

ECONOMIC
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IN
IRAQ
1932-1950

JOSEPH SASSOON

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The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality
of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the
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To Taffy, Rachel and Dena

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Notes on Transliteration, Currency and References

TRANSLITERATION

Arabic names and words have been transliterated according to the system adopted by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.

CURRENCY

Up to April 1932 the monetary unit in Iraq was the rupee. The Iraqi dinar (ID) was then introduced, each ID comprising 1,000 fils. The ID was valued at par with the pound sterling, being equal to \$4.03. In 1949, with the devaluation of the pound sterling, it became equal to \$2.80.

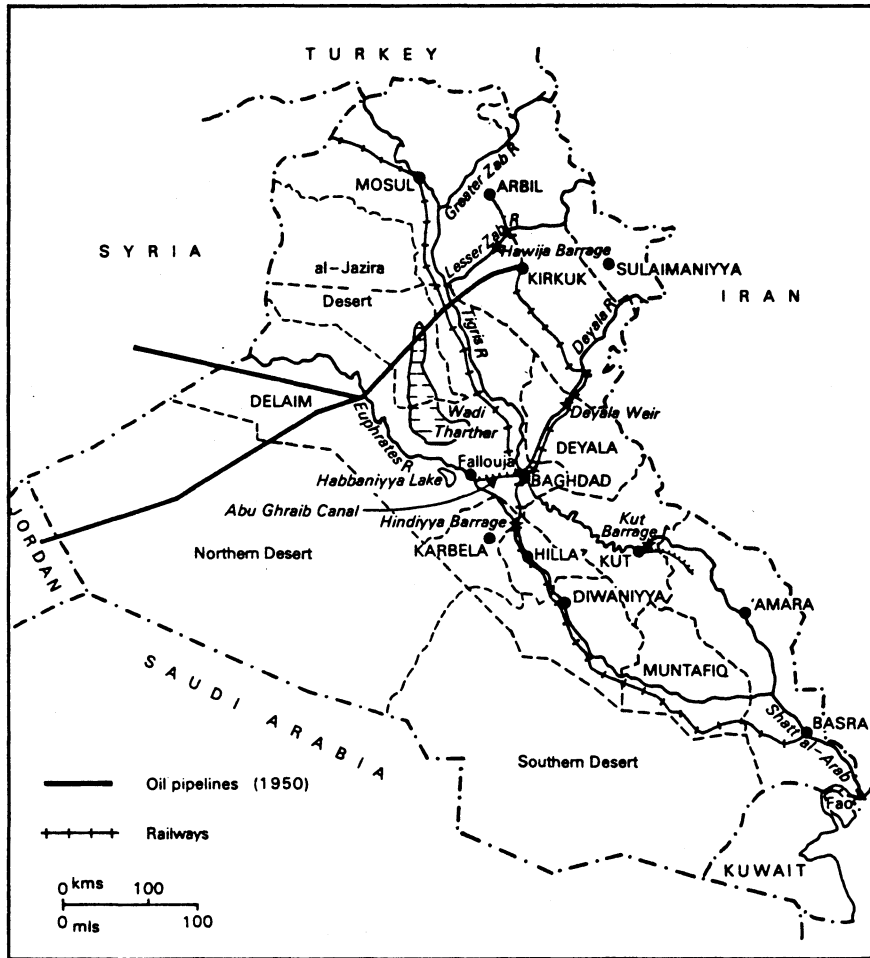
FOOTNOTES

The first reference to any source is given in full; subsequent references are abbreviated; British archival material is notated according to the List of Abbreviations; unless otherwise indicated, the files are at the Public Record Office. American archives are notated according to the number of the microfilm reel on which they appear at the Middle East Centre, Oxford.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACR	American Consular Reports
Air	Air Ministry Files, PRO
ANA	American National Archives
BMEO	British Middle East Office
BOD	British Oil Development Company
BPC	Basra Petroleum Company
BT	Board of Trade Files, PRO
CAB	Cabinet Papers, PRO
CO	Colonial Office Files, PRO
<i>DGFP</i>	Documents of German Foreign Policy
DOT	Department of Overseas Trade
ECGD	Export Credits Guarantee Department
FEA	Foreign Economic Administration
FO	Foreign Office (files at PRO)
<i>FRUS</i>	Foreign Relations of the United States
FY	Financial Year
G	Top Secret Papers at PRO
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
IPC	Iraq Petroleum Company
KOC	Khanaquin Oil Company
LAB	Labour Ministry Files, PRO
MESC	Middle East Supply Centre
MEW	Ministry of Economic Warfare
MPC	Mosul Petroleum Company
PRO	Public Record Office
T	Treasury Files, PRO
UKCC	United Kingdom Commercial Corporation

