

*United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Center
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

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AUTHOR:

Major Brian P. Sharp

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Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. D. Streusand

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Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. B. Bechtol

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Executive Summary

Title: British Colonization of Iraq, 1918-1932

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Thesis: Numerous lessons can be learned by studying British colonial efforts in Iraq. By understanding how Iraq was formed, and understanding its history, modern planners can gain a more holistic view of the grievance and issues that have continued to plague the region, and help place current problems into the proper perspective.

Discussion: The ending of the First World War ushered in an age of great turbulence and uncertainty. For the United Kingdom, the end for the war signaled economic and military decline, forcing the Empire to change its colonial policies. In particular, British efforts to colonize and govern Iraq were miscalculated and self serving, resulting in the creation of an unbalanced and violent nation, divided along ethnic and sectarian lines. Britain's lack of understanding of the Arab nationalist movement, failures of the Cairo Conference, and the appointment of Faisal as King, have led to conflict, violence, and disunity for contemporary Iraq.

Conclusion: Great Britain's strategic view of the troubles they faced in Iraq, and how to solve those problems, was flawed. Their lack of understanding, and unwillingness to dedicate the necessary resources to resolve the political and social issues in Iraq caused irreparable harm. The uniting of the three former provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra into a single country has led to ethnic and religious turmoil since its earliest moments of creation. Britain's successful colonization of Iraq has led to strategic catastrophe in the region, with little hope of a peaceful resolution.

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Introduction

A little before two in the afternoon, on October 19, 1781, in Yorktown, Virginia, 3,200 British soldiers, under the command of Lieutenant General Earl Cornwallis, marched out of their ramparts and surrendered to the American Army. Tradition claims that to highlight the unimaginable defeat of the most powerful nation in history by the smaller, ill trained, and undisciplined American Army, the British band played the song, *The World Turned Upside Down* as its soldiers marched out to surrender.¹ The British defeat at Yorktown highlighted the British Empire's dwindling influence over the American colonies and the world. One hundred and thirty five years later, the British once again faced a world that was changing before their eyes. The ending of the First World War ushered in an age of great turbulence and uncertainty. Unlike Yorktown though, it was military success, and not defeat, that signaled the demise of British efforts in the Middle East. No bands played as catastrophe overwhelmed the region, and no military defeat signaled the downfall of British policies. British efforts to colonize and govern Iraq were miscalculated and self serving, resulting in the creation of an unbalanced and violent nation, divided along ethnic and sectarian lines. Britain's lack of understanding of the Arab nationalist movement, failures of the Cairo Conference, and the appointment of Faisal as King, have led to conflict, violence, and disunity for contemporary Iraq. Numerous lessons can be learned by studying British colonial efforts in Iraq. By understanding how Iraq was formed, and understanding its history, modern planners can gain a more holistic view of the grievance and issues that have continued to plague the region, and help place current problems into the proper perspective.

The Decline of the British Empire and Rise of Arab Nationalism

Following the First World War, Great Britain's challenges seemed close to overwhelming the empire. The British Empire had expanded to its greatest territorial extent, with British soldiers deployed to Egypt, Persia, Palestine, Transjordan, the Rhine, Constantinople, Mesopotamia, Mosul, and Ireland. Due to the economic difficulties that faced Britain following the war, they could not maintain large standing armies to police their new territories. The war had irreparably changed the trading patterns and practices of the economic giants, and the once mighty British Empire had begun its economic decline.

Prior to the war, Britain had been one of the greatest seafaring traders and international investors of the world, but the once creditor nation had become one of the largest debtor nations by its end. Trading routes had been severed by the war, friendly nations' economies were shattered, and raw materials were no longer being shipped in large quantities to England, all of which effectively handicapped the industrial base of the British economy. The war had cost the England nearly one million casualties and had nearly bankrupted the Empire. Great Britain's efforts to retain its newly acquired lands in the Middle East only exacerbated its economic, political, and social difficulties. Within this context, Britain struggled to establish control over its new territories of Mesopotamia and Mosul, and how to protect the Empire's interests in the region.

