

**The Forty Thieves:
Churchill, the Cairo Conference,
And the Policy Debate Over Strategies Of
Colonial Control in British Mandatory Iraq,
1918—1924**

James D. Terry

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Approved by:

Dr. Richard H. Kohn
Dr. Joseph T. Glatthaar
Dr. Richard A. Soloway

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Abstract

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1918-1924**
(Under the direction of Dr. Richard Kohn)

After World War I, Great Britain found itself unexpectedly occupying vast swaths of the Middle East, including the modern-day nation of Iraq. The final disposition of its Middle Eastern possessions was initially unclear, and the British government explored several policy options before finally selecting air policing, a novel colonial control scheme wherein aircraft would be used in lieu of ground forces to provide a British military presence in Iraq.

This thesis examines the process by which Britain chose air policing as its best strategy for Iraq. Air policing was intensely controversial from the very beginning. The internal debate it sparked within the government was intense and bitter. That air policing ultimately won out over rival policy options was due to a combination of factors, including Churchill's advocacy, financial cuts, manpower reductions, and policymakers' determining that air policing represented the best possibility for Great Britain to maintain influence in Iraq.

To my family

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Introduction

World War I unexpectedly resulted in the destruction by Great Britain of the centuries old Ottoman dominion in the Middle East. British forces were present across the Middle East, from Egypt to the modern-day nation of Iraq on the borders of Iran. British officials had not anticipated this at the onset of hostilities of war with the Ottoman Empire in 1914. The most immediate question in the Middle East in 1918 facing British policymakers, therefore, was the final disposition of its wartime territorial acquisitions.¹

Some provision for a post-Ottoman Middle Eastern order had been made during the war, most prominently in the then-secret Sykes-Picot Agreement approved by the French and British Cabinets at the beginning of February 1916. Francois Picot, the French representative at the negotiations, was descended from a French colonialist family with long-standing interests in North Africa and southeast Asia, while Sir Mark Sykes – a member of Parliament with a reputation as an authority on all questions pertaining to Middle Eastern affairs, as well an amateur historian of the Ottoman Empire – represented Great Britain. Jointly, they negotiated to divide European interests in the Middle East between their two countries, France receiving responsibility for Syria (including Lebanon) and Great Britain Mesopotamia, as Iraq was then known.²

¹ See Daniel Silberfarb, *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East: A Case Study of Iraq, 1929-1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) and A. J. Barker, *The Neglected War: Mesopotamia 1914-1918* (London: 1967). See also Brigadier-General F. J. Moberly, *History of the Great War Base on Official Documents: The Campaign in Mesopotamia 1914-1918*, 4 vols. (London: 1923-27).

² Roger Adelson, *Mark Sykes: Portrait of an Amateur* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1975), 196-7; Christopher Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, *The Climax of French Imperial Expansion: 1914-1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), 66; C.J. Lowe and M. L. Dockrill, *The Mirage of Power: British Foreign*

Sykes-Picot delimited the respective French and British spheres of influence in the Middle East after World War I. It did not, however, set out to any degree of specificity how Great Britain or France would control their newly-won possessions. In point of fact, Great Britain's entire position in the Middle East was deeply controversial domestically. British officials argued for continued retention of British influence in Iraq along several lines. For one, Iraq was serving as an increasingly vital link in a chain of air stations connecting Great Britain with India. These airfields not only greatly sped the delivery of mail and equipment, but also enabled Britain to rapidly reinforce its imperial garrisons. Oil was also on the mind of the British cabinet. Withdrawal, several Cabinet members feared, might increase Iranian influence in Iraq, and threaten Britain's access to Iraq's oil, the presence of which remained largely conjectural but nevertheless highly anticipated and important to Britain's postwar plans. For another, a continued British presence in Iraq provided a bulwark against any Turkish attempt to rebuild its power in the region. Britain remained officially at war with Turkey until 1924, and although a ceasefire was in place from November 1918, British officials in Iraq continuously worried about the external threat Turkey posed to Iraq. The impact of a putative British retreat from Iraq on India was also calculated. Britain feared the possible impact a crescent of anti-British states stretching from Egypt through Iran might have on India's Muslim population. Retaining a British military garrison in Iraq would serve to drive a wedge through any potential Muslim axis and thereby weaken its negative effects.³

Policy 1914-1922, vol. 2. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 228-9; Roger Adelson, *Mark Sykes* (London, 1975), 246.

³ For potential of Middle Eastern air bases, see: Memoranda by Hugh Trenchard (Chief of Air Staff) and Colonial Office, Middle East Department, 11 Dec. 1922, Cabinet (hereafter: CAB) series 27/206, British National Archives, Kew, England; see also Robin Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes 1918 to 1939: The Story of Britain's Overseas Airlines* (London: 1976); for oil, see Memoranda, Colonial Office, Middle East Department, 11 Dec. 1922, CAB 27/206, Memoranda, Foreign Office, 15. Dec. 1922, CAB 27/206, and Report of the Cabinet Committee on Iraq, 23 March 1923, CAB 27/206; also, William Stivers,

Iraq at the time was known as “Mesopotamia” – in Greek, literally the “land between the rivers,” in this case the Tigris and the Euphrates – and comprised three separate geographical areas. The north was mountainous and inhabited largely by Kurds, a semi-nomadic people ethnically distinct from the people who inhabited the southern two-thirds of the country. The floodplain between the two rivers was the most fertile part of the country and inhabited by the bulk of the Iraqi population, which totaled no more than two and a half million in 1920. The people living along the Tigris and Euphrates were settled agriculturalists practicing alluvial farming and were divided between Arab Sunnis and Arab Shia, the two major sects of Islam. Shia outnumbered Sunnis, but the Sunni community was more powerful politically. Desert comprised the rest of the country, stretching across the south of Iraq from Basra, a river port near the Persian Gulf, and up west, where Iraq abutted Syria, then under French control. This vast area was inhabited largely by Bedouin nomads.⁴

To control this vast, underdeveloped, sparsely inhabited land, Great Britain relied upon indirect methods of rule, rather than direct forms of government through British officials and administrators. This accorded well with wartime British promises, as well as statements made by British leaders. In January 1918, for instance, Prime Minister David Lloyd George declared that the Arab portions of the Ottoman Empire are “in our judgment entitled to a recognition of their separate national conditions.” The Baghdad Proclamation of March 1917, made when British forces first occupied Baghdad, the

“International Politics and Iraqi Oil, 1918-1928: A Study in Anglo-American Diplomacy,” *Business History Review*, Vol. 55 (1981), 519-21; for fears of Muslim influence on India, see Report of Cabinet Committee on Iraq, 23 March 1923, CAB 27/206, also Memorandum by Colonial Office, Middle East Department, 11 Dec. 1922 and 16 Feb. 1923, both CAB 27/206.

⁴ For the background of Iraq and its people, see Stephen Longrigg, *Iraq 1900-1950: A Political, Social, and Economic History* (London, 1953). See also Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Bathists, and Free Officers* (Princeton, N.J., 1978).

capital of Ottoman Mesopotamia, also called for government by native officials in “collaboration” with Great Britain. Although all such statements were open to interpretation and short on specifics, they nevertheless presented a formidable barrier to direct annexation into the British Empire of Iraq after World War I.⁵

Measures of financial economy were also important; indeed, a careful reading of the relevant documents from the period shows that much of Britain’s Iraq policy was driven by the perceived necessity of cost-cutting measures. Costs in Iraq were indeed steep: during the summer of 1919, when Iraq was still under British military government, the garrison cost the British government some £2.7 million per month. Such costs were thought to preclude the possibility of anything greater than an indirect role for Great Britain in Iraq’s postwar affairs.⁶

The significant uprising in July 1920 was also a major factor in the evolution of British policy decision-making process. The uprising was sparked by Baghdad nationalists angered that Britain had not met its stated obligations to devolve power to the Iraqi national level some two years after the end of World War I. The rebellion spread to Najaf and Karbala, two holy cities in the south of Baghdad, where the Shia religious hierarchy came out in support of the uprising on the grounds that non-Christians lacked any legal or religious authority to govern in Muslim lands. Shia nomadic tribesmen also rose, led by tribal sheikhs angered by the British imposition of taxes and labor requisition orders for public works, and armed with legal opinions of Shia clerics justifying their

⁵ George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab Nationalist Movement* (London, 1958), p. 164-83; Elie Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: The McMahon-Husayn Correspondence and its Interpretations 1914-1939* (Cambridge, 1976), 65-137; Ghassan Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921: A Socio-Political Study* (Beirut, 1973), 151-52; John Darwin, *Britain, Egypt and the Middle East: Imperial Policy in the Aftermath of War 1918-1922* (London, 1981), 155-56.

