over regional bonds.<sup>49</sup> History was also re-represented by the Education Ministry, to give a version of history of the modern Iraq that enhanced the Sunni Arab character of the Iraqi national identity. To safeguard their own values, and indeed their own identity, the Shi'is wanted a more decentralised form of education within Iraq. They also felt that insufficient resources were allocated for the development of education within Shi'i areas, and that this would compound the educational gap already present between Sunnis and Shi'is.

Ironically, radically different policies regarding languages all served to further divide the communities of Iraq. In the late 1920s, the Iraqi government, in a bid to fracture Kurdish resistance to the state, encouraged the Kurds to use their own languages. This

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<sup>48</sup> Anderson, B. 1991. See especially chapters 2 and 3.

helped to preserve feelings of 'Kurdishness', but was also designed to *prevent* standardisation and thus collective action.<sup>50</sup> This was "*indeed a subtle poison.*"<sup>51</sup> This clear attempt to hinder Kurdish language standardisation was intended to weaken the political potential of the Kurds.

The Iraqi government also utilised another language policy. Although local Kurdish dialects were encouraged, places for Higher Education were made contingent upon the speaking of Arabic. Paradoxically, this standardisation of education, and the establishment of national schools, also compounded the fractures within Iraqi society. A memorandum sent to the League of Nations in 1930, noted that depriving communities of their local schools, "*reinforced, rather than weakened communal feelings*",<sup>52</sup> thus widening the gap between different communities. Feeling their distinct identities under threat, communities turned in on themselves. Thus, the government's policy of speeding up national integration through standardised and centralised national education, ironically had an immediate opposite effect.

## **7.5. Different Visions of 'Independence'**

It becomes clear through the documentary evidence, that different groups of people wanted different things from 'independence'. Indeed, it was recorded that: "*outside the towns, the tribes are entirely indifferent to the nature of the prospective government.*"<sup>53</sup> Ethnic and religious divisions were not the only elements pulling the new state apart. Class divisions were also important and played just as important a role in hindering the development of a sense of equitable 'citizenship' within the new state. Chapter Three examined how any nascent nationalism within the Mesopotamian region pre-1914 was at a relatively low level, and was a sentiment only held by the Arab urban intelligentsia, and Arab military officers.<sup>54</sup> The average tribesman in the

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<sup>49</sup> See Nakash, Y. 1994, pp.111-112

<sup>50</sup> See Lukitz, L. 1995, chapter 4

<sup>51</sup> CO 730/161/1, Nuri al Sa'id to F. Humphrys, 16 February 1931; AIR 23/419. Secret Note, unnumbered and unsigned, p.25B, 9 November 1931, attached to Secret Dispatch of 18 December 1931, R/5/25, from S.S.O. Sulaimaniya to Air Staff

<sup>52</sup> FO 371/15316 – E3087/751/93, *Position of the Non-Moslem Minorities in Iraq*, Memorandum sent to the League of Nations, 3 September 1930

<sup>53</sup> Mesopotamian Intelligence Report No.5, 15 January, 1921, paragraph 9. CO 730/1

<sup>54</sup> See Kayali, Hasan. 'Arabs and Young Turks,' (University of California Press, 1997). Also see Yapp, M.E. 1987.

rural areas displayed no real national consciousness. This begs an important geopolitical question. How far does the urban/rural geography of identity inform the ultimate geography of power? I would contend that its impact in Iraq was fundamental. It was the Sunni Arabs of the urban centres (principally Baghdad), and those of the high-ranking military classes, that had enjoyed Ottoman education, opportunities and privileges. Such a situation led to them being looked on favourably by the British. They were seen as the most able section of the population and consequently as the most obvious nucleus for the new Iraqi State.<sup>55</sup> Into their hands therefore, was placed the real power of the new state apparatus. A fundamental issue therefore, was that due to the distribution of the ethnic and religious communities throughout Iraq, such class divisions often reinforced cultural and sectarian ones.

Such class divisions within the society, and the corresponding questions over access to power can be seen in the documentary evidence even before the establishment of an Arab administration within Iraq. The Proceedings of the Council of Ministers, as noted in the Mesopotamian Intelligence Report of December 1920, show that "*the law as submitted to the Council provided for 25 representatives who should be specifically chosen by the tribes in a manner convenient to themselves.*"<sup>56</sup> Such a suggestion "*met with considerable opposition, at the bottom of which lay the rooted objection of the propertied and conservative classes to admit the tribesmen, who were regarded as little removed from savages, to a share in the counsels of the State.*"<sup>57</sup> The minutes of the same meeting reveal just how much 'independence' meant different things to different people. "*It is the cry of Independence, not that of Arab Government, which has made special appeal to the smaller shaikhs, the heads of sections. To them it holds out the hope of throwing off the yoke of the paramount shaikh of the tribe, through whom administration has been conducted, and of dropping the burden of rent and taxation.*" – and in contrast – "*the chiefs of big confederations have in most cases felt themselves strong enough to defy public opinion and support Government, relying in turn on Government support.*"<sup>58</sup> In this way, the desires of the majority of the population clashed with the interests of those

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<sup>55</sup> See Hemphill, Paul. 'The Formation of the Iraqi Army, 1921-33,' in Kelidar, A. 1979, pp.88-110

<sup>56</sup> Proceedings of the Council of Ministers, paragraph 1, enclosed within Mesopotamian Intelligence Report No.4, dated 31 December 1920, sent by Gertrude Bell to the India Office and Foreign Office on 14 January 1921. CO 730/1

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*, CO 730/1

who now found themselves in power, creating fundamental dislocations within society.

Further dislocations were caused by the British misunderstanding of the tribal system within Iraq. Forces arising from the process of sedentarisation had triggered the process of tribal disintegration, whereas Britain wrongly attributed it to the previous Ottoman system. To counter this disintegration, Britain sought to restore the eroded bonds, by re-establishing the authority of the shaikh. This would simplify rural peace-keeping, whilst also minimising the cost. Thus, in return for tax and other concessions, the chief shaikhs and landlords pledged their support for the new national government. This in effect, destroyed the tribesman/shaikh relationship, as the shaikhs' authority was no longer sanctioned from within his community, but from without. He was therefore immune from being held to account by the tribesmen he was said to represent. Such a situation further removed the individual tribesmen both from the hierarchy they knew, and also the new state apparatus. This also happened in the north, with Kurdish leaders being courted by the new administration. Attracted by the 'fruits of office' promised to them by the government if they were accommodating, increasing numbers of Kurdish representatives remained in Baghdad, and alienated themselves from the populations in the provinces. The Kurdish tribesmen then felt misrepresented on the political level, totally estranged from the state and its political machinery.<sup>59</sup> Their access to power was removed by the disintegration of their traditional hierarchical links.

Power became increasingly urban-based, whilst the rural areas became increasingly politically disenfranchised. Under the Ottoman administration, the *vilayets* of Mosul, Basra and Baghdad had each been a regional centre of approximately equal status. The new political power within the region however, was the British, and their administration was centralised and state-wide. The British administration was also based in the country's towns, and positions of power were increasingly to be found in urban centres, especially as traditional power structures that had previously bound the rural and urban spheres together, disintegrated. Furthermore, the supremacy of Baghdad over other regional centres was reinforced by the British. This emphasised

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, CO 730/1, paragraph 20.

<sup>59</sup> AIR 23/413, Enclosure to Report no.1/1/72, from S.S.O. Sulaimaniya to AHQ, 4 January 1928

local specific geographies of power, as the cultural and ethnic make-up of each of the main towns was of great significance in Iraq. Thus, subordinating Basra and Kirkuk to Baghdad, was in reality subordinating a largely Shi'i town and a largely Kurdish town, to a predominantly Sunni Arab centre.

## 7.6. Conflicting Models of Statehood

The entire form and content of the Iraqi Government was imported from outside, and fulfilled largely external criteria. The Government was in no sense 'popular' or 'representative', despite being lauded by the British as an example of successful self-determination. The overwhelming majority of the new state apparatus was controlled by Sunni Arab urban communities, who were in fact a minority of the population. Thus, in order to maintain itself, this Government had to gain support from the main tribal shaikhs and landlords, and form new interdependencies. However, it is clear from the records that it was the British who really propped up the new state, and extended Baghdad's writ to the provinces, sometimes via military force.<sup>60</sup> This reality was highlighted by a Colonial Office note, during Iraqi instability in 1929. Offended by recent anti-British feeling within the Iraqi government, Britain said that it would not help unless Iraq "*formally admitted*" how much they needed Britain.<sup>61</sup>

It has been demonstrated that each community within Iraq had their own strong identities and communal mythologies. Batatu records that even within Iraqi towns under the Ottomans, the development of *mahallahs*, distinct ethnic quarters, was the norm. Such communities were seen as vital and performed a positive need. Batatu argues that they were partly an expression of the innate need for protection through unity.<sup>62</sup> The tribal structure offered a similar protection to its members, ready to defend any of its members.<sup>63</sup> Crucially therefore, many of the community groups now within Iraq had little trust or dependence upon a more centralised power, and actively retained their local characteristics.