Much like Europe, the First World War irreparably changed the Middle East. During the war, the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire was supported by Great Britain, and initiated by the Sherif Hussein ibn Ali, the Emir of Mecca. Beginning in June, 1916, the Revolt had a significant impact on the political landscape following the end of hostilities. Hussein, due to fears that the Ottoman's were planing to depose him as the Sherif of the Hejaz, sought assistance

and protection from the British Empire, and engaged in open revolt against his Ottoman masters to ensure his survival. Though the revolt only consisted of a few thousand Arab combatants, which was much less than he had promised the British would rise up against the Ottomans, the idea of a Pan-Arab state, reinforced by the Wilsonian concept of self-determination, spread throughout the Arab world. Correspondence between Sherif Hussein and the High Commissioner of Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, reinforced the expectation of the creation an independent Arab state, with Britain's help, following the war. ²

In order for the British to support Hussein's rebellion against the Ottomans, they would need to divert resources from the western front of the European theater, which required the approval of France. After gaining French approval to support Hussein, the two countries began negotiations concerning the division of Ottoman territories of Lebanon, Syria, Transjordan, Mosul, Mesopotamia, Basra, and Palestine, amongst the Entente Powers. Russia was also consulted, but played a secondary role in the development of the overall vision of the post-war Middle East. The result was the Sykes-Picot-Sazonov Agreement of 1916 in which the broad outline of the division of the Middle East to the Entente Powers was established. The Sykes-Picot-Sazonov Agreement, known as the the Sykes- Picot Agreement following the Russian Revolution, conflicted with the Hussein-McMahon corriespondance which discussed Arab independence, the creation of an independent Arab state, and British support of the Arab Revolt. Unfortunately for the Arabs, the concept of a single unified Arab state would never become a reality. An unexpected result of the Revolt, however, was the rise in popularity of the Arab nationalism movement, which would become the genesis for many of the problems the British faced during their occupation of the Middle East, and in paticular Mesopotamia and Mosul.

Britains misunderstanding of the reasons for the Arab revolt and nationalism laid the groundwork for catastaphy for Iraq and the greater Middle East.³

Establishing British Rule: Making Three into One

At the close of the First World War, the British were in possession of the three Turkish Provinces that make up modern Iraq: Basra, Mosul, and Baghdad. Much like today, each of the provinces possessed its own separate ethnic, cultural, and religious identity. Basra was linked to Persia through trade and history. Baghdad looked to Palestine and Damascus for trade and cultural influence. The people of Mosul were not Arabs at all, but were Kurds of Euro-Persian decent and looked to the north for ethnic identity. Unlike modern Iraq though, the social and economic environment was much different in 1918. The vast majority of the country had never been exposed to a central government, and had relied on tribes and sheiks for basic administration and rule of law. Also, the vast majority of the population was illiterate, with little exposure to civil order and governmental oversight. These problems, as stated by Professor David Fromkin in A Peace to End All Peace, dominated the initial British occupying forces:

Tensions between the diverse populations of the area seemed to pose greater problems, and the lawlessness of groups such as the Kurds and the Bedouin tribes seemed to pose greater threats. Incoherence, communal strife, and habitual disorder-rather than organized nationalism-were perceived as the challenge.⁴

When the three newly acquired provinces were viewed as parts, there were numerous ethnic and religious minorities throughout the region, to include Sunni, Shi'i, Christian, and a sizable Jewish community in Baghdad. Once the British established their control over Mesopotamia, Reeva Spector Simon argues in her article *The View from Baghdad*, that ethnic minorities of the region fell under the protection of the new centralized government, providing them the opportunity to speak out on issues concerning political representation, which they had been

unable to do under Ottoman rule. This new protection afforded to the minorities threatened the wealthy and political elites in control of Baghdad. She asserts:

For minorities, the British occupation meant protection and improvement of their status. For the Sunni and Shi'i elites in Baghdad and the Baghdadi military offices now in Syria, the salient political issue that emerged during the short period when the future of Iraq was decided (May, 1918 until November, 1929 when the first government of Iraq was established), was whether or not to work with the British.⁵

In addition to the numerous difficulties of uniting the diverse populations into a single colony, the British method of governing their newly acquired territory caused confusion. The Foreign Office, responsible for promoting the interests of the British Empire abroad, and the Arab Bureau, a section within the Cairo Intelligence Bureau, argued for the creation of an Arab caliphate and a single colony consisting of the three former Ottoman provinces under indirect British control. The India Office, responsible for the administration of British India and the three provinces of Iraq, had conducted the military operations in Mesopotamia during the war and believed that Iraq should be absorbed into the Raj. The civil administration of the three provinces remained under the control of the Indian Office, while the War Office in London was given control of military operations and the Foreign office controlled the policy aspects of the occupation. Though this type of colonial governmental structure was typical for that time, it still was excessively bureaucratic and often times did not capture or properly communicate the wishes of the British Government in London. Not until the Colonial Office was signed control of the entirety of Iraq was the responsibility of governing the territory united under one organization.⁶