MAP OF IRAQ



PREFACE

This book is an economic history of Iraq from October 1932, when it was admitted to the League of Nations as an independent country, until 1950, when comprehensive economic planning and the wind-fall of oil revenues began.

In researching this study, considerable use was made of the British documents in the Public Record Office and, to a lesser extent, the American Consular Reports from Iraq. Both these sources have been neglected in most of the work done to date on Iraq's economic history. In addition, the research also drew heavily on official Iraqi publications of the 1930s and 1940s (economic laws, statistical abstracts, and annual reports of various economic and financial institutions). Lastly, a very wide range of secondary sources (in English, Arabic, Hebrew and French) was consulted.

Although the writer did not have access to Iraqi archives, it should be emphasized that very few of the primary documents such archives contain deal with the subject of economic policy; most are files of the police or the Ministry of the Interior, and deal primarily (as such files do) with internal politics. But even copies of some of these appear in the Public Record Office.

A further relevant point regarding the sources consulted concerns the quality of their statistics, which in many instances suffer serious inaccuracies and discrepancies. Moreover, many statistics do not exist at all. (For example, calculations of national income were not made until the 1950s.) Despite this obstacle, however, repeated checking and comparing of such statistics as do exist convinced the writer that they adequately indicate the general trend of development in each sector. No figures of the late 1950s or the 1960s were used unless it was thought they accurately reflected the situation in the period under study.

This book is based on a D.Phil. thesis submitted to Oxford University in 1980. Special thanks are due to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Roger Owen, and to Mr. Albert Hourani, for their advice, comments and encouragement. I would also like to thank Connie Wilsack for her help in editing the book, Louise van Heyningen for her technical assistance, and my wife, Taffy, for her tremendous support throughout this work.

J.S.

INTRODUCTION

This study cannot properly be entitled 'Iraq's Economic Policy' because, due to the strong British influence on its governments, Iraq did not have the power to decide its own policy in a free and unrestricted manner. At the same time, it would be equally incorrect to say that economic policy in Iraq was purely British-determined since Iraq was, at least formally, an independent state in the period under study. The neutral term 'Economic Policy in Iraq' has therefore been chosen as the title least likely to distort the subject.

The period 1932–50 was chosen for a number of reasons. In 1932 the British mandate over Iraq was terminated and Iraq officially became independent, while 1950 marks a turning point in Iraq's economic history because after that year the oil boom began, and, with it, a form of comprehensive economic planning. The eighteen-year period between those two dates therefore constitutes a special stage in Iraq's economic history, encompassing the early years of statehood up to the stage of oil prosperity and comprehensive economic planning. It thus represents an interesting subject for the disciplines of economic history and political economy.

Politics and economics were closely related in Iraq during the period under study, and each reacted on the other. One cannot speak of a particular monetary policy, fiscal policy or even development policy. Economic decisions were taken for political reasons or because of economic need, or a combination thereof. In each chapter the study will try to pinpoint the factors which led to the formulation and implementation or abandonment of a certain policy. For example, in the agricultural sector the position of the sheikhs *vis à vis* the government and the British was an important consideration co-existing with the desire to improve Iraq's agricultural conditions; and in the foreign trade sector, British interests were a dominant factor in adopting policies which were sometimes even to Iraq's detriment.

In studying the economy of Iraq, one must remember that in this period Iraq was a quasi-independent or semi-colonial state, and shared many of the characteristics of other states having similar status at that time. Thus, it had many of the features of an 'under-

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developed' economy – a predominantly agricultural population, dependence on a few primary commodities, and so forth. Furthermore, the structure of its finances, the relationship between its landlords and politicians, the British–Japanese competition for its markets in the 1930s, its connection with the sterling area, its industrialization process and the nature of its oil concessions – all make Iraq resemble many other non-European countries during this period. (For example, the problems of concentration of land holdings, British–Japanese competition, and the link with the sterling area were all part of Egypt's economic history as well during the same period.) Anglo-American competition, another feature of that period, was to be found throughout the Middle East in the second half of the 1940s, as well as in other parts of the world.