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<sup>60</sup> See CP 235 (25), 11 May 1925. CO 730/82/22162. "*If the writ of King Feisal runs effectively throughout his kingdom it is entirely due to British aeroplanes. If the aeroplanes were removed tomorrow the whole structure would inevitably fall to pieces.*"

<sup>61</sup> CO 730/150/68593, Dobbs to Shuckburgh, 28 December 1929

<sup>62</sup> See Batatu, H. 1978, p.21

<sup>63</sup> See Baban, I.H. 'From Istanbul to Baghdad. Notes of a Turkish Statesman,' (Paris: Collection de la Revue du Monde Musulman, 1911), p.256

There seemed therefore, to be no common components from which to forge an Iraqi collective identity, or indeed any popular will to do so. Some of the ethnic groups could be seen as 'proto-national' in the sense that the process of pre-national collective consciousness forming was highly developed.<sup>64</sup> It was just such communities that had the potential to develop into nations, as they held the necessary symbols and sentiments that could be mobilised behind the modern cause of nationalism. However, despite the fact that the period following the First World War represents the peak of recognition of nationalism as the most legitimate force in world politics, it was not these developed *ethnie* that were used as the building blocks of this new political system. Rather, these potential 'nations' were considered too small, and their geographical spread did not tie in with British imperial interests. Ironically, embryonic Arab nationalism was considered too large, in the sense that it also did not fit in with the Allies' territorial designs. 'Nation-state' building therefore became a façade, as the system envisaged for Iraq necessitated the destruction of the already present community based identities.

Each community within Iraq held a different vision of statehood, which was different again from that which might best serve British interests. The Shi'i/Sunni dissension became a struggle over the principles guiding the country's identity. Throughout the 1920s, there emerged a new current of Republican tendencies amongst the Shi'is in Iraq, as they saw this system as offering increased possibilities of more equitable Shi'i political representation.<sup>65</sup> They were unable to identify with the dominant Sunni elements in the proposed texture of Iraqi 'nationalism'.

The Kurds were equally frustrated with being asked to subscribe to a concept of the nation that was moulded in Baghdad's political and cultural circles. Iraq contained multiple concepts of nationalism, which meant that any one chosen over the others would lead to resentment, division and fractures within the state. Any state-wide sense of collective identity, rather than imposing one dominant concept of nationalism, would have to be cultivated by drawing from all of the present cultural reservoirs to avoid exclusion, and highlight similarities. "*The motifs advocated by the parties fell*

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<sup>64</sup> See Hobsbawm, E.J. 1990, chapter entitled 'Proto-Nationalism'.

<sup>65</sup> See Lukitz, L. 1995, p.62

*short of bringing radical changes in perception when not drawn from the context of common practices and cultural religious legacies.*"<sup>66</sup>

Another dimension is added to this issue, with the concept of nationalism being imposed from outside. Originally dependent upon the idea of 'nation' imported from Britain, many groups within Iraq grew increasingly resentful towards their Mandatory, and stressed the artificial nature of the state that had been created. With the frustration felt by many at their political and cultural exclusion from the new state, the power that had largely created it became the natural target for such feelings. In fact, it becomes increasingly clear that Britain made no real attempt to rigorously impose the concept of nationalism over the new state. Due to American pressure, and the constraints of the League of Nations mandate, Britain had to be seen to help establish a nation-state in Iraq. However, this was never more than an empty framework to allow Britain to further its vital strategic interests in the region. This is why Britain made no attempt to fully integrate the various communities of Iraq, and establish a more workable nation-state. The complexities thrown up by the heterogenous population within the country were not Britain's main concern, and this is partly why they were so poorly accommodated. Thus communities such as the Shi'i and the Kurds felt doubly subordinated, first to the Sunni Government, and then to an outside power that had come in and manipulated the situation for wider strategic aims. The population was aware that it had been grouped together largely for imperial interests, which must exacerbate the desire to separate.

Lukitz<sup>67</sup> emphasises what she sees as the naivety of the British policy-makers, in not understanding the difficulties that imported ideologies would have in penetrating the deeper levels of cultural awareness, and in re-shaping such strongly held identities. Strong communities were finding it difficult to internalise *supra*-communal messages, as these communities were formed around strong, local myths and memories, with their characters and identities determined by the very things that made them distinct from other communities. *Supra*-communal messages therefore threatened the individualism and distinctiveness of some communities.

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<sup>66</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p.145

<sup>67</sup> See Lukitz, L. 1995, p. 144

However, Britain was being far from naïve. It was not that they did not understand how difficult it would be for an imported ideology to re-shape local identities, but rather that this was not their real concern. Britain never regarded nation-state building as its true purpose in Iraq. It had desired the mandate for Iraq in order to secure wider British strategic interests in the region. However gaining the mandate had meant an acceptance of the conditions laid down by the League of Nations, namely that the mandatory had to help in the establishment of viable nation-states within the mandated territories, until such time as they were able to stand alone. To Britain, this was nothing more than a necessary annoyance, and the state they constructed in Iraq was given all the external trappings of a western nation-state, in order to satisfy America and the League, and yet had none of the substance. The establishment of the State of Iraq was always seen through the prism of British strategic interests.

A vital point was that the substance of a nation-state could not 'be given', but had to develop over time. The process of forging the European state was a process rooted in often violent contest for power. The 'model' of the nation-state thus vaunted after the First World War, had been created out of centuries of conflict, civil war and religious persecution. The true naivete therefore lies in the Wilsonian expectation that somehow nations and states could be created in a 'de-politicised' form.

Placed at the centre of such a situation, Feisal was in an almost untenable position. Not only did he face deep divisions within the Iraqi population, he also had to contend with the limiting of his sovereignty by Great Britain. The crux of this dilemma is demonstrated by the fact that upon his accession to the throne of Iraq, the British National Anthem was played, in the absence of any acceptable substitute.<sup>68</sup> In a way, it was British authority being enthroned that day, and it also highlighted the lack of national feeling within the new territory.

Feisal himself was acutely aware of the divides within the society he was given to rule, and of the difficulties involved in cultivating any ties of common feeling and purpose. He wrote in a confidential memorandum: "*In Iraq, there is still – and I say this with a heart full of sorrow – no Iraqi people but unimaginable masses of human*

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<sup>68</sup> Personal communication from Mr. Peter Hinchcliffe. British Ambassador to Jordan, 1993-1997



*beings, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatsoever... Out of these masses we want to fashion a people which we would train, educate and refine... The circumstances, being what they are, the immenseness of the efforts needed for this (can be imagined).<sup>69</sup>*

This impact of this predicament upon the Iraqi State was noted by Edmonds, writing in 1931: *"The general impression left on the mind is that the bases of the Iraqi State are still not as broad as one would wish: it dangerously resembles a pyramid balanced on its point. The Government is – I suppose inevitably – in the hands of a limited oligarchy composed essentially of Sunni Arab townsmen really representing a very small minority of the country."*<sup>70</sup>

## **7.7. Key Obstacles to Stability**

Bradnock's paper on the conflict over Kashmir raises certain comparisons with the situation within 1920s Iraq. Bradnock argues that the Kashmir dispute, when examined through a geopolitical framework, can also be seen as a result of conflicting models of statehood.<sup>71</sup> Its origins lie in the contested partition of the area by the departing imperial power, Great Britain. Upon independence, India had to take account of great cultural diversity within her borders. To cohere under these circumstances, the state had to become 'secular', in the sense of respecting all religions equally. The form of political organisation chosen was inherently inclusive, and was therefore fundamentally opposed to the partition of Indian territory on any basis, but especially religion. This was why, when a large percentage of the Muslim population opted for an independent state, it hit at the very essence of Independent India. In effect, they were setting up a state in direct opposition to India's well-being.

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Batatu, H. 1978, p.25-26. Original text, which was written in march 1933, see 'Abd-ur-Razzaq al-Hasani, *Tarikh-ul-Wizarat-il-Iraqiyyah* (The History of the Iraqi Cabinets), (Sidon, 1953), III, pp.286-293

<sup>70</sup> Note by C.J.Edmonds, 10 October 1931. Enclosed in Secret Despatch, of 28 November 1931. E 5732/3715/93: FO 371/15324

<sup>71</sup> Bradnock, R. 'Regional Geopolitics in a Globalising World; Kashmir in Geopolitical Perspective,' *Geopolitics*, 1998, Vol.3, No.2, pp.1-29

Korbel argued in 1954 that the dispute over Kashmir lay in the inherent character of the two states themselves. The following extract strongly echoes the situation within Iraq: "*The real cause of all the bitterness and bloodshed that characterised the Kashmir dispute is the uncompromising and perhaps uncompromisable struggle of two ways of life, two concepts of political organisation, two spiritual attitudes, that find themselves locked in deadly conflict, a conflict which in Kashmir has become both symbol and battleground.*"<sup>72</sup> Thus the conceptions upon which each state was founded, were utterly opposed. Just as in early Iraq, the origins of the contest for Kashmir, must be seen as a contest between competing principles of statehood.