During the First World War, the British Army sought out local sheikhs to implement control over the population. Contrary to the Turkish policy of dealing with tribal leaders, British policy aimed at empowering the Sheikhs by giving them the authority to adjudicate disputes,

arrest criminals, protect roads and communications, collect taxes, and attack Turkish supply trains. In return, the British would give loyal Sheikhs arms, subsidies, and would occasionally even give troops to enforce the Sheikhs' authority over local tribes. British intent was to use the sheikhs to govern, and strengthened the sheikhs' positions within their tribes in order to use them as their interlocutors. Though this policy worked well during the war, it proved inadequate to run the colony following the end of hostilities. The need for tighter control of the population and the collection of revenues forced the British to look at a new way to govern the three provinces.⁷

In September 1918, Basra and Baghdad provinces were united under a single civil commissioner. Law and order was established by political officers who were sent down to districts and major towns. Administration centers became the centerpieces to settling disputes between tribes and local government. British Political Officers interacting with the local community and religious leaders reported back to the Civil Commissioner in Baghdad, creating a chain of command from the lowest administration center back to the High Commissioner. Judith Yaphe states that political officers also:

...recruited labor for irrigation and flood control projects, collected supplies for the military, determined compensation for war damages, and protected communication lines. The political officers were, for the most part, young and inexperienced in either military or civil administration. Many were former military officers demobilized in 1918. They knew little of Iraq, its languages, law codes, customs, or traditions.⁸

The British administration in Baghdad disassembled the elected councils that had been established by the Ottomans and worked through local tribes and sheiks to solidify their control over the population. Borrowing from their successes in India, the British chose to enforce order and justice based on Indian civil law codes, such as The Indian Tribal Civil and Criminal Disputes Regulation, which gave tribal Sheikhs the legal authority to collect taxes on behalf of the British administration and to settle all disputes between tribes and individuals. British law

now assisted in controlling all aspects of life in the colony. Thus, by 1919, Britain had gained firm control over the administration of its newly acquired territory.⁹

The Mandate

On April 25, 1920, at San Remo, Italy, the participants of the San Remo Conference signed the Treaty of Sèvres, ushering a new chapter in the political history of Iraq. The treaty allocated the Class "A" Mandates, the territories of the former Ottoman Empire to include Palestine, Iraq, and Syria, to the Great Britain and France. The Treaty of Sèvres gave Great Britain a free hand to rule Mosul and Mesopotamia "until such time as they are able to stand alone."¹⁰ The Mandate established Great Britain as the de facto colonial occupier of Iraq, and the native populations of Mesopotamia and Mosul could petition the League of Nations for independence once it demonstrated to the British government its capability to govern and defend itself. Thus, Great Britain would determine when Iraq would become an independent country. The British could now establish a ruling council within the new state of Iraq, "composed largely of British officials, with Iraqis in strictly subordinate positions."¹¹ The Mandate also called for a semi-autonomous state for areas which were Kurdish major areas, which the British granted the Kurds, but would later integrate the state into the colony. The British would never fully grant the Kurds their independence, and administratively governed them from Baghdad for the duration of the occupation.¹²

The leader of the civil administration in Baghdad was Sir Arnold Talbot Wilson, the First Civil Commissioner of the newly created colony of Iraq. An Army officer from India, and previously the deputy to the British Political Officer to the region during the First World War, Wilson was very familiar with the issues facing the Empire in the region. He strongly argued that the three provinces of Iraq were too different to be united under one flag and felt that the

Kurds would never accept Arab rule. Prime Minister Lloyd George's enthusiasm to retain Iraq as a single colony contradicted Wilson's concerns about uniting the provinces, and forced him to establish British administrative control over the three provinces. To display to the Iraqi people his concern for their opinion and well-being, Wilson:

... ordered a survey, or plebiscite, which asked prominent Iraqi notables what shape of government and constitution they preferred. The responses seemed to indicate support for a state comprised of three provinces under Arab rule, but with no consensus on the form of government or ruler. Wilson, who visited Basra and other southern towns, reported they preferred "Englishmen speaking Arabic" to French or American officers and that British political officers should continue their work.¹³

Unfortunately for the general population, Wilson only surveyed those who were viewed the occupation favorably, and failed to gain an overall understanding of the populations' opinion of the British occupation.¹⁴