⁶ For garrison costs, see Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1922*, 193. See also Eli Kedourie, *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire 1914-1921* (London: 1956), 197-204.

actions. By August of 1920, Great Britain was faced with the nightmarish situation of a general Iraqi revolt.⁷ The rebellion was contained by January 1920, but at great cost. The Iraqi garrison was enlarged to some 100,000 troops. Some 900 British troops were killed and another 1,300 wounded.⁸

The uprising drove Great Britain to speed up the process of Iraqi independence. In January 1921 the British government approached Faisal ibn Husayn to assume the throne of Iraq. Faisal was a Sunni Arab from Syria who had briefly been proclaimed king of Syria in Damascus before being driven to abdicate by France, asserting its position in Syria after World War I. Faisal fled the Middle East for London, where he was approached by intermediaries from the British government. Faisal accepted their entreaties, and in August 1921 was duly crowned the first king of Iraq.⁹ Faisal thereupon invited the British government to retain a military presence in Iraq to safeguard the royal regime's external and internal security. Britain's presence was regularized in a military agreement of 1924 between the governments of Britain and Iraq.¹⁰

After the 1920 uprising was put down, Britain's army presence in Iraq was rapidly reduced and supplemented by air power. The process of substitution of ground power by air power enabled Great Britain to maintain control of Iraq a colonial control scheme known at the time as air policing. Air policing was a system that relied heavily upon the striking power of the aircraft to bomb villages, tribes, or individual leaders that proved unwilling to acknowledge the authority of the central government of Iraq, to implement

⁷ For general accounts of the 1920 Iraq uprising, see Lieutenant General Sir Aylmer L. Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia: 1920* (Edinburgh, 1922), 19-34; Philip Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development* (London, 1937), 145-46, 241-43, 246-49; Attiyah, *Iraq 1908-1922*, 261-354, and Longrigg, *Iraq*, 113-21.

⁸ For casualties, see Haldane, *Insurrection*, 331.

⁹ Ireland, *Iraq*, p. 303-18 and Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq 1914-1932* (London, 1976), 67-78.

¹⁰ The military agreement can be found in Foreign Office (hereafter: FO) series 371/12260.

directives from the central government, or to pay taxes. As a practical matter, few major population centers in Iraq were more than several hours airtime from central British airbases located around Baghdad. Air policing therefore enabled Great Britain to maintain a military presence across Iraq without the need for large-scale, expensive army garrisons.¹¹

The existing scholarship of British policy in Iraq in the late 1920's and 1930's is voluminous and highly useful. Among these works, several stand out. One is Peter Sluglett, perhaps the best historian of this period, and whom is best known for his work on the British Mandate period. However, Sluglett pays very little attention to military and defence-related matters. Martin Gilbert is invaluable for anyone looking to detail various Churchillian strategies and schemes for reducing military costs in the Middle East post-World War I. David Omissi has written the best general reference work on air policing, and he extensively covers the phenomenon in its various interwar iterations from Iraq to Afghanistan.

None of these works, however, devotes much attention to how British policymakers came to decided upon air policing as the most effective strategy for Iraq. Air policing was in no way a foregone conclusion. It was in fact a highly contentious and controversial plan that revealed deep divides within the British government. That it was adopted as British policy in Iraq is in no small way a tribute both to Winston's Churchill's (then dual-hatted as Colonial Secretary and Secretary for Air) advocacy, and Hugh Trenchard's (the commander of the British Royal Air Force) skills as a bureaucratic infighter. But it also represented a calculated, reasoned risk in Iraq on the

¹¹ For a general overview of air policing, see David E. Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 8-17.

part of the British government.¹² How air policing's champions finally won over the policymakers is a crucial albeit often overlooked aspect, and serves as the focus of this thesis.

¹² Daniel Silberfarb, *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East: A Case Study of Iraq, 1929-1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 5.

The Bureaucratic War Over Air Policing

When British forces marched into Baghdad in March 1917 close on the heels of retreating Ottoman forces, Lieutenant General F. S. Maude, the British commander, under directions from the British Foreign office, issued a proclamation that British forces came not as conquerors but as liberators, and that Great Britain had no designs to impose foreign political regimes or institutions on Iraq.¹³ Iraqis were invited, “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.”¹⁴ There are multiple possible interpretations the historian can place on such statements. Undoubtedly British officials intended to deflect accusations of territorial aggrandizement both from local Arab leaders and, even more importantly, from the French (who planned to carve out a Middle Eastern empire of their own from the Ottoman carcass) and from the United States. Maude himself objected strenuously to the proclamation. He felt British administration in Iraq was crucial to maintain order. Furthermore, the proclamation itself evinced profound ignorance within the British government about the realities of Iraq. For example, Maude argued, while a great deal of attention was given to the aspirations of the Arab people, no mention was made of the Jews, whom Maude believed constituted a majority of the inhabitants of Baghdad in 1917.

¹³ Silberfarb, *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East*, 5.

¹⁴ Silberfarb, *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East*, 5.

The proclamation almost certainly created more problems than it solved.¹⁵ No provision for the creation of a government was authorized, beyond vague announcements of support for Arab self-government. In part to solve this conundrum, a Mesopotamian Administration Committee was established on March 16, 1917, over the protests of the Government of India, which although controlled by Great Britain had an interest in governing Iraq itself, rather than seeing the Colonial Control receive responsibility for it. Faced with a personnel crisis over a severe shortage of qualified officials to staff a nascent Iraqi administration, the newly established Mesopotamian Administration Committee agreed to accept Government of India control over Iraq, with the important proviso that such control was not permanent, and was contingent upon wartime exigencies. General Maude was thus in the unusual and ultimately untenable position of “preaching self-rule while discouraging its practice.”¹⁶ British administrative responsibilities for Iraq were growing at the same time expectations were being raised of greater responsibilities being devolved to Iraqis themselves. Few seemed to have been aware of the incongruities of the arrangement, or were blasé about the possible consequences. As the future Iraqi minister of defense pointedly observed since independence for Iraq under the Mandate was a matter of British policy, it was obvious that “British military occupation will gradually cease.”¹⁷ On the other hand, Gertrude Bell, the famous assistant to Arnold Wilson, the civil commissioner and senior British official in Iraq from the end of World War I through 1921, felt “the people of

¹⁵ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989), 306.

¹⁶ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 307.

¹⁷ Memorandum, Jaafar Pasha al-Askari, Major-General, Minister of Defense, Iraq. Military Needs of Mesopotamia. Progressive Formation of National Forces to Meet Them. Air Ministry (hereafter: AIR) series 23/439. British National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

Mesopotamia, having witnessed the successful termination of the war, had taken it for granted that the country would remain under British control and were as a whole content to accept the decision of arms.” Such notions of Iraqi political passivity were to be exploded during the fall 1920 uprising.

The first formal suggestion the airplane might be used in Iraq to maintain internal security was made in an internal War Office memorandum dated May 9, 1919. Addressed to the Director General of the Imperial General Staff, it book-ended the discussion of garrisoning Iraq with the frame of internal disorder and external invasion. Potential external enemies included Turkey, the Kemalist rump of the Ottoman Empire, and the Ikhwan, the religious army of the newly independent kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The memo accepted that aircraft would “certainly play in integral part in our arrangements and must, to the extent to which they are used, reduce our military force.”¹⁸ Ground forces would be maintained only as are “necessary for immediate emergency.”

Responsibility for day-to-day stability would rest with the air force, although the War Office still envisioned that overall responsibility for Iraq would remain within the purview of the army. At this early stage, no independent role for the air force was as yet envisioned. The air force would be responsible for maintaining security, but under the direction and command of the army. This dynamic in the debate over Iraq policy served functionally as a debate within the debate, and was often the more important: where did ultimate responsibility for Iraq lie? For many involved in formulating policy, this was often the issue uppermost in their minds, as shall be seen, although it was rarely acknowledged as such, at least publicly.