Many points from Nonneman's study of 'The Middle East and Europe: The Search for Stability and Integration',<sup>73</sup> are also pertinent to early Iraq. In outlining the key obstacles to stability in the Middle East, many seem to reinforce what we have already seen in early Iraq. The lack of political participation as an obstacle to longer-term stability is one such issue. Such a lack of popular involvement in politics can create pressure for change from dissatisfied internal groups, which can lead to the jealous protection of privileges by the controlling elite.

This is then linked into the lack of legitimacy of such regimes. The historical subordination of these regions to Ottoman and then Allied imperial interests, meant the artificial creation of 'nation-states' in the region. This did not lead to a general acceptance of these new structures of political culture, nor the regimes that embodied them, and thus alternative foci of identity were lent added potency. Such ethno-religious fragmentation made the country increasingly volatile, exacerbated by feelings of exclusion from the new system. The ethnic mosaic caused added problems due to the way boundaries were drawn, often without sufficient reference to ethnic or religious cohesion. This fragmentation did prove to be an obstacle for integration within Iraq, as it led to domestic upheavals and dissension.

The issue of foreign domination is also raised by Nonneman. He argues that the sense of having been dominated, not surprisingly creates feelings of inferiority and

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<sup>72</sup> Korbel, J. 'Danger in Kashmir,' (Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1954), p.25

<sup>73</sup> See Nonneman, G. (ed.), 'The Middle East and Europe: The Search for Stability and Integration.' (Federal Trust For Education and Research, London, 1993)

vulnerability, causing resentment to build against that dominant power. In Iraq, this resentment was also extended to the Sunni regime that Britain helped to establish, as they were seen as 'collaborators' to the degradation. Therefore, even when the dominant power departs, problems with accepting the political structure in place, continue. Ideological differences can also be a major obstacle to integration. As we have seen in Iraq, the different philosophies on how the state should be organised, impede integration, as excluded communities turn inwards and foster their own distinct identities. 'Functional interest'<sup>74</sup> is also crucial. Each group must see that some of their interests can be achieved by such integration, or they will not wish to become involved in such a process.

## **7.8. The Regional Issues Facing the New Iraqi State**

It is important to briefly examine the regional territorial and political issues faced by the new Iraq in relation to its also new neighbours. For example, what interests did the economic geography of the new state suggest would be paramount in its relations with these new neighbours? How far would the cultural identity of the new state set it apart? Finally, how far would trans-border links disrupt efforts to create a coherent political unit?

Iraq was one new state amongst many in the region. It was part of a new regional sub-system of international sovereign states, and as well as having relationships with established global powers such as America and Britain, it also had to construct new modes of political communication with its immediate neighbours. Previously, the area now recognised as Iraq, had been several outlying provinces of the Ottoman Empire. After the First World War, Iraq was set up as a sovereign state, and therefore had to construct new frames of reference to deal with the other new political entities of the region. Iraq had to establish its own society, its own internal economic framework, and work to promote *Iraqi* interests on the international arena.

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<sup>74</sup> Nonneman, G. 1993, Section entitled: 'Problems Facing Co-operation and Integration Attempts in

### 7.8.1. Issues of Identity

The Iraq of the 1920s was suffering from identity clashes within the country's new territory. The homogenous ideology of nationalism was being applied to a heterogenous population. As well as containing a very ethnically and religiously mixed population itself, strong community groups also spread across the new state borders. Thus, Iraq contained a very similar population mix to some of the other surrounding areas. So what was an *Iraqi* identity? What local traits and communal loyalties set it apart from the neighbouring regions?

Fattah documents how mixed the towns and areas of Iraq had become, a process which continued right into the late nineteenth century.<sup>75</sup> The Ottomans wanted to control the successful market towns in lower Iraq and Kuwait in the nineteenth century, to benefit from the extra tax revenue. However, many of these towns were semi-autonomous, and controlled by very powerful merchants whom the Ottomans were afraid to alienate. Therefore, they created government-sponsored towns throughout middle and upper Iraq. One of the most successful of these was 'Amara on the banks of the Tigris, which became a major centre for riverine trade and export-orientated agriculture. The Ottomans deliberately threw open the district to any farmer, regardless of origin. They were offered free plots of land and access to water. Such promises attracted hundreds of settlers from within Iraq, and from across the Shatt-al-Arab, especially from Arabistan (present-day Khuzistan).<sup>76</sup>

Because of this cultural and ethnic mix, many segments of the population identified more with their parochial leaders, or with groups and leaders from outside Iraqi state territory. Shi'is living within Iraqi territory held strong affiliations with the Shi'i communities of Iran, and looked to Iranian religious leaders for guidance. Such a situation seems inevitable given the history of cross-border mixing within the region. We can deduce the importance of this integrated region from the context used in historical texts. For example, Fattah examines how Najdi literary sources mention

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the Middle East', in previous citation, p.39

<sup>75</sup> Fattah, Hala, 'The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq, Arabia, and the Gulf: 1745-1900.' (State University of New York Press, New York 1997)

events not normally within the confines of Central Arabia proper, as if they had a direct bearing on that society's development. Factional struggles within Iraqi towns and villages are sometimes inserted in the middle of narratives concerning Najd, as if they naturally belonged in the same narrative sequence.<sup>77</sup> Fattah claims that "*a substantial number of the local histories written in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Iraq, Arabia and the Gulf were of a transregional nature, written most often by 'ulama' whose places of origin may have been almost incidental in the larger scheme of things.*"<sup>78</sup> Such a transregional legacy was obviously going to affect efforts to nationalise group identities along state lines.

Thus Iraq, and its newly fashioned neighbours, suffered both from internal pressures, and 'pan' pressures from some widely spread groups. Khoury and Kostiner examine how such divides and prenational group affiliations affected the resulting states.<sup>79</sup> The tribe as an actual social structure within Iraq had been already eroded under the Ottomans, but it remained a significant focus for social identity and loyalty. Thus, the legitimacy of a state, and its territorial sovereignty can only be described as partial, as different groups within the state, or regional or international powers can limit the state's authority and strength. As Joel Migdal explains it, within society, "*the state is one organization among many.*"<sup>80</sup> After the First World War, the authority of the new States was undermined by these tribal habits, as they had to accommodate a certain measure of tribal power, and be aware of the ideological pull that other new states may have for 'Iraqi' tribes.

Machiavelli, born in the late fifteenth century, had studied the Ottoman Empire and considered its strength to be due to the weakness of civil society in the East. Once the centre was defeated, he believed, society could no longer oppose you, and the rest fell into your lap.<sup>81</sup> However, he did not appreciate "*that in the Middle East, tribes will*

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<sup>76</sup> See Jwaideh, Albertine. 'Aspects of Land Tenure and Social Change in Lower Iraq During Late Ottoman Times,' in Khalidi, Tarif. (ed.), 'Land Tenure and Social Transformation in the Middle East.' (American University of Beirut, Beirut 1984) p.334

<sup>77</sup> Fattah, H. 1997, p.21

<sup>78</sup> Fattah, H. 1997, p.21

<sup>79</sup> Khoury, P.S. & Kostiner, J. (eds.) 'Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East'. (University of California Press, 1990), pp. 1-22

<sup>80</sup> Migdal, J. 'A Model of State-Society Relations,' in Wiarda, H.J. (ed.), 'New Directions in Comparative Politics.' (Boulder, Colorado, 1985) p.47

<sup>81</sup> See Gellner, E. 'Tribalism and State in the Middle East,' in Khoury, P.S. & Kostiner, J. 1990, p.122

also cause you trouble, even after you have defeated and replaced the sultan. The distinctively Middle Eastern path to political fragmentation eluded him.”<sup>82</sup> Tribes caused problems both within new states, and between them, as states fought to assimilate them to reduce their ‘national security’ risk.

Iraqi state identity therefore had many issues to resolve. The identities and loyalties of the internal population had to be accommodated, whilst inter-state relationships with immediate neighbours were also vital to the equation. Agnew and Corbridge remind us that “*states are historically constructed (and reconstructed) in the nexus between global and domestic/local social relations.*”<sup>83</sup> The resulting geopolitical order of the day arises out of these spontaneous actions of the state itself, and other actors, which may include other states. In this way, the geopolitical order is always precarious and impermanent, and constructed through *social practice* rather than being imposed via a timeless determinism.