Wilson's Oriental Secretary, Gertrude Bell, had great influence on British policy. She advocated Arab autonomy, but recognized that complete independence was not possible. Bell also believed that, for the benefit of both Britain and the Arabs, any government in Iraq must be under the guidance of the British Empire. Unlike Wilson, she contended that Arab nationalism was "developing an unstoppable momentum."¹⁵ She thought that the Indian colonial model would not work in Iraq. She worked feverishly to construct the modern day boundaries of Iraq, and played a significant role at the Cairo Conference of 1921, which will be discussed in fuller detail later in the paper, in the forming of the modern day Iraq. Because of her affection for the Arab people, and her close affiliation with the political elite in Baghdad, she was well aware of the political currents running through the colony, more so than the High Commissioner. Trusted by the Arabs, Bell was the first in the British administrator to recognize that Arab nationalism had grown to the point where it could challenge British rule over the colony. In June, Arab

politicians warned Bell that the British planned to create a single nation out of the three provinces, without consulting Arab or Kurdish leaders, would be met with substantial resistance from the population. Needless to say, the British pressed ahead with their plan.¹⁶

While the British struggled to form a cohesive plan to govern Mesopotamia and Mosul, the vast majority of Arabs and Kurds rejected the Mandate established by the League of Nations. As early as the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, when the British prevented a delegation from Mesopotamia from attending the conference, Arabs began to call for an independent Iraq. Clandestine nationalist organizations began forming and in May, 1920, both Sunnis and Shi'is participated in mass demonstrations in Baghdad denouncing the League of Nations Mandate and calling for British withdrawal.¹⁷

Judith Yaphe describes the beginning of Ramadan in Baghdad:

When Ramadan began on May 17, 1920, huge demonstrations took place in the mosques of Baghdad. *Mawlud* celebrations and *ta'ziyya* commemorations were held in combined services that took place alternatively in Sunni and Shi'i mosques with members of each sect participating. Besides the intense religious ceremonies, patriotic speeches were made and poems recited appealing to Arab nationalism, honor, and Islam. Even Muslims who opposed the nationalist cause and Shi'i participation in government attended and helped defray expenses lest they be branded infidels and traitors.¹⁸

For most Arabs, the Mandate illustrated the idea that the British had no intention of granting Iraq its independence. The independence movement gained popularity around the colony when a leading Shi'i cleric from Karbala issued a *fatwa* stating that service in the British Administration was unlawful and that no Muslim had the right to elect a non-Muslim to rule over other Muslims. Mosques became gathering areas for the nationalists, and the movement was spreading across the colony. By the end of June, it became clear that the British administration was losing control of their colony.¹⁹

At the height of Arab discontent, Winston Churchill commented:

It is an extraordinary thing that the British civil administration should have succeeded in such a short time in alienating the whole country to such an extent that the Arabs have laid aside the blood feuds that they have nursed for centuries and that the Sunni and Shiah tribes are working together. We have even been advised locally that the best way to get our supplies up the river would be to fly the Turkish flag, which would be respected by the tribesmen.²⁰

The extremely volatile situation was only exacerbated when the British administration refused the request from Shi'i sheikhs to create an elected assembly to determine the future government of Iraq. In June, fearing that the British intended to rule Iraq without representation from the local population, and with little hope that they were to become an independent nation through peaceful means, the Iraqi people finally rose up in armed revolt against the British.²¹

The Revolt

When the revolt began in June of 1920, the British had already initiated a plan to reduce the number of ground forces across the former Ottoman territories. Listening to the continuing debate in London concerning the wisdom of the British occupation of Iraq, the majority of Iraqis felt that armed rebellion might force the British into a situation that might not drive them out of the country, but would force them to consider the cost of the occupation and hasten their withdrawal. Recognizing the weakened state of the British garrisons throughout Iraq, and capitalizing on the strong links between religious leaders and powerfully armed tribes, the revolt quickly grew in size and violence, and spread to consume large urban areas across southern Mesopotamia. By late July, the revolt had spread throughout the colony. Churchill, serving at the time as the Secretary of State for War and Air, responded by deploying twenty additional battalions of infantry, four British and sixteen Indian, to suppress the revolt.²²

By late July, the rebellion controlled much of the mid-Euphrates area. British military posts were being overrun, Political Officers were killed, and communications were cut. The

revolt spread to the north and east of Baghdad, plunging the entire colony into chaos. By mid August, the Arabs formed a provisional Arab Government had been formed. As the rebellion grew though, coordination of the rebels' efforts throughout the colony became difficult, and poor communication began to impact the ability of the Arabs to continue the revolt. A number of cities, to include Amara and Kut, would not support the revolt, and at times actively cooperated with the British administration to suppress it. Also, the mass influx of British soldiers and material began to affect the rebellions ability to continue to fight, and the British intelligence service's ability to identify key leaders of the rebellion proved to be a critical element to the suppression of the revolt. By October, the country was once again under British rule. It had cost the Empire "nearly 2,000 casualties, including 450 dead,"²³ and close to forty million pounds to bring the colony back under control.²⁴