¹⁸ Memorandum, Imperial General Staff, 9 May 1919. War Office (hereafter: WO) series 32/5222, British National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

Although pioneering, little more seems to have been done with this memorandum, at least as regards Iraq. Generally quiescent throughout 1919, Iraq did not garner much attention from British military and civilian policymakers. Their attention was elsewhere. Provision for Iraq was made during the 1919 Versailles Treaty Conference: as one of the nations which had “reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone,” Iraq’s existence was regularized as a matter of law in the League of Nation’s covenant.¹⁹ Yet when the issue of Iraq did crop up in domestic debates, the central issue was usually economy, except when Britain’s status as the Mandatory power in Iraq was utilized to give the British government domestic cover for defending Britain’s presence in Iraq.²⁰

The government wanted to reduce the financial burden of maintaining the Iraq garrison. India could partially defray Iraq costs, as Indian funds were separate from Great Britain’s for accounting purposes. Determining how much British expenditures in Iraq totaled was a complicated question that drove Treasury officials to near fits of distraction. Funds for Iraq were divided among cabinet ministries, government departments and offices, the armed services, the Government of India, as well as taxes raised locally in Iraq.²¹ No single official or department had ultimate financial responsibility. Churchill linked this problem with that of fractured bureaucratic responsibility, with decision-making power of Iraq policy split between the army and the air force. After winning a titanic bureaucratic battle within the Cabinet for control of implementing Iraq policy,

¹⁹ Daniel Silberfarb, *Britain’s Informal Empire in the Middle East*, 6.

²⁰ General Staff Note on the Possibility of Reducing the Garrison of Mesopotamia to 4,000 British and 16,000 Indian Troops. WO series 32/5227, The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

²¹ Rough Estimate for Military Forces Required in Mesopotamia. MFC series 76/1/138/67, The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

Churchill moved immediately to control Iraq finances as well, prelude to cutting them further.²² He believed he could not continue to dun parliament for further monies when “nine-tenths” came from a government department other than his own.²³

The garrison in Iraq was acknowledged to be inadequate to its task, yet the pressure was to reduce manpower commitments as the financial imperative won out.²⁴ British forces in Iraq were plagued by shortages of personnel.²⁵ Units in Iraq were significantly under strength, either because the slots had not been filled or—more commonly—because soldiers were widely seconded for administrative, engineering, and other tasks. Armored car units lacked qualified drivers, equipment was often inoperable due to desert conditions, and there were not enough logistics and communications specialists.²⁶ These shortages would be gradually remedied, but in the short-term British forces in Iraq remained unready for an uprising. Yet British officials remained strangely oblivious to the dangers of rebellion, despite numerous warnings to the contrary from Iraqis close to British government representatives.²⁷ This compared highly unfavorably to British actions in Syria, where officials took a much more aggressive and forward-leaning posture, and where Britain set up a native administration almost as soon as it

²² Preliminary Draft Conclusions of a Cabinet on 5.4.20, MFC 76/1/138/66. The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

²³ Memorandum by Secretary of State for Colonies. 4 August 1921, MFC 76/1/138/66. The National Archives, Kew, England.

²⁴ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 453.

²⁵ The Cabinet. Note by the General Staff. Policy Regarding Garrisons of Egypt and Palestine and Mesopotamia and Persia, MFC 76/1/138/53. The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 453-454.

occupied the country.²⁸ By contrast, in Iraq, the foreign secretary informed the British high commissioner in Baghdad that “loose administrative control [was] the most to be expected.”²⁹ Another British official, assessing the drift in British Iraq policy, opined, “You can’t be at Peace and at War at the same time.”³⁰ Low-level military operations continued throughout 1919 and into 1920; given this context, the 1920 rebellion was more a spike in violence than a complete departure from what had gone before. Nevertheless, the British government focused during this period almost exclusively on cost-cutting measures, causing one frustrated official, realizing the disconnect between government policy and events on the ground, to comment somewhat peevisly that trying to impose a peacetime financial system while military operations were underway amounted to an expectation for British troops to “await financial sanction for the ammunition they propse[d] to fire.”³¹

Throughout this period—indeed, up through the uprising—the debate over air policing continued to evolve, albeit usually in areas outside Iraq. The campaign against Mohammad bin Abdullah Hassan and his Dervish warriors, for example, figured prominently in this debate, and the successful outcome for the British in this matter served to bolster the claims of air policing advocates, who saw Hassan’s debate as a victory for British air power.

Also known as the “Mad Mullah,” Hassan had been a thorn in the side of British Sudan since the mid-1890’s when he rose to power in Somalia, which he dominated for

²⁸ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 451.

²⁹ Memorandum from Sec. Of State to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad. 22 August 1919. WO 32/5223.

³⁰ Memorandum. 25 October 1919. WO 32/5223.

³¹ P. de B. Radcliffe. Extract of Minutes on 0162/314. 23 October 1919. WO 32/5223.

the next quarter-century. Despite launching multiple punitive expeditions against him, the British were never able to decisively defeat him, and he allied himself with Germany during World War I, using German arms to rebuild his forces and emerge from the war greatly strengthened. When Britain moved against him in 1919-1920, it did so almost entirely by air, with the active encouragement of Churchill and Trenchard. Ground forces played a supporting role only. Within a month, Hassan had been defeated, and he fled into exile, dying of the Spanish flu in 1921.

The entire campaign was taken by the Air Ministry as a huge victory for air power, and one for which the air force could claim sole credit (although the army hotly disputed this). The apportionment of responsibility for British success was less important than the fact that the campaign seemed to confirm—at least in the minds of those charitable to air policing—that the airplane could deliver victory. The “Mad Mullah” campaign, an imperial sideshow, would nevertheless figure prominently in the debate over Iraq.³²

Emboldened by Britain’s success against Hassan, Churchill attempted to apply the East Africa case to Iraq, while the victory was still uppermost in the Cabinet members’ minds. His statement on February 19, 1919, to the air force chief of staff represented his first systematic attempt at thinking through the various problems, possibilities, and implications of a putative air policing regime for Iraq.³³ Characteristically cutting right to the heart of the matter, Churchill immediately recognized the most immediate limitation of air policing was its inadequacy in dealing with a Turkish invasion, one of the greatest potential foreign threats facing Iraq in 1920. As a peace treaty had not yet been signed

³² For an in-depth account of the campaign against Hassan from the British perspective, see David Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, 10-17. Also, *Operations Against the Mullah in Somaliland*, Chapter 2, AIR 5/846.

³³ Memorandum to War Office, Winston Spencer Churchill, 2 February 1919. MFC 76/1/138/2.

between Turkey and Great Britain, fears of a postwar Turkish revanche were widely held. Churchill discounted the need to plan for such an eventuality, as reinforcements from outside Iraq would be needed to deal with such a situation whether or not air policing was adopted. Air policing advocates, Churchill wrote, had “only to consider the maintenance of local and interior security.”³⁴ On February 20th, Churchill circulated to his Cabinet colleagues a memorandum relating to the possibility of substantially reducing the British garrison in Iraq and replacing it with air power. In it, Churchill acknowledged critics who wanted to abandon Iraq as not worth the cost by noting that Britain remained in Iraq for the same strategic considerations that it had entered Iraq to begin with, namely to ensure an uninterrupted supply of oil for the navy, and as a deterrent to any potential Turkish encroachments on Egypt or the Persian Gulf.