### **7.8.2. New State Boundaries**

The geography of the new state presented new challenges. New international boundaries bestowed new fixed legal limits of jurisdiction on all the surrounding states. This was a radical break from the past experience of the area. One of the principal features of the Ottoman period within Middle Eastern societies such as Iraq, was the reality of the shifting frontier, which gave the region its coherence in spite of the many tensions threatening to pull it apart. The notion of the frontier society implies fluidity, permeability, access and acculturation, all characteristics that permeated the region at one level or another. “*It also suggests flux and impermanency, the natural by-products of societies constantly in the throes of formation, making and re-making themselves to suit the particular circumstances of the moment.*”<sup>84</sup> Regional shaikhs and merchants constantly drew and re-drew the contours of regional society under the Ottoman Empire, and it is here that we can begin to see mirrored the earlier comments regarding the fluidity and changeability of group identities and loyalties.

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<sup>82</sup> Gellner, E. ‘*Tribalism and State in the Middle East*,’ in Khoury, P.S. & Kostiner, J. 1990, p.122

<sup>83</sup> Agnew, J. & Corbridge, S. ‘*Mastering Space: Hegemony, Territory and International Political Economy.*’ (Routledge, London, 1995), p.16

Thus, in Iraq and Arabia throughout the nineteenth century, there were constantly evolving frontiers that were defined from *within* the region, according to the socio-economic and political context of the time. Most of Iraqi-Gulf society therefore coalesced around a region of shifting frontiers. However, with the establishment of a state system within the area, the new logic demanded that rigid boundaries must be defended to safe-guard sovereignty. This was very different from the more fluid tribal process. Previously, the region had been territorial extents "*that functioned as passages instead of barriers.*"<sup>85</sup> Such a fundamental change would clearly feed into economic ramifications for the new state.

### 7.8.3. Constructing National Economies

From the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, several districts in central and eastern Arabia, lower Iraq, Kuwait, south-western Iran and portions of the northern Gulf, formed a regional market that bought, sold and shipped to India. This formed a certain organic structure that lasted until late into the nineteenth century, and such a trading structure "*gave the Indian Ocean an unparalleled spatial and temporal unity.*"<sup>86</sup> At that time there were no imposed boundaries, no *national* economies or borders as such.

Indeed, far from constituting a national economy, the Iraqi region was divided between several different regional economies. Before the delineation of the Iraqi nation-state, the inhabitants of Mosul "*were culturally and economically closer to the Arabs of Syria than to those of southern Iraq.*"<sup>87</sup> Baghdad functioned as an important centre for the central Mesopotamian region, and Basra, due to its role as a port city, was historically orientated towards the Persian Gulf and India.

A fundamental facet of this regional trade was the establishment of family firms over a wide region. Many merchants during the time of the Ottoman Empire survived

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<sup>84</sup> Fattah, H. 1997, p.13

<sup>85</sup> Fattah, H. 1997, p.21

<sup>86</sup> See Chaudhuri, K.N. 'Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750.' (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985), pp.34-79

<sup>87</sup> Helms, C.M. 1984, pp.19-20

adversity through family alliances and the posting of relatives to distant areas. These far-flung representatives of merchant houses were often able to control and to re-direct trade to their own advantage. This meant that even though merchant houses in Aleppo, Najd or Bombay were often directly allied to a parent firm elsewhere in the network, *"their interests were not completely parochial in nature. Because of their regional ties...necessity decreed that these interests become regional over time, tied neither to a specific country nor to a set government but ultimately to an international trading community."*<sup>88</sup> For example, Basra in southern Iraq, was settled by Najdi and Persian merchant communities of long-standing.<sup>89</sup>

Such a cultural milieu was also a result of Ottoman administration policies. If overly burdened by the Ottoman taxation and legal system in one area, important sectors of Iraqi and Gulf society would simply physically uproot and relocate to other markets in the large trans-national trading community.<sup>90</sup> As well as providing an effective restraint on Ottoman excess, this process also created incredibly culturally diverse market towns throughout the region, containing heterogenous populations originating from all corners of the network. Such a legacy would clearly affect the national economic structures of the states created after the First World War, as well as the identity issues of the newly enclosed populations.

Anne Perotin-Dumon highlights one such impact on national economies. She demonstrates that under Ottoman administration, there was often very little to distinguish between state merchants and 'pirates'. She claims that the critical difference between 'legal' and 'illegal' trade seems only to have come about with the rise of the nation-state, the emergence of protectionism and 'exclusivism', and the consolidation of international law.<sup>91</sup> Within a nation-state, 'pirates' posed a threat to the nation-building efforts of state elites, and to the state regulation of the economy. Thus, the centuries old system of piracy was targeted by the state, involving great structural societal change and the disintegration of ancient economic networks.

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<sup>88</sup> Fattah, H. 1997, p.9

<sup>89</sup> de Rivoyre, Denis. 'Obock, Mascate, Bouchire, Bassorah'. (Plon et Cie., Paris 1883) p.182

<sup>90</sup> For more details on the state-merchant system of the nineteenth century in Iraq and the Gulf, see Crystal, Jill. 'Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar.' (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990).



Whilst it may be argued that boundaries in general created huge challenges for the new State of Iraq and its economy, it is true that specific boundaries presented more problems than others. The boundary with Kuwait, in particular, was seen as very economically and strategically unfavourable to Iraq. Access to the Gulf was severely impaired, creating a negative consciousness within Iraq, and practical economic challenges.

#### 7.8.4. Iraq's Attitude Towards its Neighbours

The boundary between Iraq and Kuwait created an immediately negative issue with Kuwait, sowing seeds of competition and tension.<sup>92</sup> (Kuwait also may have felt vulnerable right from inception, due to this large, unhappy northern neighbour.) During the time of the British mandate though, there were no reports of serious clashes, and traditional nomadic migrations continued over the unmanned boundary.<sup>93</sup> However, this did not mean that Iraq did not have designs on its tiny southern neighbour. In the spring of 1930 Lt. Col. Harold Dickson, the Political Agent in Kuwait, cautioned that efforts were possibly already being made by prominent Iraqis to encourage Kuwait to consider amalgamation within a wider Iraqi territory. Dickson claimed that *"there is little doubt in my mind that important Basrawis who come down on visits, or who own property in Kuwait, are by order actively engaging themselves in anti-British propaganda as well as preaching the doctrine of the amalgamation of Kuwait with Iraq."*<sup>94</sup> Indeed, by 1931, small incidents had started to occur on the Kuwait-Iraqi boundary.<sup>95</sup>

Neighbouring states were now seen as competitors, not just geographically contiguous and disinterested provinces. Claims to territory began between states, which had not been such a critical issue before, as all had been part of one empire. Frontier

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<sup>91</sup> See Perotin-Dumon, A. 'The Pirate and the Emperor: Power and the Law on the Seas, 1450-1850' in Tracy, J.D. (ed.) 'The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade, 1350-1750.' (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991), pp.200-206

<sup>92</sup> For more details see Schofield, R.N. 1991

<sup>93</sup> Schofield, R.N. 1991, p.59

<sup>94</sup> despatch dated 25 April 1930. Lt. Col. H.R.P. Dickson to Lt. Col. H.V. Biscoe, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, India Office Library and Records, London: R/15/5/12

<sup>95</sup> Letter dated 18 February 1931 from the Ruler of Kuwait to the Political Agent, Kuwait, India Office Library and Records, London: R/15/5/184

territories became especially hard to administer, as their inhabitants were sometimes unwilling to surrender their autonomy to a new central authority that wished to establish sovereignty over them. Some frontier tribes and communities tried to play-off new state governments against each other. *“Moreover, neighbouring states also treated the inhabitants of these frontier regions as part of their own constituencies or as agents through whom to extend their influence into the other state.”*<sup>96</sup> Thus, frontier areas became hubs for domestic and inter-state rivalry, with local tribes manoeuvring between the different governments.

*Iraq’s large Kurdish and Shi’i populations caused concerns such as these for the Iraqi government. Both populations were part of wider communities that had been carved up by the new international boundaries in the region. Iraq therefore worried about Iranian influence over Iraqi-based Shi’i, which caused immediate tension between the respective governments. Iraq was also concerned about the centripetal pull factor of the Kurdish diaspora, again affecting Iraq’s attitude towards states that also contained Kurdish populations.*

During the early part of the twentieth century, the mainstream international geopolitical opinion was that the Great Power potential of states was a function of their industrial prospects, which in turn could be traced to their natural resources and their ability to exploit them.<sup>97</sup> Such a prevailing mindset of environmental determinism supposed that in a closed system (as the post-First World War was becoming), a premium would therefore be placed on relative national efficiency.<sup>98</sup> Such a belief created an inherent competitiveness and paranoia within new states. *“Nationalism and protectionism helped countries mobilize the resources of their earth and their people...A country without access to the full complement of modern industries was vulnerable, would be a pushover in a war, and thus would attract the bellicose attention of more well-balanced nations.”*<sup>99</sup> Such an immense economic (perceived) pressure upon a new state was clearly going to affect how that state

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<sup>96</sup> Khoury, P.S. & Kostiner, J. 1990, p.15

<sup>97</sup> Such ideas were proposed by Mackinder and Spykman.