The economy of Iraq also had certain distinctive features, of course. The potential of its oil reserves was becoming increasingly evident and its agriculture, unlike Egypt's, had tremendous possibilities in that there were virtually no obvious constraints on the expansion of the cultivable area. These advantages, together with the abundance of water and dearth of population, made Iraq very different from many other developing countries.

Iraq of the 1930s and 1940s is also an interesting case study in neo-colonialism. Having secured its own position and interests there during the mandate period, Britain proceeded to a policy aimed at maintaining and enhancing its gains without the need for either military occupation or a mandate. This policy was lucidly described by Sir John Glubb as 'control by influence': 'this is an art in itself, quite different from Colonial administration.'¹ Once again, Iraq was but one of many countries within the British sphere of influence where this form of indirect control prevailed.² In Iraq's case, this new 'art' largely depended on the presence of British officials serving as 'advisers' to the Iraqi government and on the continuation of political alliances between the British and certain groups of Iraqis (e.g. politicians like Nuri as-Said on the one hand and tribal leaders on the other). By such means, and as long as British interests were not infringed upon, Britain did not have to resort to direct intervention in Iraqi affairs. (The events of 1941, as will be shown later, were exceptional in this respect.)

The Iraqi political élite – as in most other ex-colonial countries, a group of a hundred or so eminent personages – were for their part well aware that their being in power depended greatly on their alliance with and support for the British. Most of this élite came from the same social background, and had once been Sharifian³ officers. They shared many experiences and knew each other well,

INTRODUCTION

and some were even closely related – although this of course did not prevent strong and continuous competition among them.⁴

While it can accurately be said that the government controlled Parliament and there was no real democracy in Iraq, the government was nevertheless not without constraints upon its activities. Because of the strong competition among politicians, it was highly sensitive to criticism in Parliament or the press. Any failure on the political or economic front rendered it vulnerable, and this point should be borne in mind throughout the study.

Before proceeding to the main body of the study, a brief review of some of Iraq's basic demographic features will provide useful general background information to the more detailed reviews of the various sectors of the economy given in the relevant chapters.

During the period under study, Iraq was administratively subdivided into fourteen *liwas*, covering an area of 235,733 square kilometres (equivalent to 94 million *mesharas*), in addition to its three desert areas (known as the North Desert, the South Desert and the al-Jazirah Desert) which together comprised an area of 208,709 square kilometres – the total area of the country therefore being 444,442 square kilometres.⁵

Prior to 1947, when the first official census of Iraq's population was taken, a number of estimates were published by the Census Department (established in early 1926) and in various economic and agricultural surveys. In both 1930 and 1932 the population was put at about 2.83 million;⁶ in 1935, 3.35 million;⁷ in 1944, 4.25 million;⁸ and in 1947, 4.82 million.⁹ A study by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1959 concluded that the 1947 census underestimated the population, and a more correct figure would be 5.28 million.¹⁰

The annual rate of population increase was estimated at 1.7% between 1905 and 1919, 1.5% between 1919 and 1935, and 2.4% between 1935 and 1947. As one commentator has written, 'It is therefore clear that it was only during the period since 1935 that Iraq's population began to grow at a rate markedly higher than at any other time from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards ...'¹¹

Most of Iraq's population was rural. In 1930 only 25% was urban, while 68% was rural and 7% nomadic. By 1947, 37% were classified as urban, as against 59% rural and 5% nomadic.¹² The increase in urbanization during the period 1930–47, which was in no small measure due to a mass exodus from distressed rural areas to the cities, had an important impact on the economy, as will be discussed in the chapter on agriculture.