Churchill also revealed an appreciation for the situation by noting events were uncertain and the possibility for significant domestic Iraqi unrest remained, necessitating the continued retaining of a powerful ground force garrison in Iraq. This was a sop to Churchill’s army critics who deprecated the possibility for aircraft to police Iraq, a task much more complicated than that of defeating Hassan. Churchill remained unbowed, however, and continued to insist that the garrison would be substantially reduced over the coming months and be replaced by air power. This was before the uprising and the large-scale reinforcement of ground troops to suppress the Iraqi insurgents provided a field day for air policing’s critics within the government and in the press. Nonetheless, Churchill’s February memorandum, although its recommendations were not adopted by the Cabinet as a whole, represented the first concrete instance of an attempt to apply the concept of air policing to Iraq, and to think through the practical implications of such a decision,

³⁴ Ibid.

such as how air policing would manifest itself on the ground, what resources would be required, what the downsides would be, and within what timeframe air policing could plausibly be implemented. No concrete answers to these questions were advanced either by the memorandum, or in the subsequent Cabinet discussion of it, but both served to pave the road towards air policing in the future.³⁵

Churchill subsequently asked Trenchard privately if he was “prepared to take Mesopotamia on.”³⁶ Trenchard was, having immediately divined the importance such responsibility would have for the air force institutionally. He directed the Air Staff on March 15 to flesh out a plan for aerial control of Iraq, which he duly submitted to Churchill on March 20. Trenchard emphasized the “experimental” nature of air force control, and argued for only limited withdrawals of British military forces until the experience had proved “successful.”³⁷ Even if the air force met with the most resounding success in Iraq, there would still remain a critical need for ground forces, with the important caveat that these would come under the command of the air force. Churchill presented the broad brush strokes of the plan to Parliament on March 22.³⁸

Churchill denied that Britain needed a garrison of tens of thousands of British and Indian troops in Iraq. Churchill knew that parliamentary appetite for such a major commitment was lacking, and deprecated the necessity for it.³⁹ Rejecting the need to “dominate every square mile of Iraq,” Churchill compared the Middle East with the

³⁵ Memorandum, Secretary of State for War, Possibility of Reducing the Garrison of Mesopotamia. WO 32/5227.

³⁶ Letter from Churchill to Trenchard. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC series 76/1/36.

³⁷ Letter by Trenchard, Control of Iraq by the Air Force. Trenchard Papers, Hendon.

³⁸ Memorandum, Air Secretary and Memorandum, Trenchard, March 1920. Cabinet (hereafter: CAB) 24/106.

³⁹ Extract from Statement by the Secretary of State. House of Commons, 22 March 1920. Trenchard Papers, Hendon.

British experience of East Africa: “You open up block by block each area, and your influence permeates, friendly relations are established, trade springs up, local militia are established, [and] local troops are brought in.”

All this activity within the Air Ministry did not go unanswered by the army, which circulated a memorandum of its own in February, answering the air force’s position point by point. The army rejected any drawdown on troop strength in Iraq, while acknowledging that reductions were necessary sometime in the undefined future. Reductions would be to “invite disaster,” the “complete abandonment of Persia,” and the “stultification” of recent diplomatic approaches made to the Persian king. Any future withdrawal would have to be carefully managed so that any “retrograde movement” would not be misinterpreted as a “sign of weakness.” The army advocated a forward strategy by incorporating the province of Mosul, the final disposition of which remained to be decided to a future peace treaty between Great Britain and Turkey. Only by the inclusion of Mosul into Iraq, with all of Mosul’s surrounding oil fields, could Iraq be made to pay for the costs of its own occupation. Without Mosul, Iraq would be a drain on the British treasury, making continued British occupation of Iraq less tenable. The army also attempted to side-step responsibility for Iraq by pointing out that many of the problems of Iraq derived not from the presence of British troops, but the continued hostility of Turkey towards a British garrison there. The General Staff, the memorandum noted dryly, had not been responsible for “the policy of antagonizing the Turks and thereby embittering the whole Mussulman [sic] world [which] was involving us in unnecessary expense at the present time and laying up for us untold liabilities in the future.” By extension, the Cabinet, if it was looking to apportion blame, should look first at itself, the army was implying. “It must not be supposed,” the memorandum went on, “that the General Staff

are pressing for the retention of Mesopotamia, or any part of it, on strategic grounds of Imperial security. Our presence there is entirely a matter of State policy in which the military authorities have no power.”⁴⁰

This is not to say that the army wanted to abandon Iraq; far from it. The army was committed to remaining in Iraq, or, short of that, preventing the air force from retaining responsibility for it. But the army was also not interested in championing an increasingly controversial occupation, and this February memo attempted to square the difference. Having previously argued that only Mosul could make Iraq profitable, the army then revealed that the senior British general in Iraq was considering abandoning Mosul. In this way, the army hoped to force the Cabinet’s hand in deciding finally whether to commit to Iraq, or not. In doing so, the army seemed on the surface to present the Cabinet with a choice that, upon closer examination, was not a choice at all. If the Cabinet remained committed to Iraq, then it would have no option but to occupy the entire country (including Mosul). To do anything else would impose on drain on British finances, which the Treasury would not accept. If the Cabinet did want to remain in Iraq, it would have to accept the army’s forward-leaning strategy for a greater Iraq, one that included the Kurdish areas in the highlands to the north around Mosul and Kirkuk, and not just the Arab areas of the Euphrates river valley.

The General Staff further realized that the greatest advocate within the Cabinet for a continued British presence in Iraq was Churchill, who was also air policing’s most vocal champion. The army hoped it could check the air policing scheme by turning Churchill’s fiscal concerns against him, and by winning his support for the army’s Iraq

⁴⁰ General Staff Note on the Possibility of Reducing the Garrison of Mesopotamia to 4,000 British and 16,000 Indian Troops, 9 February 1920. WO 32/5227.

policy.⁴¹ The army's position was the result of a shrewd reading of the key players in the Iraq debate. But Churchill saw through the army's plans, calling its bureaucratic maneuvering "inveterate hostility and obstruction" and a "form of warfare I have never seen the like in all my (now long) experience."⁴²

Members from the army's General Staff and aides to Trenchard met on March 24 to discuss the feasibility of air policing.⁴³ Despite tensions, the meeting was surprisingly civil. The army had come prepared with an estimate of the number of troops needed to support air force operations in Iraq. Garrison troops would be needed to hold each major air base, as well as advanced landing grounds. Some army officers expressed concerns that about hostile artillery fire, but this was considerable improbable due to the likely difficulties of obtaining such arms. The air force emphasized the need for as small a garrison as was feasible.

Elsewhere the air force warned against perhaps inevitable comparisons of air policing with World War I air campaigns. The two were not comparable, the air force argued.⁴⁴ World War I air operations were focused on actions against enemy aircraft and "co-operation with other arms in actions in which land or sea forces were the predominating partner."⁴⁵ Iraq would differ greatly, in that the air force would have the lead role. This would allow the garrison requirements for a country to be considered from

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Draft Minutes of a Conference held in Room 282, War Office, at 11 a.m. March 24th 190, on the subject of: Royal Air Force assuming control of Mesopotamia, and the military commitments involved. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/41.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Memorandum, On the Power of the Air Force and the Application of this Power to Hold and Police Mesopotamia. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/36.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

an entirely “novel” viewpoint. Previous models relying on ground forces alone called for the widespread dispersal of military forces across a country in order to achieve as widespread a security presence amongst the local population as possible. Punitive columns would be dispatched to deal with disturbances, after which the troops would withdraw to their bases. This meant that the impact of the intervention, although perhaps severe initially, was also highly localized both in time and space. The results were, the report’s author argued, “speedily forgotten, and last results can often only be achieved by permanent military occupation over a period of years with coincident opening up of the country by railways and roads.”⁴⁶ Left unsaid was the silent acknowledgement that such a large-scale commitment of resources to Iraq was unlikely.

By contrast, the air force could maintain a permanent presence over even the harshest terrain. Aircraft had complete freedom of movement. Centrally based out of a few strategically located air bases, aircraft would be able to reach any point in Iraq.⁴⁷ Air power’s “long arm” would render it “ubiquitous.” By air, frequent patrols and demonstration flights could keep the entire country under “more or less constant surveillance.” Although Trenchard dryly deprecated “education by pamphlet,” he was aware of its potential power. “It must be remembered,” the memorandum continued, “that from the ground every inhabitant of a village is under the impression that the occupant of is aeroplane is actually looking at him.” Events in 1919 on the Northwest Frontier in India might have led to conclusions to the contrary, but the air force staff apparently gave little credence to such arguments.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

From the meeting Trenchard compiled a financial estimate and forwarded it to Churchill.⁴⁹ These figures dealt only with the additional seven squadrons the air force would need to send to Iraq if air policing were adopted, and did not include the three squadrons already present. An initial expenditure of £3.7 million was necessary to meet capital outlays on infrastructure and technical equipment not yet present in Iraq. Recurring annual costs of £1 million would be needed to maintain 10 squadrons of aircraft in Iraq, with personnel costing a further £1.5 million. This is to be compared with a garrison whose annualized cost by December 1920 was running at £30 million. Trenchard's admittedly highly approximate costs—as he was the first to point out—totaled no more than £6.2 million annually. These were economies on the order of eighty percent. Unsurprisingly, such cuts proved highly powerful arguments in favor of air policing, as Trenchard rightly realized, especially given government projections that expenditures were set to exceed tax receipts by more than £100 million by fiscal year 1922. Government departments were threatened with Treasury control of their budgets if they did not achieve cuts.⁵⁰ Perhaps surprisingly, Trenchard viewed the Treasury threat with confident anticipation. He felt this put the air force in the best possible position, as it was the branch best positioned to achieve financial economies.⁵¹

Yet Churchill realized the power of the General Staff's argument, and was thought by some to be coming round to the army's position before events on the ground

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Scheme for Military Control of Mesopotamia by Royal Air Force, March 1920. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/45.