<sup>98</sup> Agnew, J. & Corbridge, S. 1995, p.64

<sup>99</sup> Kearns, G. ‘Prologue: *fin de siecle* Geopolitics: Mackinder, Hobson and Theories of Global Closure,’ in Taylor, P.J. (ed.) ‘The Political Geography of the Twentieth Century.’ (Belhaven Press, London, 1993), pp.18-19

viewed its immediate neighbours, as it was seen as a matter of national security, not to mention national survival.

Many different political systems grew up surrounding Iraq: the independent Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the French Republic of Syria and the undefined territory of Transjordan. Therefore, as well as institutionalising rivalry between these countries, the establishment of a state system in this region also brought great upheaval and confusion. It is important to remember that the entire region was going through the same turmoil and change as Iraq, which again added to regional insecurity. This was clearly a time of great uncertainty and tension, with each new state waiting to see how things would 'settle'.

Completely new frames of reference were needed, not just for individuals within each state, but also for state governing systems in respect to their neighbours. Neighbours were no longer simply open markets and cultures, but were now framed as competitors for territory, population and trade. Boundaries had provided new dividing lines for populations and economies, whilst the ideology behind nation-states provided new cultural, political and supposedly ethnic divides. In effect, Britain was telling Iraq that it was unique: that by drawing the boundaries where it had, Britain was enclosing Iraq's distinctive and coherent 'national' population. That this was so patently untrue, made it all the harder for Iraq to define itself in terms of other states; harder to find a focal point for identity that would set it apart and justify it both culturally and politically.

## **7.9. Conclusion**

An historical and geopolitical framework has been necessary to understand the complexities of the Iraq formally created in 1921. Different alliances, loyalties and identities clashed in Iraq, and contributed to its consequent geopolitical form and identity. Britain had established a new state in the territory of Mesopotamia, with defined boundaries and the façade of a European-style political system. However, the question remained: whose state was it? It was clearly not set up with local aspirations being the priority, but rather to safe-guard British strategic interests and international

responsibilities. There was a disavowal of the new state by the majority of the population, as they clearly felt it was not their state. *"Britain's attempts to build a state on the basis of Western models of constitutionalism, parliamentarianism and political order could hardly succeed. The different kind of logic underlining events and developments in the Middle East proved that recommendations of the League of Nations drawn from the political realities in Europe could hardly find an echo in a country where different codes of political behaviour were still predominant."*<sup>100</sup>

A small Sunni Arab, and predominantly urban elite came to the forefront of the new political system. Was it their state? This is hard to answer, as although they were given the greatest access to power, even their sovereignty and power was curtailed by the ongoing British control. Their power base was not indigenous, but was imposed from outside, to satisfy foreign imperatives. Therefore this Sunni elite needed the military support of Britain if it were to survive. This echoes back to the earlier comment by Hirtzel in 1920 that what Britain wanted in Mesopotamia was some administration with Arab institutions, *"which we can safely leave while pulling the strings ourselves."*<sup>101</sup> By 1923, Britain was well on the way to establishing such an apparatus in Iraq, which allowed for a continuation of British control in Iraq, and the subsequent limiting of the Iraqi Government's sovereignty. Power within Iraq was firmly in foreign hands.

The fact that the area of Iraq was not ethnically or culturally homogenous proved so divisive, because the political principle chosen for Iraq was unable to encompass the reality of heterogeneity. The communities of Iraq held multiple concepts of nationalism, each feeling that it had a right to political existence. The ideal of self-determination had a mass popular appeal, yet each community held a different vision of what this may entail for them and such a situation was exacerbated by the geographical clustering of these strong communities. The myths, symbols and shared memories of these communities made them a formidable focus of loyalty and allegiance, especially when the officially disseminated ideology alienated the majority of the population. When threatened by the new Sunni Arab Iraqi state, many ethnic and religious groups turned increasingly to their traditional loyalties to their local

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<sup>100</sup> Lukitz, L. 1995, p.75

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Marlowe, J. 1967, pp.182-3

leaders, rather than surrender them to wider, complex, and not yet fully understood frames of identification. The concepts of national sovereignty and cultural homogeneity implied in the state-building process, had been chosen for the Iraqis, not by them. As well as exacerbating certain divides within Iraqi society, this created a widespread resentment towards Britain, and a certain degree of reinforcement of ethnic identities. Such ethnic identities were reinforced most, where access to power was the least, such as in the Iraqi countryside.

After being awarded the Iraqi mandate, British interests needed Iraq's territorial continuity, and for this reason, Britain played such an active role in helping Baghdad extend its writ to the provinces. It becomes clear that Britain saw nationalism firstly as a necessary evil that had to be seen to underpin any post-war political arrangements, and then as a *real politik* opportunity. Britain was aware of the many different visions of nationhood that existed within the territory of Iraq, yet recognised also that the principle of nationalism was vulnerable, in the sense that it was open to deliberate misinterpretation. Britain could construct their own 'vision of nationhood', that could prove a useful vehicle for British interests, whilst still seeming to fulfil Wilsonian ideals. A narrow, Arab based, Sunni nationalism was thus actively fostered by the British, to the detriment of other communal identities. Nations were being created rather than recognised, which led to <sup>a</sup>divisive and inherently unstable situation. Agreements between the British and the Sunni leaders, although providing the support that enabled Sunni hegemony, could not bestow the necessary legitimacy to allow a Sunni minority to rule over a Shi'i majority, and thus an ongoing British dominance within the state was secured.

If Gellner's definition of a nation holds true: "*an artefact of men's common convictions, loyalties and beliefs,*"<sup>102</sup> then, whilst Iraq was arguably further along the path to statehood, its path to *national* crystallisation was still a long way off in the 1920s. Geographical, religious and ethnic chasms split the country, and we have seen that the ideology behind the whole process itself did not correspond to the sets of loyalties, beliefs and cultural values of the various sectors of the population. Established ethnic and religious communities held their own visions of an 'Iraqi'

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<sup>102</sup> Gellner, E. 1983, p.7

community, so putting pressure on sectarian and cultural fracture lines within the society. When discussing the Allied plans for partition in 1917, Colonel House described his meeting with Balfour when he was back in America, and concluded that *“they are making it a breeding ground for future war.”*<sup>103</sup>

As well as internal cultural divides, Iraq had to deal with its geographical inheritance. Certain communities were divided by new international lines, putting great centripetal pressures on the resultant states due to strong cross-border affiliations. Boundaries were laid down with British prerogatives in mind, rather than attempting to be true to the surrounding cultural landscape. In fact, certain tribes were included in Iraq as they were seen to be ‘friendly’ towards Britain – surely an unsuitable base from which to foster a national identity. Nomadic tribesmen of the south held very different views on territoriality to the new state-based vision, and cross-border allegiances and migrations continued.<sup>104</sup> Even within the territorial extent of the new Iraqi state, well-defined communities inhabited distinct geographical regions, leading to ethnic-religious ‘blocs’ within the country. With the elevation of Baghdad (a nucleus of the Sunni Arab ethnic-religious community) to the position of capital over the other important Iraqi towns, Sunni Arab authority was established over the largely Shi’i south, and Kurdish north. Correspondingly, Shi’i and Kurdish access to power was hampered by their geographical distribution. Geographies of power, seen so clearly at the global level, were therefore also operating on a more local level within the Iraqi State itself.

Iraq also had to contend with the negative consciousness created by what was seen as inequitable access to the Persian Gulf. The fact that this inheritance was seen as largely due to British imperial interests, heightened the resentment and discontent within the new state. All of these factors fed into the crystallisation of the Iraqi state in the 1920s, and its subsequent geopolitical nature.

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<sup>103</sup> Seymour, C.S. (ed.), ‘The Intimate Papers of Colonel House,’ Vol. III, (Ernest Benn, London 1926), pp.47-48

<sup>104</sup> See Fattah, H. 1997. These tribesmen held different views on territoriality as nationalism had not diffused downwards to these sections of the population. Therefore, their priorities remained parochial and traditional.