The rebellion had also convinced the British to reevaluate how they were governing Iraq, and to seek a more amiable system that the Arabs would support. Direct rule was no longer an acceptable option. Sir Arnold Wilson, who had pushed for direct rule at Lloyd Georges' request, and had prevented the Arabs from having representation in the government, was asked to step down. On October 1st, Sir Percy Cox was appointed the High Commissioner of Iraq. One of Cox's first acts was to hold an election for a President of the new Council of Ministers, in order to establish an Arab provisional government. The rebellion had convinced Cox that the British needed to find a form of government that the Iraqis would support. This would create a more stable political environment, which would in turn protect British vital interests in the region. Cox believed that the only acceptable form of government would be a council of ministers who would work under British supervision.²⁵

... in October, he (Cox) allowed former members of al-Ahd to return to Baghdad and persuaded the elderly Naquib of Baghdad, Abd al-rahman al-Kaylani, to become the

president of the provisional government under Sunni domination of the new country. Cox and Bell worked assiduously with their superiors in India and London through the winter to take local consideration into account. Instead of a mandate, Iraq and Britain would be linked by treaty. Instead of direct rule, a king acceptable to all Iraqis would be installed along with the trappings of parliamentary democracy suitably advised by British experts.²⁶

The old Ottoman administrative system of local government was revived, and soon Iraqis began to replace British officers in the provinces and cities. Though British advisors remained, most of the country was slowly turned over to the newly formed Iraq government. Similarly, on the national level, the ministries of the national government were turned over, with limited numbers of British military officers to act as advisors. On November 20th, the new government was officially formed under the newly elected president, Abd al-rahman al-Kaylani.²⁷

With the reestablishment of the old Ottoman administrators and systems, the predominant number of government workers and administrators were Sunni Arabs. Few, if any, Shi'i were involved in the governmental establishment, giving them very little influence in the governing of the country. This was evident when the government took its first steps to form a new Iraqi Army. Commanded by former Ottoman Officers, the army was almost exclusively Sunni, and quickly helped to solidify Sunni control over the three provinces of the former Ottoman Empire, ensuring Sunni Arab domination over Shi'i and Kurdish populations.²⁸

While Sir Percy, Bell, and Abd al-rahman al-Kaylani struggled to establish and define the powers and scope of the new Iraqi government, others within the British Government were formulating their own ideas of how British rule should proceed after the revolt. Winston Churchill, now the Colonial Secretary, had been entrusted with the affairs of the greater Middle East, which included Iraq. Churchill had numerous concerns in the spring of 1921. First of which was the problem of what to do with the Kurdish north. Initially promised their own autonomous province British, Churchill came to believe that giving the Kurds their own

independent territory would be contradictory to the British desire to retain control of the oil rich area, and to the Arab aspiration to rule the entirety of Iraq. Another concern that vexed Churchill was the persistent threat of Soviet intervention in Persia, which forced the Secretary to maintain a large military presence in the area to thwart any attempt by the Soviets to seize the oil-rich country. This large military presence ran contrary to his desire to reduce the large standing British armies in the theater due to the enormous cost to the treasury. Churchill also began to sense the building momentum of the Zionist movement and the difficulties that it would cause the British in Palestine. Great Britain could no longer afford adventurism in the Middle East, and Churchill once again turned to Mesopotamia to save money and try and remove the Empire as much as possible while still protecting its interests.²⁹

The Cairo Conference

In March of 1921, Churchill called together the chief British decision-makers for the Middle East to Cairo. The meeting was soon to be known as the *Cairo Conference*, and Churchill dictated the agenda, and acted as chairman and arbiter. He addressed four basic issues: First, and most importantly, was the determination of who would rule Iraq. Churchill felt that a singular leader, who could be manipulated by the British, but was accepted by the Arabs, would be the best arrangement. Cox, Bell, and T. E. Lawrence, his newly appointed Arab advisor, agreed with this suggestion and recommended Faisal Bin Al Hussein Bin Ali El-Hashemi, or Faisal for short, as the new ruler of Iraq.³⁰

Faisal was the son of Hussein bin Ali, Sharif of Mecca and a descendent of the Prophet. Siding with the British during the First World War, Faisal was pivotal to the success of the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans. In 1918, he was appointed King of Syria and leader of an Arab government in Damascus. Additionally, he led a delegation to the Paris Peace Conference to

argue self determination for all Arabs and the creation of a Greater Syria. His dream of self determination was short lived however, and in April of 1920, the San Remo Conference assigned the Mandate of Syria to France, essentially making Syria a colony under French rule. This led to the Battle of Maysalun Pass between Syrian and French forces on July 23, with the result of Syria's military conquest by the French and Faisal being expelled from Damascus in August. He had been residing in England until he was summoned to Mecca to await instructions from the British government.³¹