⁵⁰ Treasury Circular, CO 732/3/27065.

⁵¹ Minute by Trenchard, 17 October 1921. CAB 5/4.

in Iraq overtook the army's plans when a general rebellion broke out in the fall of 1920.⁵² An inkling of increasing tensions in Iraq cropped up in the policy papers being circulated at the time in London. For example, one noted that "national feeling" and the "driving power of religious fanaticism" was increasing over the summer of 1920.⁵³ Interestingly, the same anonymous author also worried about the implications of disaffected, demobilized Iraqi Arab Ottoman army officers who had fought British forces during the Great War.

Over 100,000 soldiers were required to suppress the rebellion, amounting to some 52 battalions of infantry, and seven regiments of cavalry.⁵⁴ This was an increase of 20 battalions from British strength in Iraq in July, and did not include native levies raised by British forces, nor Indian army forces.⁵⁵ In putting down the rebellion Britain suffered some two thousand casualties, among them 450 dead. Expenditures in Iraq for the 1920 fiscal year nearly quadrupled.⁵⁶ Troop drawdown after the October 1920 peak was swift, however.⁵⁷ By March 1921, 33 infantry battalions remained in Iraq, only one more than in July, 1920. When the air force took responsibility for Iraq on October 1, 1922, only two British battalions were based in Iraq, leavened by some 7 Indian Army battalions. Indian Army expenditures were funded by the Government of India. India regularly received funds from Parliament to cover part of its defense budget; the balance was made up by taxes raised within India itself.

⁵³ The Proposed Scheme Showing the Units Required for the Control of Mesopotamia. By the Royal Air Force Assisted by the Army. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/57.

⁵⁴ Summary showing Strength of Garrison from 1920 onwards. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/140.

⁵⁵ Memorandum, Hoare, 14 May 1925. CAB 24/173.

⁵⁶ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 453.

⁵⁷ Summary, Iraq Garrison Strength. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/140.

Commitments on the scale of 1920 were unsustainable and rendered the army's carefully laid plans moot. The sheer scale of the current army deployments in Iraq was simply not politically acceptable. Churchill's initial brilliant insight in 1918—that in Iraq, economy was “everything”—was truer after the rebellion than before. Even before the rebellion the size of British garrison in Iraq was out of scale to all previous estimations.⁵⁸ The air force thought British forces in Iraq bloated, out of scale to the perceived threat, and needlessly antagonizing Turkey.⁵⁹ In any event, there was no appetite in London for a long and costly occupation. Great Britain spent some £80 million in 1919-1920, and a further £20 million in outlays for the rebellion, for a total of £110 million in little over a year.⁶⁰ The *Times* spoke for many when it asked rhetorically “how much longer are valuable lives to be sacrificed in the vain endeavor to impose upon the Arab population an elaborate and expensive administration which they never asked for and do not want?”⁶¹ A subsequent article labeled the British government's policy in Iraq simply “foolish.”⁶²

The army was well aware of these criticisms, as were military commanders in Iraq. Lieutenant General A. Haldane, commander of British forces in Iraq, acknowledged as much when wrote to the Baghdad high commissioner, emphasizing that both he and the War Office were cognizant of how “unpopular the policy of maintaining a large garrison in this country is with a large section of the public at home.”⁶³ While the army

⁵⁸ Notes on Meeting of the War Office on Present Garrison of Mesopotamia. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/47.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Parliamentary Debates. 41 July 1921. Vol. 144, cols. 1525-6.

⁶¹ Editorial, *The Times*, 7 August 1920.

⁶² Editorial, Ibid., 10 August 1920.

was still not reconciled to air policing as a matter of policy, nor of the air force taking over responsibility for Iraq from the army, the army was increasingly accepting of the need for strict economies in the Iraq. This change in the army's attitude provided an opening for the air force to push air policing more strongly, despite the negative coverage the air force received during the Iraq uprising, and led to the next great chapter in the evolution of British Iraq policy.

Churchill, realizing a narrow window was opening, quickly seized his opportunity. He approached the cabinet and asked for the authority to chair a conference in Cairo on Britain's Middle East policy. Assent was given on February 14, 1921, and a date for the conference was set for March 12.

The Cairo Conference duly opened on March 12, 1921, in the palatial Semiramis Hotel on the banks of the River Nile. Among those attending were Churchill, Trenchard, and Colonel T.E. Lawrence of World War I fame. A.T. Wilson spoke for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and oil interests in the Middle East more generally. The Baghdad High Commissioner, Sir Percy Cox, was also present, as was Gertrude Bell, the only woman present at the meeting. Two Iraqis, Jafar Pasha and Sasun Effendi, also attended; both were members of the native Baghdad Council created by the British as an official interlocutor between British government and military representatives and the native Iraqi population. All told, some 40 people were present at the week-long conference. Churchill dubbed them his "forty thieves."

Churchill opened the conference with a ringing peroration on Britain's "justifiable pride" in bringing the "torch of civilization now to be kindled anew in Baghdad."⁶⁴

⁶³ Secret Memorandum to: His Excellency the High Commissioner. From: General Head Quarters Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force Baghdad, 6 November 1920. AIR 23/439.

⁶⁴ Slater, S. H. "Iraq." *Nineteenth Century*, XCIX, 480.

Whatever the rhetoric, he knew that ensuring the long-time viability of Britain's presence in Iraq meant reducing commitments, not embarking upon grand new projects of remarking the country in a British image. Britain would exercise power behind the scenes, and support a native Iraqi regime.

The Cairo Conference took place within a general perception among British policymakers of British military overstretch. The War Office had identified numerous military "liabilities" and demands on Britain's military resources in the immediate postwar period, and circulated these concerns in memoranda addressed to the Cabinet and to British officials in the Middle East. The army also took the opportunity to plug the importance of the ground soldier and deprecate the efficacy of the aircraft in colonial policing. "It is on the presence and example of the individual British soldier that internal security ultimate rests," one War Office memorandum states, "and he must be visible in sufficient numbers...The [army] are fully alive to the great assistance aeroplanes, tanks, and armoured cars can render in wars, whether great or small, and have every intention of extending their use wherever possible, they would be conveying an entirely false impression if they held out any prospect of there effecting *large reductions in infantry and cavalry*, so long as the internal security factor continues to predominate."⁶⁵ The same memorandum also mentioned that airplanes would be extremely useful in the event of an invasion by an outside power, a sly bit of double-talk on the army's part, as it knew that the chief threat to Iraq—as it admitted elsewhere—was from another uprising, not an invasion. More broadly, the army cited threats of unrest in England, the civil war in Ireland, the intervention in Russia against the Bolshevik regime in Moscow, the threat of a revanchist Turkey, and the continuing costs of maintaining the occupation Army of the

⁶⁵ Memorandum, Military Liabilities of the Empire, 25 February 1921. WO 32/5745.

Rhine in Europe as evidence of a military stretched thin with too many demands on its resources with too few troops to carry them all out adequately.