A 'prophecy' that can be seen to relate to this early Iraqi state, can be found in a letter sent by Ali Pasha, then Foreign Minister for the Ottoman Empire, to his Ambassador in Paris, Mehmet Jemal Pasha, dated 18 September 1862. In this letter, he gave a survey of the situation in Europe. He ended with Italy, then in the throes of unification: "*Italy, which is inhabited only by a single race speaking the same language and professing the same religion, experiences so many difficulties in achieving its unification. Judge what would happen in Turkey if free scope were given to all the different national aspirations which the revolutionaries, and with them a certain government, are trying to develop there. It would need a century and torrents of blood to establish a fairly stable state of affairs.*"<sup>105</sup>

This was a reality that did not concern the British policy-makers. The longer-term problems inherent in superimposing such an ethnically homogenous ideology as nationalism over a heterogenous population were largely ignored. Britain actively used the concept of nationalism in such a way that would secure British interests over local ones, whilst still saving face on the international arena. Clear evidence demonstrates that Britain was not committed to the morality of nationalism and self-determination, but rather to how such concepts could be manipulated to secure British ends. This was shown by the unwillingness to let the American-backed King-Crane Commission into Iraq during the time of the Peace Settlement, to gauge the sentiments of the local populations. This attitude is again highlighted by the fact that Britain, whilst officially preaching 'self-determination' within the Arab lands, voiced clear anxieties about Ibn Saud's "*complete and absolute independence*".<sup>106</sup> Britain did not desire the establishment of a strong and coherent nation-state in Iraq, as this would jeopardise the dominant British position. In this spirit, Britain encouraged one, well-controlled form of nationalism within Iraq, whilst frustrating and discouraging other valid communal identities. If nationalism was the political paradigm that Britain had to work with in Iraq, they wanted to make sure that it was one particular vision of nationhood that was narrowly-based and unsustainable without dependency upon the British.

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<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Dann, U. 1988, p.425

The resulting tensions and conflicts between the various communities and their conflicting visions of identity and statehood fed into the geopolitical nature and form of 1920s Iraqi society. The theories of nation-state building discussed in Chapter Two mentioned the impact of warfare on the crystallisation of national sentiment.<sup>107</sup> In much the same way that international warfare can unite a community by raising national consciousness, so it is true that competition between ethnic and religious groups *within* a state territory, can compound these ethnic sentiments. Conflict politicises the original cultural differences, and distinct ethnic identities are reinforced. Such was Iraq's inheritance in the 1920s.

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<sup>106</sup> Article 1 of the Treaty of Jeddah between Britain and Ibn Saud, 20 May 1927, in Dann, Uriel, 1988, p. 55. Also see Hurewitz, J.C. (ed.), 'Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East.' (Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1956), vol. 2, pp.149-150

<sup>107</sup> See Hobsbawm, E.J. 1990, p.91. Also see Smith, A.D. 1988, pp.37-41



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSION

*“the earth is in effect one world, in which empty, uninhabited spaces virtually do not exist. Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.”<sup>1</sup>*

In their study of state-formation in the Middle East, Khoury and Kostiner contend that only when anthropology, history and political science are used in synthesis can we grasp a full appreciation of all the issues.<sup>2</sup> However, geography has also proved fundamental in an examination of early Iraq. Iraq’s crystallisation as a state was inherently about the nature of power and the specific geographies of power at global, regional and local scales which were dominant at the time of its creation. Mackinder highlighted the importance of geographical location on a nation’s power and potential on the world scene.<sup>3</sup> Although many of Mackinder’s views have been criticised as being simplistic and deterministic, he himself claimed that his ideas should not be seen as fatalism, but rather that states should be aware of the geographical realities and historical forces which would have to be overcome.

Agnew and Corbridge have attempted to move the discussion of geopolitics away from the fixed effects of a determining global physical geography, to an understanding of how geographies are socially constructed in different historical eras.<sup>4</sup> In this way, geography has still informed our analysis of the great changes wrought in the Middle East after the First World War and the crystallisation of the Iraqi State, as it offers a deeper perspective of space and change:

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<sup>1</sup> Said, E. ‘Culture and Imperialism.’ (Vintage, London 1993), p.7

<sup>2</sup> Khoury, P. & Kostiner, J. 1990, p. 1

<sup>3</sup> See Mackinder, H.J. 1919

<sup>4</sup> Agnew, J. & Corbridge, S. ‘Mastering Space,’ (Routledge, London 1995)

*“Surely space, or the presumed effect of geographical location and spatial setting on economic and political life, is fixed and, hence, of little use as a focus for understanding change? In fact, the production of space and how it is conceived can be used to convey the sense of how change is occurring. But this is so only if space is historicized; put in a historical context rather than seen as a permanent set of influences or fixed backdrop upon which history is inscribed.”<sup>5</sup>*

In the same way, the ‘space’ of Iraq has had to be put in its historical context to fully appreciate not only all of the complexities that fed into the Iraqi State in the 1920s, but also to understand how Iraq’s location was perceived, and consequently fought over, by the Great Powers of the time. In this sense, the more ‘fixed’ perception of Iraq’s geographical significance and role in ‘imperial space’ by Mackinder is important, as it highlights exactly how space was perceived *in that particular time*. Such perceptions have certainly changed through time, but it was the perceptions of the Great Powers at the end of the First World War, that fashioned their policies towards the Middle East and Iraq. Agnew and Corbridge, whilst disagreeing with Mackinder over whether the relative success or failure of a given region in the international system is due directly to that region’s natural resource endowments, stress that this relative position is partially determined by how foreign powers *perceive* that region’s assets, liabilities and resources. Of course, such perceptions are seen through the prism of self-interest that each one of those foreign powers will possess.

Iraq’s relative location on the globe gave it great significance in the eyes of Britain, and thus was a major influence on the geopolitical form and function that Iraq would be given. Iraq was not only a symbol of prestige for the British, but was also a vital link in Britain’s imperial communications network. Beyond Europe, but influenced by European balance of power politics, India was Britain’s prime concern. Iraq provided not only an excellent physical link, but also a large Muslim population that could be under British influence. This was very important, as Britain feared the rise of a large bloc of hostile states within the Muslim world would de-stabilise the Muslim population of India. Iraq would provide a useful ‘wedge’ to break up such a bloc.

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<sup>5</sup> Agnew, J. & Corbridge, S. 1995, p.x

A geopolitical framework is also useful in understanding the European political system that was functioning at the turn of the twentieth century – a system that was to have a profound effect on the new Iraqi State. The European ‘balance-of-power’ system was greatly criticised by the Americans at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference after the First World War, and they proposed that from henceforth, the international system should be based upon ethnic self-determination. However, Kissinger contends that the European nations did not choose the balance-of-power system out of ‘innate quarrelsomeness,’ but rather that they were thrown into it partially as a result of geographical realities. Whilst Americans “*inhabited a nearly empty continent shielded from predatory powers by two vast oceans and with weak countries as neighbors,*” Europeans had a very different reality to face. “*Europe was thrown into balance-of-power politics when its first choice, the medieval dream of universal empire, collapsed and a host of states of more or less equal strength arose from the ashes of that ancient aspiration. When a group of states so constituted are obliged to deal with one another, there are only two possible outcomes: either one state becomes so strong that it dominates all the others and creates an empire, or no state is ever quite powerful enough to achieve that goal. In the latter case, the pretensions of the most aggressive member of the international community are kept in check by a combination of the others; in other words, by the operation of a balance of power.*”<sup>6</sup> Despite Wilson’s ground-breaking new agenda at the Paris Peace Conference, Britain was not going to be able, or willing, to change its own modes of political strategy overnight.

Such an ongoing process of elusive equilibrium, meant that if one of these powers showed interest in a region, such an interest would also have to be balanced out - almost a ‘prestige race’. Such a geostrategic power struggle created ‘shatterbelt’ regions at these political and ideological frontiers. This was the case in the Middle East leading up to the First World War, as Britain could not afford to cede strategic advantages to Russia, Germany, or even France. The region functioned as a ‘cross-roads’ where the vital interests of these Great Powers overlapped and clashed. Even the webs of allegiances formed between these powers through the War were not based

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<sup>6</sup> Kissinger, H. 1994, p.20

upon ideology, but were sharply practical and used where expedient. Each of the powers held important interests in the region, but these were always subsidiary to their interests within Europe, and coloured by the perceived threats that the other powers represented in the area. Global power struggles were being played out in a Middle Eastern arena, and for Britain, Iraq became the primary focus.

Such processes of global geographies of power impacted fundamentally upon the destiny of Iraq, as it lay in the middle of a global shatterbelt. "*The tribal territories of the Middle East are peripheral and yet internationally important...they did possess strategic, and sometimes symbolic, significance. This led outside powers to take an active interest in controlling them or denying such control to others.*"<sup>7</sup> Thus control of Iraq was useful to Britain in order to protect its core areas in India and Egypt, rather than holding an inherent advantage in itself. In this way the geo-strategic character of the region was developed, being predominantly fashioned from these more European power machinations.