Even though Faisal was a descendent of the Prophet, Arab nationalism and independence were his motivation for accepting the throne of Iraq from the British, not religion. An astute politician, Faisal was aware of the many challenges and issues he would face when he accepted the throne. He, along with his Iraq subjects, realized that Britain would be the true authority behind his reign. He would have to work diligently, and be true to his Arab subjects' desire for independence, to gain their respect. British material assistance would be essential, as well as ensuring that he protected imperial interests, while serving the nation and people he was to lead. Most importantly, his time as a leader during the Arab revolt helped him recognize the difficulties of unifying the Arabs. His challenges would be many, but he chose to accept Great Britain's offer to be crowned King of Iraq.³²

Faisal's selection as king was a shortsighted decision. One of the underlying factors in selecting Faisal was to use him to control of his brother Abdullah, who would later become the Emir of Transjordan and later King of Jordan. At the time of the Cairo Conference, Abdullah had assembled a small army in Trans-Jordan and was preparing to reclaim Syria from the French. Attempting to avoid conflict with France, Churchill dispatched Colonel Lawrence to inform Faisal that if Abdullah attacked Syria, it would ruin Faisal's chances at becoming King of Iraq.

By threatening Faisal and appeasing Abdullah by giving him the kingship of Trans-Jordan, the British set into motion one of the great tragedies of our time. British entanglements with the Hashemite family led to the creation of two separate nations out of Transjordan, Palestine and Jordan, and in conjunction with the Balfour declaration, set the foundation for the Arab-Israel conflict.³³

The second and third matters to be considered at the Cairo Conference were the future size, character, and organization of the British forces in Iraq, and the time-table for the reduction of those forces. Christopher Catherwood states that as early as 1919, Churchill understood that the overall force levels in Iraq needed to be reduced:

On 30 August 1919, he (Churchill) wrote to the commander in the region, General Sir George MacMunn, that of the 25,00 British troops stationed there, at least 13,00 had to be sent home" within the next three months." Of the 80,000 native Indian Army forces, 45,000 were also to be sent home, along with 60,000 "Indian followers" (camp followers and civilian workers). It was, he told the general, 'absolutely necessary to get down to it at once.'³⁴

Maintaining such large military forces was no longer economically viable. The cost of running the colony far outstripped the profit it brought the empire. If the British were to maintain the level of military forces in Mesopotamia and other areas in the Middle East, to include Persia, it would soon find itself bankrupt. Britain thought it better to reduce its forces, and assume the risk of civil unrest and violence, than allow the empire to go bankrupt and threaten the government's existence. Churchill even questioned the justification for holding the colony. He wrote Lloyd George in early 1920 that the costs for administering the colony were out of proportion, and the policy of retaining Mesopotamia should be fundamentally reconsidered. Churchill suggested that the Royal Air Force might be able to police the large and generally uninhabited country side, without large garrisons of troops throughout the colony.³⁵

It was during these deliberations that the decision was made that the defense of Iraq would be a joint effort between Britain and Iraq. British military objectives Iraq were to defend Iraq from foreign invasion, protect the route to India and Persia, and maintain internal peace and security. The least expensive way to do this was to assign Iraq the responsibility to raise and maintain an army, which it had already begun, and to have the British furnish air power. Churchill pushed for a “unanimous view that airpower, rather than troops on the ground, should be the way of maintaining British military control in the region.”³⁶ He established a policy of cutting military commitments on a reduced scale, “and expenditure dropped from about 32 million pounds in 1920-1921 to about 4 million pounds in 1926-1927.”³⁷ At the time of the Conference, the British and Indian armies had over 33 infantry Battalions, 16 artillery batteries, and 4 squadrons in Iraq. These numbers would drastically change over the next few months as Churchill’s plan of reduction began to take effect.³⁸

Catherwood argues that Churchill was trying to run a program of “Empire Lite” in Iraq, protecting the Empire’s interests in Mesopotamia, but deploying limited troops to police the colony. The issue with his argument is that it Churchill’s plan was effective in supporting the British Empire’s desired result. Churchill’s concept for the use of airpower, and limiting the number of British forces on the ground, to subdue the population was successful. While drastic troop cuts were taking place, overall control of the country and population was maintained after the 1920 revolt with the use of airpower. Because of Churchill’s plan, not despite it, the British were affordably able to hold on to Iraq while maintaining control of its vast territories through the RAF.³⁹

Another result of the Cairo Conference was the denial of the creation of a Kurdish homeland. The failure to establish a Kurdish state has led to tragic consequences for both the