ECONOMIC POLICY IN IRAQ

According to the 1947 census, the economically active population (49.5% of the total) consisted of 22.5% male-active and 27% female-active. The data on the occupations of this economically active population are, however, inaccurate and ambiguous. Because the term 'occupation' was confused with 'industrial employment', what the 1947 census shows is in fact the number of workers employed in various industries. Moreover, the figures underestimate the proportion of working women (mainly in agriculture). However, based on the census and Hasan's article, one can say that in 1947 some 57–60% of the total active population were working in the agricultural sector.¹³ A further 30–35% were engaged in commerce, public and domestic services, transport, and other administrative and professional services. The smallest sector was industry: only some 5–7% of the active population were employed in manufacturing industries, oil and handicrafts.¹⁴

Illiteracy was very widespread, only 8.5% being literate in 1947. Similarly, health conditions were very poor; even by as late as 1950 there were only 5,000 hospital beds, and an average of two doctors for every 10,000 people.¹⁵

The social and economic structure briefly reviewed above exhibits many of the characteristics of a developing country. This impression is further sustained by the fact that Iraq had a very young population (about half being under the age of twenty) and a very low average annual per capita income (\$48 in 1939 and \$85 in 1949, as against \$100 for Syria and \$125 for Lebanon in the latter year).¹⁶

When Iraq became independent on 3 October 1932, the managers of its economy inherited an undeveloped country with extremely low living standards. Though there had been important achievements during the mandate period preceding independence, mainly in the spheres of infrastructure and health, many of the shortcomings of the 1930s and 1940s also had their roots in those years of British occupation: a legacy of financial burdens, an inequitable land policy, and unfavourable trade agreements and oil concessions.

This study seeks to understand Iraq's economic history during the first eighteen years of its independence by examining policy in each sector of the economy and analysing the factors which caused Iraq, with its glorious past and impressive potential, to end the first half of the twentieth century with the majority of its people still living in poverty.

The first chapter examines British interests in Iraq, which played so crucial a role in shaping economic policy there. The second chapter concentrates on the Iraqi side of the equation, examining government attitudes towards economic policy and the mechanisms

INTRODUCTION

for its implementation. The third chapter looks at Iraq's finances: its budgets, its tax system and aspects of its financial policy. The fourth chapter discusses various facets of agricultural policy by exploring the triangular relationship among the Iraqi government, the British government and the landlords. The fifth chapter analyses foreign trade policy by examining the trade structure and various factors affecting commercial policy. The sixth and last chapter reviews the most important developments in Iraq's industry, oil and labour policies.

NOTES

1. Memorandum by J.B. Glubb, Officer Commander of the Arab Legion 1943. FO 371/34975, E 5925/2551/65.
2. For a general discussion of colonial development policy see: Stephen Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy 1914–1940* (London, 1984).
3. 'Sharifian' refers to those who were associated with the Sharif of Mecca's revolt in the Hejaz against Ottoman rule.
4. See David Pool, 'From Elite to Class: The Transformation of Iraqi Political Leadership' in Abbas Kelidar, *The Integration of Modern Iraq* (London, 1979), pp.64–75. See also Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, 1978), pp.319–61.
5. Government of Iraq, Principal Bureau of Statistics, *Report on the Agricultural and Livestock Census of Iraq 1952–1953* (Baghdad, 1954), vol. i, p.15.
6. Ernest Dowson, *An Inquiry into Land Tenure and Related Questions* (Letchworth, 1931), p.12; *The Statesman's Year-Book 1935* (London, 1935), p.1033.
7. *The Iraq Directory 1936* (Baghdad, 1936), pp.481–506.
8. Statement of Director General of Census, FO 371/45338, E 2084/2084/93.
9. Government of Iraq, Directorate General of Census, *Census of Iraq 1947*, 3 parts (Baghdad, 1954), p. h.
10. Food and Agriculture Organization, Mediterranean Development Project, *Iraq, Country Report* (Rome, 1959), appendix ii, pp.1–2.
11. Mohammad Salman Hasan, 'Growth and Structure of Iraq's Population', *Bulletin of the Oxford University Institute of Statistics* xx (1958), p.340.
12. FAO, *Iraq*, p.7.
13. A similar percentage was suggested by Hashim Jawad, *The Social Structure of Iraq* (Baghdad, 1945), p.18.
14. *1947 Census*, Hasan, op. cit., p.348.
15. FAO, *Iraq*, p.9.
16. United Nations, *Final Report of the United Nations Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East* (UN 1949), part i, p.43.

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