The Cairo Conference set itself two broad tasks. The first was to determine whom to support in the campaign for Iraq's throne. This was eventually decided in Feisal's favor, a former Hashemite king of Damascus who had been forced by the French to flee the city and seek exile in Europe. Some feared the French might object to Feisal's candidacy, but this concern was set aside in the face of the argument that the French would more pleased in having Feisal securely on the Iraqi throne "stirring up trouble throughout Arabia." A more critical concern was the Arab reaction to Feisal, and specifically, Ibn Saud's reaction to Feisal's kingship. It was thought that if Feisal was proclaimed King of Iraq, there was a "great possibility of a conflagration flaring up throughout the Arabian Peninsula." In Feisal's favor were his perceived hostility to Communism and his descent from the tribe of Quraish, the Prophet Muhammad's tribe, which was thought would make him acceptable to Iraq's Shiite majority, even though Feisal himself was a Sunni. Also consequential was the fact that Feisal's brother was a good friend of Mustapha Kemal's, the leader of Turkey, and was believed to be in constant contact with him. This familial connection between the leaders was thought by the conference to likely serve to dampen down Turkish intrigues, which were rife in Iraq, especially in the north.⁶⁶

The second task was determining future British military dispositions in Iraq. The Cairo Conference determined that the current garrison in Iraq would be reduced to some 12 battalions by 1922, a reduction of almost one-half. Further reductions were anticipated, down to 8 battalions, or fewer. Of these, it was hoped that only two would be

⁶⁶ Memorandum, The Proposed Kingdom of Mesopotamia., 17 February 1921. WO 32/5619.

British battalions, the balance composed of either Indian Army troops or native Iraqi levies. The War Office was opposed to this however, as it wanted, in Churchill's words, to use Iraq as a permanent "testing grounds" for soldiers in desert warfare. Churchill considered this unacceptable, although he presented the Cabinet with the army's position, along with his rejection of it, stating that "if no other way can be found of holding the country, we can better give up [Iraq] at once," a bit of hyperbole Churchill, so committed to maintaining Britain's presence in Iraq, doubtless did not mean, although it underscored his feelings on the subject of economizing at almost all costs.

The Cairo Conference also considered Trenchard's scheme of air policing, which Churchill, as Colonial and Air Secretary, backed to the hilt. Trenchard proposed a garrison of eight squadrons of the Royal Air Force, three armored-car companies, two armored trains, four gunboats, a pack battery from the Indian army, and four infantry battalions, of which two would be British. This force, backed by the Iraqi Army, which Britain would establish and advise, would be capable of maintaining internal security in Iraq. Trenchard stated during the conference that he felt "willing to assume responsibility" for Iraq with such a force at his disposal. Crucially, Churchill felt that "such a system could, I think, with careful pruning be maintained with the [financial] limits."

Also important for the success of the air policing scheme was the "greatly improved" state of Iraq. The "political arrangement which are to form the foundation of our future position in Mesopotamia are far advance and are progressing favourably," Churchill thought. He also cabled to the Cabinet that he had from the "outset contemplated holding Mesopotamia not by sheer force, but by the acquiescence of the people of Mesopotamia as a whole in a Government and Rule whom they have freely

accepted, and who will be supported by the Air Force, and by British organised levies, and by 4 Imperial battalions.” Even if this was a bit of artful sophistry on Churchill’s part, which it likely was, it nevertheless gets at the heart of the reality of air policing, in that it did not rely on force alone, and was never conceived as such by its advocates.

Furthermore, the government of Iraq would be “conducted by an Arab administration under King Feisal, who will act in general accordance with the advice tendered him by the High Commissioner.” The Conference was at pains to reassure critics that the air force garrisons in Iraq were thoroughly capable of defending themselves from a “rising or local disorder.” One critique of the air policing scheme was that with so few British ground troops in Iraq, air force bases would be vulnerable to ground attack. Churchill reassured the Cabinet this was not so, arguing that if another rising were to take place, an evacuation from Baghdad—the chief British air base in Iraq—could be swiftly evacuated down the Tigris towards the Persian Gulf in purpose-built armed barges. If the “worst comes to the worst,” Churchill argued, Britain retained the capability in Iraq to evacuate its personnel without needing to send a rescue expedition. This would not only protect British servicemen, but would do so within the financial limits, which were “inviolable.”⁶⁷

Cairo was predicated with limited goals in mind, as Trenchard himself later acknowledged in a private letter of October 1, 1922 to Marshal Salmond, the air force commander in Iraq.⁶⁸ Air policing could only succeed if there was no external threat to Iraq, and if Iraq was free of organized rebellion aside from “ordinary spasmodic

⁶⁷ Memorandum, Secretary of State for the Colonies, Policy and Finance in Mesopotamia, 1920. WO 32/5899.

⁶⁸ Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 71/1/36/2.

disturbances.”⁶⁹ This marked a departure from the War Ministry’s argument that British forces needed to prepare for simultaneous Kurdish and Arab risings.⁷⁰ The air force’s position was that the Kurds and the Arabs lacked the capacity and the desire to coordinate, but it is telling that the air force chose not to deny the essential validity of the War Department’s argument. Even air policing’s most passionate proponents recognized its inherent limitations.

Trenchard further recognized in his correspondence that air power alone was not sufficient in suppressing rebellions in Iraq. He compared the situation in the north of Iraq with that of the Northwest Frontier in India. In India, air strikes were followed by punitive operations on the ground, the psychological impact of bombing being combined with the ability of an infantry column to root out resistance.⁷¹ Before air policing had even been accepted as official British policy in Iraq, Trenchard was, privately at least, acknowledging that air power could not operate effectively in isolation. Combined operations were necessary. The air policing scheme provided for “maximum work by the police, minimum casualties on both sides, and the attainment of the object in the shortest time.”⁷² As Salmond recognized in his command report to Trenchard, local levies and the Iraqi police had a “considerable part to play in the normal control of the country.”⁷³

⁶⁹ Royal Air Force Command Report, Appendix I, by Air Marshal Sir J. M. Salmond, On His Tenure of Command in Iraq from 1 October 1922 to 7 April 1924. AIR 23/542.

⁷⁰ The Proposed Scheme Shewing the United Force Required for the Control of Mesopotamia by the Royal Air Force Assisted by the Army. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 71/1/36/56.

⁷¹ MFC 71/1/36/12.

⁷² Royal Air Force Suggestions for Future Operations. AIR 23/557.

⁷³ Command Report, General Salmond, On His Tenure of Command in Iraq from 1 October 1922 to 7 April 1924. AIR 23/542.

Internal air staff memorandums issued in 1920 further revealed a keen interest within the air force over the relevance of the Indian Northwest Frontier as a model for Iraq, especially in the Kurdish north. Along the Northwest Frontier, British forces contended with Afghan tribes engaged in low-level guerrilla warfare. Based out of border forts, British columns launched punitive missions against belligerent tribal leaders. The air force believed that in the future, aircraft could replace these columns, giving a much higher degree of mobility and flexibility to British military operations. Areas difficult to reach on the ground would be vulnerable to attack from the air. Aircraft could also bring power to bear much more swiftly than a ground-based column could.⁷⁴

The air force further recognized that the successful implementation of air policing in Iraq necessitated a gradual handover from the army to the Royal Air Force. Once the 1920 uprising was suppressed, air force control was initially limited to the north of Baghdad, away from the restive heart of the rebellion.⁷⁵ Once the situation on the ground had stabilized, the handover could proceed. The success of air policing was predicated on at least partial stability.⁷⁶ Churchill himself acknowledged this in March 1920 by proposing a gradualist approach to governing Iraq: increasing local influence by establishing friendly relations with local tribal leaders, establishing local militias and raising local troops, and opening up previously closed areas for trade.⁷⁷ There was no need to govern everything all at once, Churchill argued. Instead, he advocated a “block-by-block” approach based upon the threat of aerial bombardment to keep the local tribal

⁷⁴ Air Staff Memo, 1920. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 71/1/36/15.

⁷⁵ The Control of Mesopotamia by the Air Force. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 71/1/36/11.

⁷⁶ Memorandum, Air Staff, 1920. On the Power of the Air Force and the Application of this Power to Hold and Police Mesopotamia. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 71/1/36/14.