Arabs and Kurds in Iraq. The original promises by Great Britain to the Kurds to allow them an autonomous state were quickly dismissed once British control was established over Mesopotamia and Mosul, and the complex political situation of creating a state was realized by the British. Protecting imperial interests in Mosul against Turkish intervention superseded the Kurdish desire for independence. The discovery of oil in the vicinity of Mosul contributed to the Britain's decision to retain the Kurdish areas under British control. Denying the Kurds their own homeland was the clearest demonstration of the frustration felt by the British in establishing colonial rule in the area. Instead of choosing the more complicated course of action of creating a sovereign territory for the Kurds, the British simply placed them under the administrative care of the established government in Baghdad. Great Britain took the easy way out to avoid complication and expense, to the detriment of the Kurds and the future of the region.⁴⁰

By the end of the Cairo Conference, the British had permanently changed the political and geographical landscape of the Middle East. Most importantly, the Cairo Conference resulted in Britain's endorsement of Faisal as the new king of Iraq. Also, the military commitment to the region was significantly altered, and a time table for the reduction of forces was completed. The Kurds were denied the independent state that they had been promised, and Iraq's contiguous boundaries were established. Churchill, unknowingly, set the world on a path of bloodshed and discord for generations to come.

Faisal Becomes King

Faisal was crowned king on 23 Aug 1921. His reign would last for twelve years and was marked "by his attempt to give some strength to an office characterized chiefly by its weakness."⁴¹ Despite his weakness of office, Faisal did not turn out to be Britain's ideal of a subordinate ruler. Faisal's thoughts of what Iraq should be revolved around two themes that ran

contrary to British desires: independence from British control and the integration of diverse communities and ethnic groups into a singular national identity. He had carried these ideals throughout the Arab revolt during the First World War, and it should not have been a surprise to the British Administration that he would reject any type of British domination.⁴²

The next hurdle that the new government had to face was the British Mandate. Because the League of Nations Mandate for Iraq had become so unpopular, the British decided to replace it by establishing a treaty with the new government to present the illusion of normalized relations between two sovereign nations. However, the Anglo- Iraq Treaty turned out to be an extremely restrictive treaty, and did not assist in normalizing relations between the two countries. Still acting as an occupying force, British troops were still present in many cities, while the RAF patrolled the skies. The British retained the authority to nominate Iraq for membership to the League of Nations, effectively keeping them out of the world community until Great Britain felt it was in its best interest to allow this to happen. The new treaty also stated that King Faisal would adhere to all British advice affecting British interests and fiscal policy. The treaty also specified that British officials would be appointed to all ministries to act as advisers. In summary, the Anglo-Iraq Treaty, in an effort to normalize relations between the two countries, effectively hand over key financial, international, and security matters, greatly limiting Iraqi sovereignty, and did little more than replace the Mandate.⁴³

At this very critical time in the development of the new government, Cox contradicted his policy of indirect rule, and threatened to impose direct rule as a way to persuade the Iraq Assembly and king to sign the treaty. According to author Charles Tripp, an example of this new approach of direct rule is when "He (Cox) crushed political parties and shut down newspapers, banished opposition politicians, and ordered military action against tribal

insurgents.”⁴⁴ Cox threatened to scrap the Iraqi Constitution that was drafted by the Council of Ministers unless Faisal signed the new treaty. Needless to say, the king strongly opposed the treaty and found himself in direct conflict with the British administration. After a brief suspension as king in August, Faisal relented and signed the treaty after he was reinstated in September.⁴⁵

In July of 1927, the British administration in Iraq informed King Faisal that it would be “recommending Iraq for membership of the League of Nations in 1932, but not in 1928.”⁴⁶ This would effectively end the Anglo-Iraq Treaty in 1932, making Iraq a truly independent nation. Gilbert Clayton, the new High Commissioner in 1929, set the conditions for this transfer of power through a new treaty with Iraq in 1930. The new treaty gave all responsibility for the internal affairs and defense of the nation to the King. Iraq would allow the RAF to maintain two major air bases, and all military equipment used by the Iraqi Army would be sold to them by the British. Also, Iraq agreed to allow Great Britain to use all facilities in the event of war, including the right to move British troops and materials through its territory if necessary.⁴⁷

The Anglo-Iraq Treaty set the stage for Iraq’s admittance into the League of Nations:

“In October 1932, Iraq’s membership of the League of nations was approved by a unanimous vote of the League’s Assembly. Iraq thus became the first of the League of Nations Mandates to achieve full independence as a sovereign state.”⁴⁸

Conclusions

British influence did not end with Iraq’s admission into the League of Nations. Occupied by British military force from 1941 to 1945, Iraq was dominated by Great Britain’s influence until 1958. Though Britain’s interference in Iraqi affairs had ended, the effects of British rule remains, and will have an impact on the region for the foreseeable future. The complex make up of the Iraq population continues to have significant impact on the county’s political environment.