The imposition of western-style boundaries also had a great impact on the Middle Eastern region and the newly delimited Iraqi State. Although tribes within the area had their own notions of territoriality, these were generally fluid and flexible, and were primarily designed to prevent overexploitation of natural resources.<sup>8</sup> The essential right that had to be preserved in territorial organisation was mobility in space. Wilson's stance on self-determination for recognisable ethnic 'nations' implied that all the members of a putative nation or ethnic group had a natural right to live within the boundaries of a political state. Where these limits of political authorities were located, and the purposes they served, greatly influenced the lives of all the people separated by these new frontiers, and the stability of the political units themselves. Boundaries raised crucial questions regarding identity, allegiance, inclusion, exclusion and separation. The change in status from outlying Ottoman province to independent state under British patronage had profound consequences for Iraq: "*the frontier was transformed into the 'cell wall of the basic unit of national*

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<sup>7</sup> Khoury, P. & Kostiner, J. 1990, p.113

<sup>8</sup> See Wilkinson, J.C. 'Britain's Role in Boundary Drawing in Arabia: A Synopsis,' In Schofield, R. 1994, p. 97

*identity, ' marking an emotional and psychological divide as well as a political-geographical line. '9*

The positioning of Iraq's boundaries also created very noticeable strategic disadvantages for the new state. Iraq's inequitable access to the Gulf has been an overriding concern for successive Baghdad regimes. This was hardly surprising given that Lord Curzon himself had originally encouraged the Ruler of Kuwait to claim the islands of Warbah and Bubiyan, an act "*motivated above all by a desire to prevent the Ottoman Empire from having any developable coastline on the Gulf.*"<sup>10</sup> However, such British self-interest has been a legacy that Iraq, and not the Ottoman Empire has had to deal with. There are still some uncomfortable questions to be answered: can a boundary ever be seen as settled without the full consent of one of the countries sharing that territorial limit? As early as 1931 Iraq displayed their intent to exert some form of control over Kuwait, in order to benefit from Kuwait's enviable position at the head of the Gulf. Thus the geopolitical form of Iraq was strongly coloured by the boundaries that were drawn around it.

The principle of ethnic self-determination espoused by America after the First World War presented its own problems for Iraq. Under the Ottomans, the Iraqi provinces had loose and tenuous links with each other, which had facilitated a strong degree of localism throughout the region. Furthermore, although state formation within the Middle East region was not new, the building of *nation-states* certainly was. In the European identification of the state with the nation, territorial sovereignty became fused with the fate of the nation. The 'interests' of people were rigidly territorialised.<sup>11</sup> Woodrow Wilson believed that free institutions were next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities.<sup>12</sup> However, fundamentally in the case of Iraq, "*the existence of minorities has conflicted with the objective of creating a homogenous national identity bounded by the frontiers of states.*"<sup>13</sup> Political and cultural identities within Iraq did not always coincide with the frontiers of the new sovereign state. Locality, social hierarchies, language, ethnicity and

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson, M. 1996, p.3

<sup>10</sup> Schofield, R. 1994, p.14

<sup>11</sup> See Agnew, J. & Corbridge, S. 1995, p.31

<sup>12</sup> See Anderson, M. 1996, p.38

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, M. 1996, p.5

religion were also the basis of deeply-rooted identities. Such identities were also geographically linked, as the Shi'is of Iraq predominated in the south, the Kurds in the mountainous north, whilst the Sunni Arabs were concentrated in the central region surrounding Baghdad. It was this central locality that was politically and economically elevated over the others by the British administration structure.

The many identities and communities within the Mesopotamian region fed into the crystallisation of the Iraqi state. Tribal power, although in a process of erosion since the Ottoman Tanzimat Reform era, still had to be accommodated within the new state, so affecting Iraq's nation-state formation. The nation-state ideal was a novelty to Iraq in two ways. Firstly, it was based upon a concept of internal sovereignty. The core of this was the idea of citizenship, which presupposes transforming tribal and pre-national ties into a national identity and loyalty. Secondly, the modern nation-state is based on a concept of external sovereignty, which refers to mutual recognition of boundaries by a set of states that form a systemic framework of interaction – an entirely new concept within Iraq. It has already been demonstrated that Iraq itself was unhappy with its southern boundary with Kuwait almost from inception. The fact that this particular boundary was decided upon between Kuwait and a British team 'on behalf' of Iraq, means that this line was never really 'mutually recognised' by the two states that actually shared it.

The concept of internal sovereignty also proved problematic for the new Iraq. Ghassan Salame recalls Ibn Khaldun's formula that "*in the lands which are inhabited by a multitude of tribes it is difficult to establish a state.*"<sup>14</sup> Nation-state building is clearly compromised when the process of creating pre-national sentiment is hindered within a particular territory due to the pre-existence of several such distinct identities – each vying for position. In Iraq, Britain enabled a Sunni Arab-dominated authority, centred upon Baghdad, to emerge, to the detriment of other identities within the state. As such a situation was unstable, it needed British military strength, and coercive measures to prop it up. Therefore, due to both dissensions from within the territory

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Khoury, P. & Kostiner, J. 1990, pp.128-129. Ghassan Salame quotes the Muthana Press edition of Ibn Khaldun's *Al-Muqaddimah* (Baghdad, n.d.), p.164, in his book *Al-Mujtama' wa al-Dawla fi al-Mashriq al-'Arabi* (Beirut, 1987), p.11

against Sunni Arab hegemony, and the dominant role of Britain within early Iraqi politics, the internal sovereignty of the state was limited and nominal.

Each of the communities within Iraq had developed their own, strongly held, yet constantly shifting, cultural and political values, that had been conditioned over history. This led to conflicting models of statehood with many ethnic or religious groups wanting their particular vision of the state to be created. The Shi'is and the Kurds, were both caught in an inherent dilemma: they wanted the continuation of their strong cross-border links, whilst also demanding a more equitable role in the fashioning of the new Iraqi state. They despised the Sunni Arab vision of Iraq because it was so exclusive, and contained only Sunni Arab symbols and meanings. Minority groups within Iraq, if they could not have their own separate political future, at least wanted the texture of Iraqi nationalism to be more expansive, and contain elements and meanings that all could relate to. As Esman and Rabinovitch noted, the imposition of nation-states created "*tensions between the pluralism of society and claims of the state to regulate the lives of all who live in its territorial boundaries...The European model of the sovereign state*<sup>15</sup>...was the threat to minorities, and in some cases to majorities, that exacerbated tensions among the various ethnic group communities in the Middle East and between those communities and the new states."<sup>16</sup>

Iraq was only ever nominally a nation-state based on the concept of nationalism, as this presupposed the existence of a national community, which in fact never existed. Even Wilson's Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, denounced Wilson's nationalist ideals as utopian. He feared that they would stimulate false hopes and could lead to new conflict.<sup>17</sup> However, Britain and France were obliged to accommodate these ideas, and implement them as laid out in their mandates. Wilson's views on self-determination risked the establishment of non-viable nation-states, and of creating insoluble disputes over territory with trapped minorities and stranded majorities,

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<sup>15</sup> As informed by post-First World War Wilsonian principles. Esman and Rabinovitch are presumably referring to those European models that were not inclusive. Of course, some models were inclusive, depending on validation of identities in non-political or de-politicised forms.

<sup>16</sup> Esman, M.J. & Rabinovitch, I. (eds.), 'Ethnicity, Pluralism, and the State in the Middle East.' (Ithaca Press, London 1988), pp.3-4

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, M. 1996, p.39, note 4.

especially when new states were being fashioned at such speed, at such a chaotic time within the global political structure.

Why was Britain so seemingly unaware of all of these complexities when setting up Iraq? In fact, Britain was simply being acutely practical. Even without the inherent conflict between the state and the nation in Wilson's principle, Iraq would still have had problems in establishing a strong national state-wide identity. This was because Britain was never committed to the construction of a strong nation-state in Iraq. "*In the treaties which followed the war, the principle was applied to the vanquished and was ignored when it ran counter to the interests of the victorious powers.*"<sup>18</sup> In fact, Britain had never been asked to *create* a nation-state in Iraq, just to recognise the one supposedly already there. That there was no national feeling within the area defined as Iraq was patently obvious to the British, yet they needed to be seen to fulfil their moral requirements on the international scene, due to their increasing political dependence upon the United States. Britain needed to retain control over Iraq to safeguard vital strategic interests, and so claimed that the territory constituted a coherent whole. If accepting the mandate for the new state was the only way to keep that control and remove Iraq from the control of other powers, such as France, then Britain felt that creating the façade of a national state within the territory was a small sacrifice. Any gains to the Iraqi people, or any specific section of the Iraqi population, along the way, were incidental to the British pursuit of basic imperial interests. Thus, the consolidation of an Iraqi national identity was always seen through the prism of British strategic interest.