⁷⁷ Memorandum, Secretary of State for Air, 22 March 1920. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 71/1/36/16.

leaders from rebelling. He conceived of the airplane as an omnipresent eye in the sky, monitoring movement on the ground, and uncovering and crushing unrest before it spread (beyond the point where air power alone would be insufficient to bring the situation back under control).⁷⁸

Despite these reassurances, many critics remained unconvinced. Churchill defended himself in parliament by stating, “I cannot give an absolute guarantee that any scheme we may pursue in Mesopotamia will infallibly succeed, or that troubles will not arise in this vexatious country. But there is no other way in which the promises made to Parliament for reduction in cost can be kept. Moreover, it would not be right to spend a larger sum upon retaining our position in Mesopotamia. Politically, I do not believe we could defend it, and from an Imperial point of view it would be a misapplication of limited and overstrained resources. I think it is the best we can do in all the circumstances.”⁷⁹

Churchill also defended the conclusions of the Cairo Conference in Cabinet by citing Iraqi public opinion.⁸⁰ The state of Iraq, he reported in his summary of his position, was much improved since the 1920 rebellion. The tide had definitely turned against the insurgents, Churchill felt. Political arrangements for a final Iraqi disposition were well in hand. Feisal, about to be crowned king, was “generally acclaimed” by the Iraqi population. There were nagging problems with the state of the Iraq levies, intended to form the basis of an eventual independent Iraqi army, but this was felt to be easily remediable. Most important, the power of the air force was increasingly making itself

⁷⁸ Memorandum, Air Staff, 1920. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 71/1/36/15.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies for Air Staff, 1920. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 71/1/36/14.

felt, and this was before the air control regime had been implemented in full. For his part, General Haldane, previously an inveterate opponent of air policing, now believed that if he had had sufficient aircraft in the fall of 1920 he could have forestalled the Iraqi uprising.⁸¹ Furthermore, Churchill professed that he had never intended on controlling Iraq by force alone; the acquiescence of Iraqis in maintaining British influence in Iraq was of key importance. Churchill foresaw an independent, sovereign Iraq friendly with Great Britain, at peace with its neighbors, open to British commerce, and making few demands on the Treasury. The only possible impediment to the realization of such a seductive vision was the weight of an unsustainable British garrison that would necessitate a precipitate British pull-out from Iraq before the post-uprising gains had been consolidated. The swift adoption of air policing would prevent this from happening.

The General Staff sensed the tide of opinion was moving against its position, but refused to acknowledge its defeat, and weighed back in with yet another memorandum on “Policy and Finance in Mesopotamia,” which circulated on August 17, the day before the Cabinet was scheduled to meet and debate the Cairo Conference’s recommendations. While agreeing that financial economies were of the utmost importance, the memorandum disagreed about almost everything else. The army rejected Churchill’s argument that it was simply too expensive to maintain British soldiers in Iraq with the kind of establishment and supplies they were used to back in Britain. Given the Mesopotamia’s status as a “poor, starving, bankrupt,” country, the War Office wrote, it is necessary to maintain British troops in the “maximum of comfort possible under the conditions” if British troops were to be “maintained in a state of efficiency and high

⁸¹ Extracts from a Private Letter from General Haldane to Mr. Churchill, 25 June 1921. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, 76/1/138/93.

morale.” If the costs were too high, the War Office argued, then it would be better to abandon Iraq altogether.

As for the proposal of transfer of command in Iraq from the army to the air force in the name of cost-cutting, the army sharply noted under air policing, the air force would be raising units of gunboats, armored trains, supplies, signals, ordnance, medical, veterinary, and other similar services, all of which were ground forces functions, and all duties of which the army feared it would be forced to train the air force to how to carry out while having to bear the fiscal costs of doing so. The army deprecated the utility of native levies, and argued that only British soldiers could carry out the necessary ground tasks.

Furthermore, the “only weapons which can be used by the air force are bombs and machine guns...Punitive measures may have to be taken against disturbers of the peace; the only means at the disposal of the Air Force, and the means now in fact used, are the bombing of the women and children in the villages. If the Arab population realize that the peaceful control of Mesopotamia ultimately depends on our intention of bombing women and children, I am very doubtful we shall gain that acquiescence of the fathers and husbands of Mesopotamia as a whole to which the Secretary of State for the Colonies [Churchill] looks forward. More probable is it that the new King, Feisal, will complain that he cannot expect loyal co-operation of the tribes so long as their women and children are done to death.”⁸²

The army also found fault with the plans for evacuation of the British garrison. Accepting for the sake of argument that the evacuation would work as Churchill and the air policing advocates argued, the army was “disturbed” at the implication that any

⁸² Memorandum for the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 1921. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/101.

British evacuation would leave native levies “to their fate.” This not only seemed problematic in terms of loyalty—native levies would refuse to ally with British soldiers they knew were prepared to abandon them in the event of an uprising—but also because “leave our friends in the lurch has not hitherto been a policy of the British Government.” The army, the memorandum stated, continued to see no alternative to a large British reserve remaining in Iraq. The army concluded by stating that it was unwise and uneconomic to allow the air force to Iraq to “depart from its present functions of an ancillary force” and the command and control scheme for the air policing regime as had been proposed by the air force and confirmed by the Cabinet was “unconstitutional and would lead to hopeless confusion.”

This last ditch effort by the General Staff failed to persuade the Cabinet, which met on August 18th as scheduled and formally adopted air policing as British strategy in Iraq. Defeated, the army remained unreconstructed, and chose a different tack in its attacks on the air force in the future by striking on the flank and attempting to “partition” the air force.⁸³ In short, the War Office proposed that since many air force units in Iraq—such as the armored car units, which were acknowledged by air force officers serving in Iraq to be an integral part of the air policing regime—essentially duplicated army functions, these air force units should be folded back within the structure of the army. ““Millions”” of pounds would be saved. The Cabinet did not address the issue head on, instead deciding not to “reopen the question of an independent air force,” which was tantamount to declaring it would tolerate no more trouble-making from the army, although not in so many words.

⁸¹ David Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, 29.

This last represented the final salvos in the struggle between the War Office and the Air Ministry over who would control Iraq policy. It was a battle that had frustrated Trenchard greatly. A consummate bureaucratic infighter, Trenchard was a great asset for the newly independent institution at a time when its very existence was coming seriously into question. Wise to the machinations of civil servants and army generals alike, Trenchard retained a constant capacity to be seemingly surprised by the army's continued opposition and last minute objections, which Trenchard felt were specious and self-serving.⁸⁴

When Lloyd George's coalition government fell in 1922, the Conservatives were returned to power and Sir Samuel Hoare was appointed the new Minister for Air. At 42, he was a young man in the cabinet, and possessed of a "good and quick brain," Trenchard felt. The air marshal was also pleased to learn Hoare was "keen on maintaining the Air Service and its prestige." Hoare took a long view of Iraqi prospects, as did Trenchard. Hoare wanted to reduce the British presence in Iraq, but not precipitately. The Iraqi regime needed at least three years before it could take administrative responsibility for itself, and even then there would continued to be a need for a British military garrison. Reductions in British army battalions posted in Iraq would continue, as the Cairo Conference had mandated, but only after the Iraqis had raised four battalions of their own and trained them to a "reasonable" level of effectiveness.⁸⁵

Trenchard considered the position of the new Conservative government towards the Iraqi royal regime to be that it had four years organize itself effectively, after which Britain was leaving, regardless of whether or not the regime was ready for the withdrawal

⁸⁴ Letter from Trenchard to Salmond. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/17.

⁸⁵ Letter from Trenchard to Salmond. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/23.

of British support.⁸⁶ He considered this short-sighted, but felt confident that British officers would remain in advisory capacities beyond the four year limit. Additionally, air force squadrons would remain behind, under treaty arrangements yet to be negotiated.⁸⁷

Worries over the quality of the Iraqi levies continued to dog Trenchard.⁸⁸ He knew local forces were critical to the success of air policing. In a typical operation, Iraqi forces would carry out the first operation.⁸⁹ Even in the most sensitive missions, those dealing with individuals responsible for killing British air force pilots, local police were given the lead. In April 1924, three British pilots were shot down and killed by angry tribesmen. Iraqi police were dispatched to arrest those responsible, and the army occupied the village where the perpetrators lived. Air action was not taken, even though collective punishment was systematically practiced in Iraq.⁹⁰ Similarly, in August 1924, when two more British pilots were shot down and killed, Iraqi policemen were again dispatched to arrest those responsible. Air action was not taken in this case either.⁹¹

Air policing was designed to extend the power of the central government in the countryside. Iraq in the 1920's was an overwhelmingly rural and tribal society. Outside of the cities, local tribal leaders were usually the most important figures in the political

⁸⁶ Letter from Trenchard to Salmond, 20 March 1923. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/321.