Created from the imperfect ideals of Pan-Arabism and British occupation, Iraq now faces the problem of implementing a democracy in the heart of the Arab world. Former governments of Iraq have shown that different ethnic and religious groups can be brought together into a cohesive, functioning social system. What has not been shown is that these divergent groups have the capacity to do this in a democracy. Efforts at social equality, and new freedoms provided by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, have allowed the grievances of the Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish populations to propel the nation into violent confrontation with itself. The establishment of a democratic government has not provided stability and cohesiveness, but incredible violence and destruction. Britain's mismanagement of the occupation of colonial Iraq set the conditions for this turmoil and violence. Their lack of understanding of the Pan-Arab movement, their failure to establish a Kurdish state, allowing the Sunni minority to rule over the entire country, and their apportionment of Palestine as a condition for the appointment of Faisal as King have all contributed to the modern day issues facing Iraq. The colonization of Iraq achieved the objectives of the British government, which were simply the protection of their interests in the region, but has had a long lasting negative strategic impact.

After shattering the Ottoman Empire during World War I, Great Britain worked to replace it with state governments, sovereign boundaries, and appointed kings. Yet, much like today's efforts in Iraq, British efforts at colonization were not without tactical missteps and setbacks, which led to unforeseen consequences. Great Britain's strategic view of the troubles they faced in Iraq, and how to solve those problems, was flawed. Their lack of understanding, and unwillingness to dedicate the necessary resources to resolve the political and social issues in Iraq caused irreparable harm. The uniting of the three former provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra into a single country has led to ethnic and religious turmoil since its earliest moments of

creation. Britain's successful colonization of Iraq has led to strategic catastrophe in the region, with little hope of a peaceful resolution.

Notes

- ¹ Piers Mackesy, The War for America 1775-1783 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1993) 427
- ² David Fromkin, A Peace to End all Peace (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989) 219
- ³ Fromkin, 188-199
- ⁴ Fromkin, 449
- ⁵ Simon, Reeva S., and Eleanor H. Tejirian, eds. The Creation of Iraq (New York: Columbia UP, 2004) 43
- ⁶ Christopher Catherwood, Churchill's Folly (New York: Carrol and Graf, 2004) 77
- ⁷ Simon, 25
- ⁸ Simon, 24
- ⁹ Charles Tripp, A history of Iraq: Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 37; Simon, 24
- ¹⁰ SEVRES Treaty, Section VII, Article 95
- ¹¹ Tripp, 41
- ¹² Peter Sluglett, Britain in Iraq. Contriving King and Country (Columbia UP, 2007) 13; Tripp, 41
- ¹³ Simon, 26
- ¹⁴ Simon, 27
- ¹⁵ Simon, 27
- ¹⁶ H.V.F. Winstone, Gertrude Bell (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978) 207
- ¹⁷ Tripp, 41
- ¹⁸ Simon, 28
- ¹⁹ Simon, 44-45
- ²⁰ Catherwood, 88
- ²¹ Simon, 28-29
- ²² Tripp, 43; Catherwood, 85
- ²³ Fromkin, 453
- ²⁴ Toby Dodge, Inventing Iraq (New York: Columbia UP, 2003) 8; Fromkin, 452-453
- ²⁵ Simon, 46; Peter Sluglett, Britain in Iraq 1914-1932 (London: Ithaca P, 1976) 41-50
- ²⁶ Simon, 46
- ²⁷ Tripp, 45
- ²⁸ Simon, 32
- ²⁹ Catherwood, 114; 140
- ³⁰ Catherwood, 109
- ³¹ Catherwood, 130-133
- ³² Tripp, 48
- ³³ Catherwood, 140-141
- ³⁴ Catherwood, 70
- ³⁵ Catherwood, 72-77
- ³⁶ Catherwood, 137
- ³⁷ Sluglett, Britain in Iraq 1914-1932, 259
- ³⁸ Catherwood, 137; Sluglett, Britain in Iraq, 1914-1932, 259, 260
- ³⁹ Catherwood, 156
- ⁴⁰ Simon, 102; Catherwood, 136
- ⁴¹ Tripp, 49
- ⁴² Dodge, 20
- ⁴³ Glubb, 127
- ⁴⁴ Tripp, 53
- ⁴⁵ Dodge, 23; Tripp, 53
- ⁴⁶ Tripp, 63
- ⁴⁷ Tripp, 66
- ⁴⁸ Tripp, 75

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