The fact that Britain defined Iraq by the benefits it offered *in relation* to other parts of the world, had a great impact on Iraq's geopolitical form. The state was moulded by Britain's strategic outlook, not by strong local power bases or a crystallisation of local considerations. It's entire *raison d'être* seemed to be determined by realities elsewhere, which severely hampered the development of a coherent and functional state and nation-wide sense of collective identity. Sovereignty was limited, and the search for any common ground amongst the population was left to a mistrusted, unrepresentative Sunni Arab elite.

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<sup>18</sup> Anderson, M. 1996, p.139



State formation within Iraq therefore, was not the outcome of an integrative social process emanating from 'within', but was largely the result of a disintegrative political process being driven from 'without'. Thus, the state became merely an arbiter among conflicting nationalities and ethnicities. This was not done in an organic way that can lead (often after bitter struggle), to the emergence of a 'nation', but through the instruments of central power such as the army and a dominating bureaucracy. Although written about state formation in the Levant region in general, the following comment stresses that in Iraq also, there was "*a deep cultural disjunction so that the culture of the dominant side joins up with the superior European currents, whereas the culture of the dependent sides retreats into the cocoon of a historical and linguistic heritage whose prime function is to proclaim its difference.*"<sup>19</sup> The State thus excluded important parts of the social experience of its society, by deliberately isolating them.

Without the pressure of Wilsonian ideals to accommodate in the political framework chosen for Iraq, would the British ever have established a state in Iraq? British policy in Iraq was certainly not created in a vacuum. Although this is speculation, the uncertainty over the answer does highlight both the immense role that America had to play on the world stage, and the strategic and *real politik* concerns of the British in Iraq. After the First World War, America claimed that foreign policy should be informed by principle, yet Britain's history and experience had taught it that such policies should reflect self-interest. Despite the failure of such 'balance-of-power' politics, a failure that had culminated in the War in Europe, such a British attitude towards foreign policy could not be radically altered in such a short space of time, and indeed it was not.

Establishing a nation-state in Iraq was clearly not done on principle by the British, rather by necessity. Britain wanted a formally autonomous, but politically affiliated country. Strong nationalist sentiments did exist within the region, that could have provided the bases for nation-states. The Kurds are only one example. However, the

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<sup>19</sup> Sharara, W. *Al-Mas'ala al-tarikhiyya...* (The Historical Question in Contemporary Arab Thought), (Beirut: Ma'had al-Inma' al-'Arabi. 1977). Quoted in Ayubi, N. 'Overstating the Arab State.' (I.B.Tauris: London, 1995), p.109

British saw some of these potential nations as too small to fit in with their imperial interests. The developing pan-Arab consciousness was ironically judged by the British as too large, as it would have challenged British dominance in the region. 'Nation'-state building in Iraq therefore became truly a farce, as already present community based identities would have to be destroyed. In keeping with this, the complex issues surrounding the imposition of a homogenous ideology over a heterogenous population were ignored, creating great resentments and tensions within the new society. All this greatly affected the geopolitical function of Iraq as it crystallised in the 1920s.

The Iraqi State as it was created at inception, displayed great difficulties in establishing its authority in the face of so many conflicting visions of statehood. It greatly lacked internally bestowed legitimacy, and there was a general reluctance to accept this new structure of political culture. The new state was not of 'functional interest' to enough of the population.<sup>20</sup> Even for the Arab 'Iraqis', framing Iraqi national identity as fundamentally Arab was problematic, as many felt that they belonged to a far wider community of Arabs that was being dissected by these new state lines.

Migdal coined the phrase 'strong societies/weak states, and Tibi has restated this duality as 'segmentary fragmented societies/artificial imposed states.'<sup>21</sup> This holds a lot of truth for the geopolitical predicament of Iraq in the 1920s. Iraq had to deal with the dual legacies of the Ottoman Empire, and British colonialism, both of which fed into the subsequent geopolitical function and form of Iraq. One fostered the development of strong, deep-rooted local identities, due to policies of ethnic and religious tolerance and the de-centralisation of authority. The colonial legacy however, was twofold. Firstly, it exacerbated existing tribal and ethnic divisions via policies of divide and rule – playing minorities against majorities. In contrast, their policies also gave rise to an anti-colonial nationalist movement within Iraq. However, such a genuine nationalism was not one that the British wished to encourage, as it would mean a reduction in British dominance within the country.

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<sup>20</sup> See Nonneman, G. 1993, 'Functional interest' is crucial to the stability of a political regime. Each community must believe that enough of their interests can be achieved through such integration, otherwise they will withdraw from the process.

<sup>21</sup> Tibi, B. 'The Simultaneity of the Unsimultaneous: Old Tribes and Imposed Nation-States in the Modern Middle East.' in Khoury, P. & Kostiner, J. 1990, p.147

Thus, the British, motivated by strategic self-interest, backed the narrow Sunni Arab-based community within the state, so subjugating other forms of identification within the territory. The Sunni Arab community of Mesopotamia was concentrated in the central regions around Baghdad, whilst the other significant ethnic and religious communities formed their own geographical clusters, in the north and south of the country. With the central Baghdadi region raised in status under the new administration, the very close correlation between religion/ethnicity and geography made itself felt upon the Iraqi State. These local geographies of power hugely determined the geopolitical structure and character of the state created.

Britain had no strategic interest in establishing a strong, viable, coherent Iraqi state with a broad base of legitimisation, as they wanted to retain their own control and influence over the area. All the cultural values presented as 'Iraqi' were drawn solely from the Sunni Arab cultural reservoir, so alienating the vast majority of the new Iraqi population, who then turned increasingly to their traditional loyalties for support and familiar frames of identification. Although written more recently, the following words from Batatu could have been written about the Iraq of the 1920s: "*the new national loyalty...is still hazy, uncertain of its direction (Iraqism? Pan-Arabism?), unacceptable to the Kurds, poorly assimilative of the Shi'is, and lacking the normative ethics, the warm intimacy, and the sustained emotional support once associated with the old loyalties.*"<sup>22</sup>

As this thesis has demonstrated, such ethnic and religious issues were inherent within the Iraqi state created in the 1920s. Several specific factors shaped the geopolitical crystallisation of Iraq. Firstly, its location in a shatterbelt region made it a contested area, and attracted the interest of foreign powers. Britain, who prevailed in Mesopotamia after the First World War, had their own strategic imperatives to consider, and were concerned with control, rather than the consolidation of a strong nation-state. Such dominance of a foreign power over the shaping of the Iraqi state greatly influenced its geopolitical function, as sovereignty was limited, and local

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<sup>22</sup> Batatu, H. 1978, p.36

considerations were subordinated to foreign ones. The government of Iraq was essentially controlled by the government of Britain.

Added to this, was the presence of several deep-rooted ethnic and religious communities within the territory, each quite geographically concentrated. The establishment of a nation-state in the region called for these communities to adopt new frames of reference, and to develop new loyalties and allegiances that were based on the territorial extent of Iraq, rather than on kinship and community. The Sunni Arabs, of the central region of Iraq, had been exposed to more employment and educational opportunities under the Ottomans, due both to their geographical concentration around the principal town of Baghdad, and their status as Sunnis, within a Sunni Ottoman Empire. Such advantages allowed them to come to the forefront of Iraqi politics after the First World War, as the easiest solution to Britain's problem of having to be seen to install self-determination within the mandated territory. This exacerbated ethnic and sectarian divides within the country, hindering the development of a country-wide feeling of nationalism and 'citizenship'. The final main factor that shaped Iraq's geopolitical crystallisation was the imposition of international boundaries. The borders chosen for Iraq cut through established community groups, putting not only internal but also external pressures on the new state.

Thus, many factors had a profound influence upon the geopolitical crystallisation of Iraq. Without speculating about whether such issues still persist within the contemporary Iraqi State, it has been of fundamental importance to examine the factors that first shaped the state and presented inherent obstacles. Such an examination allows a clearer insight into problems of national integration, state consolidation, and the limitations of the globally accepted paradigm of nation-states and self-determination. This thesis has also highlighted the vital importance of geography, a reality that underlies and shapes all of these political processes. The consolidation of the Iraqi State in the 1920s was fundamentally about the nature of power, and the geographical patterns that such global, regional and local powers displayed. The geographies of power demonstrated at each of these levels have greatly informed this analysis into the crystallisation of a modern nation-state in the region of Mesopotamia. This approach has allowed a deeper understanding of the

establishment of Iraq, the politics of the post-First World War era, and the ongoing yet changing geopolitical patterns that shape the world in which we live.

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## ARTICLES

### Abbreviations

**AA** Asian Affairs

**AAAG** Annals of the Association of American Geographers

**AAAPSS** Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science

**AE** American Anthropologist

**GJ** Geographical Journal

**IJMES** International Journal of Middle East Studies

**JAIMES** Journal of Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies

**JRAI** Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute

**MEJ** Middle East Journal

**MER** Middle East Review

**MES** Middle Eastern Studies

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