⁸⁷ Letter from Trenchard to Salmond. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/35.

⁸⁸ Letter from Trenchard to Salmond. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/32.

⁸⁹ Memorandum, Secretary to His Excellency the High Commissioner for Iraq, Baghdad, 9 November 1923. AIR 23/547.

⁹⁰ Telegram No. 15, 5 April 1924. From Administer, Nasiriyah, to the Minister of the Interior, Baghdad. AIR 23/547.

⁹¹ Memorandum No. 213, 7 August 1924. From Mutasarrif Muntafiq, Liwa, Nasiriya to Ministry of the Interior, Baghdad. AIR 23/547.

power structure. Suspicious of government intrusion, tribal leaders usually resisted the presence of government agents, almost always policemen, on the local scene. When villages were bombed, the action almost always took place because police had been attacked, or refused access. Air force operations were designed to provide police with maximum flexibility in their movements around Iraq.⁹²

Throughout, Trenchard deftly navigated the twists and turns of Iraq policy to the great advantage of the air force. He remained deeply concerned with public opinion: at one point Trenchard mandated a title change from “Operations Report” to “Report of Work Done” in official air force reports sent to London from Baghdad on the grounds that the latter downplayed the significance of events in Iraq. In a similar vein, Trenchard prevented the publication of bomb tonnage expended in Iraq, arguing that the army forbore from releasing the number of shells or bullets army personnel fired. The tone of air force reports also came in for criticism, much of which he felt provided an inaccurate picture and contributed to a picture in the press of “constant restlessness” in Iraq’s villages. Iraq, he averred, was largely quiescent.

Salmond was less sanguine. He noted in a private letter summarizing the situation in Iraq that pro-Turkish propaganda was significantly up from a year earlier. Turkish nationalists had swept to power in the 1919-1920 elections in Turkey, and Salmond feared, but could not prove, an orchestrated campaign on the part of the Turkish government to stir unrest in British-held Iraq. More disturbing from Salmond’s viewpoint was the revelation that the clergy of Karbala and Najaf had prepared orders for the Shia population not to resist if Turkey invaded. While these orders had not actually been

⁹² Memorandum, Suggestions for Future Operations. AIR 23/557.

issued, it worried Salmond, especially when combined with the knowledge the Turks were inserting army units surreptitiously to northern Kurdish mountain valleys.⁹³

Revealingly, Salmond never once mentioned aircraft. His letter is full of details of troop movements, and how he was deploying soldiers in the north to counter the continuing infiltration of Turkish soldiers, but never how he was using aircraft in Iraq. Nor did Trenchard press him in his reply. Salmond might have assumed Trenchard was already familiar with air operations in Iraq. More likely, Salmond chose not to mention the role of aircraft because the most important work was being done on the ground by British army battalions, native levies, and Iraqi policemen. Salmond recognized the purpose of air policing to be supporting “the political authorities in their tasks of pacification and administration.”⁹⁴

The War Office also raised the vexatious issue of morality. Was it moral to bomb rural Iraqi villages? Doing so might effectively compel the rural leadership, but the ability of the villages to defend themselves from the air was almost non-existent. More problematic from Trenchard’s viewpoint were questions raised to Parliament over the issue.⁹⁵ To pre-empt such questions, or to deflect them if raised, Trenchard wrote Salmond and directed him to write what in affect amounted to a Royal Air Force position paper that highlighted the difficulty of policing Iraq, the efficiency of air force operations, and an outline of how the air force “kept the country quiet.” Trenchard planned to use the letter as evidence to counter potential critics in parliament. He also chastised Salmond gently to gain control over junior officers “mixing themselves up in

⁹³ Letter from Salmond to Trenchard. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/28.

⁹⁴ Letter from Salmond to Trenchard. 6 November 1923. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, MFC 76/1/138/46.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

policy.”⁹⁶ Trenchard was increasingly aware that these questions were usually expressed along moral lines.

Salmond’s reply was notable not only as a robust defense of air policing policy, but also revealing how Salmond viewed the air force’s role not centrally, but as part of an integrated whole that contained a range of options escalating from police patrols to air strikes.⁹⁷ Salmond emphasized that his mission was one of internal security; defending Iraq externally was beyond his capabilities. Policymaking in Iraq was a constant negotiation between the British high commissioner and the Iraqi government. Air policing was not solely British, but a “combined policy” of the Iraqi and British governments. Aerial bombings were always used as a last resort, and only when a localized anti-government rising occurred. The vast majority of such cases were resolved by police action, without resort to the air force.

The battle over air policing was won unequivocally by the air force, which instituted an aerial regime of colonial control more thoroughly than anywhere else in the British Empire. The army resented the praise the air force received from all quarters in both cutting costs—British expenditures in Iraq fell from some £20 million in 1922 to under £3.5 million in 1925—while maintaining stability because it felt its own role in achieving that stability was almost always overlooked: it was the British army that had put down the 1920 rising, and when it handed responsibility for Iraq over to the air force in 1922, Iraq was largely quiescent and stable under the rule of its new king. The last British infantry battalion departed Iraq in 1929, while the air force retained responsibility

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Memorandum, Air Headquarters, British Forces in Iraq, Baghdad. 29th November 1923. Trenchard Papers, Hendon, 76/1/138/54.

for Iraq's internal security until October 1932, although the Royal Air Force remained through World War II, albeit without an active operational role.

On one level, the air policing regime was a singular success. British financial expenditures were greatly reduced, and the size of the British garrison in Iraq was greatly shrunk from its late 1920 high. Ultimately backed by the power of the Royal Air Force's bomber squadrons centrally based around Baghdad, the Iraqi royal regime headed by King Feisal was outwardly stable. The 1920 uprising was not repeated, and post-1920 outbreaks of violence remained sporadic and localized.

On another level, however, air policing must be judged a failure. Air policing was not adopted because it was the best possible scheme of colonial control; it was adopted because it was the least expensive in manpower and in pounds, and because Trenchard saw it as a proving ground for a newly independent air force. Air policing could not solve the lack of political stability at the very top of the Iraqi government. Between 1921, when Faisal was crowned king of Iraq, and 1958, when the Iraqi royal family was murdered during a military coup, Iraq saw no fewer than 58 separate changes of government. The problems plaguing the Iraq central government were fundamentally political, not military. Air policing could offer only a temporary solution at best. The political dimension of air policing is virtually absent in the literature. When political issues are introduced, they are usually discussed in the context of British domestic politics. These are undoubtedly crucial; one of the chief arguments for air policing was that the British public would no stomach any greater overseas commitment in the immediate aftermath of World War I. The ramifications and implications of air policing for Iraqi politics is much less discussed, even in the literature by historians focused on specifically Iraqi national history, where the British occupation is glossed over either as an interlude or a brief

phase of national history with few lasting impacts overall. This treatment is surprising given the fundamental weaknesses in the Iraqi national government that air policing revealed (but did not create). Every year the Royal Air Force was responsible for internal security in Iraq, from 1922 through 1936, saw Iraqi villages struck from the air, underscoring the extraordinary degree to which central government control in the villages was lacking. Without the Royal Air Force, it is at least probable that rural villages – and perhaps entire provinces – would have slipped from the control of the Iraqi government. Thus air policing underscored the great gulf between Iraq's rulers and Iraq's ruled, and the, in generous terms, inchoate sense of national identity among Iraqis as a whole. Iraqis remained split along sectarian, ethnic, and religious lines, without agreement on who was, and who was not, Iraqi.

Also striking in the literature is the absence of a sustained discussion over how air policing came to be adopted as policy. For some, it is simply assumed, and the focus is on how the air policing regime was implemented operationally. Other works focus only on the broad-brush strokes of the debate, and gloss over the details. Also, while there has been some limited focus on the policy debate behind air policing, no work up to this time has highlighted the deep split between the army and the air force over Iraq policy. This is an important aspect of the history of the air policing regime, and one that deserves more focus than it has hitherto received. The army ultimately lost the debate, but the army-air force divide remains strangely forgotten in the air policing historiography.

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