

**Creation and Collapse:  
The British Indian Empire in Mesopotamia Before and After World War I**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores British India and the Government of India's involvement in Mesopotamia [modern-day Iraq] before, during, and after World War I. By bringing these regions together, this study challenges prior assumptions that India and the Middle East exist in entirely distinct historic spheres. Instead I show that the two regions share close, interrelated histories that link both the British Empire and the changing colonial standards. Specifically, the argument here is that even though the Government of India developed multifaceted ties to Mesopotamia before and during World War I, several factors contributed to major changes in the region's dynamics. Wartime realities, shifting geopolitical standards, political complications, and the Revolt of 1920 formally ended the Government of India's involvement in Mesopotamia, forever changing the British Empire's role in Mesopotamia.

*Keywords: British Empire, Government of India, Mesopotamia, sub-imperial, World War I*

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## Introduction



*Edward Stanford Ltd. Library of Congress*<sup>1</sup>

From 1921 to 1932 the British Empire administered its Mesopotamian mandate [modern-day Iraq] from the air. Employing the British Royal Air Force, the British government punished tax evasion and minor tribal transgressions with aggressive bombing campaigns under the pretense of maintaining stability and restoring civilization to a depressed region.<sup>2</sup> As the Royal Air Force marketed their strategies as humanitarian, the bombs “infallibly achieve[d] the desire result” as they killed scores of innocent civilians and destroyed homes, towns, food, and senses of safety.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “A map of the countries between Constantinople and Calcutta : including Turkey in Asia, Persia, Afghanistan and Turkestan.” 1912. Edward Stanford Ltd.

<sup>2</sup> James S. Corum, “The Myth of Air Control: Reassessing the History,” *Aerospace Power Journal* (Winter 2000): 68. Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/6368/174c31d4249aec8f4bd9320c72bc80b21e70.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Deputy Director of Operations, memo on “Forms of Frightfulness,” 1922 as cited in Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 246.

The Air Force's devastating power, combined with its easy deployment to distant regions at minimal cost, allowed the British to create an omniscient state in Mesopotamia, finally achieving a level of control that had evaded the British for years.<sup>4</sup> This development in Mesopotamia reflects a profound change in Mesopotamia's administration. Until 1921 relations with Mesopotamia fell under the auspices of the Government of India. As a result of the changing dynamics within the British Empire and the geopolitical norms, however, the British government moved Mesopotamia's administration to British Colonial Office, creating the circumstances for the Royal Air Force to begin its bombing campaigns.

Between 1600 to 1947, Great Britain and the British Empire played a powerful role in shaping Indian history. From 1600 to 1857 the East India Company, backed by an exclusive charter from the British government, defined British involvement in India and laid the foundations for Indian imperialism in Mesopotamia through extensive trade relations and political organization. In 1857 an uprising against the East India Company's rule fundamentally shook the East India Company's authority in India. As a result, the British government revoked the company's charter and added India to Britain's formal colonial network. In doing so, the British government introduced a key new actor to the region: the Government of India. As the government in charge of directing India, the Government of India headed the political structure in India from 1857 to 1947 when India gained independence. Despite its role as a subservient power within the entire British Empire, the Government of India, building upon the East India Company's foundations, continued to foster ties with Mesopotamia. Thus assuming Mesopotamia and India shared no history not only conceals important trends within both

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<sup>4</sup> Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 248.

countries but also buries an important yet overlooked element within the British Empire. India's subservient colonial role did not encompass India's entire history within the British Empire.

Instead, India's ties with Mesopotamia helped build India into an empire in its own right.

In 1914, amidst this growing relationship between India and Mesopotamia, the world went to war. In a battle of empires, the British India Empire played its part defining the war. As formally part of the British Empire, Britain's war declaration bound India to fight. Unlike other parts of the British Empire, however, British India, also known as the British Raj at this point, operated in a distinct space in the war. Like every other colony within the Empire, India sent troops to fight on the Western front. Unlike every other colony within the Empire, the Government of India directed the Mesopotamian campaign against the Ottoman Empire. Supplying the strategy, the troops, and the supplies, the Government of India expanded its quasi-empire status in its quasi-colony through military efforts. For much of the war the British Empire and its allies treated India, led by the Government of India, as an independent entity with the regional authority to administer its own colony. From this wartime reality, Britain, India, and their allies concluded that post-war India and the Government of India would continue their long-standing relationship with India assuming official control over Mesopotamia.

The post-war reality resulted in an entirely different situation. Even though during the war the British Government treated the Government of India as its own actor, when the time came to allocate mandates to governments as part of the Treaty of Versailles, the Government of India resumed its subordinate place within the Empire and did not receive Mesopotamia's mandate. As British policies in other parts of the Empire indicate, it is a false assumption to conclude that India did not receive Mesopotamia's mandate because of India's colonial status. After the war, South Africa received Namibia's mandate. Although India and South Africa's

statuses and autonomy in the Empire differed, this power transfer demonstrates other reasons drove India's decline in Mesopotamia. In the years after the war, the decisions the Government of India made and the administrative foundations they laid ultimately sowed unrest and instability in Mesopotamia. In 1920 Mesopotamia experienced a widespread revolt against British rule that fundamentally changed the British Empire's Middle Eastern perspective. As a result, the British Empire formally severed all connections between India and Mesopotamia and its approach to the Middle East. This thesis thus examines the strong relationship between British India and Mesopotamia before and during World War I, and how ultimately factors from and after the war eroded these ties, culminating in the Revolt of 1920. This progression, while incredibly significant for Mesopotamia, irrevocably changed the British Empire's approach to the Middle East and ended India's reign as an imperial power.

### **Historiography**

Actors within the British Empire extensively documented their thoughts and justifications, creating a large secondary source historiography built on strong primary source foundations. Noting British official's proclivity for writing, published memoirs and first-hand accounts from actors contemporary to the Government of India's involvement in Mesopotamia provide perspective crucial to understanding this topic. Arnold T. Wilson's autobiography, *Loyalties: Mesopotamia, Volume I, 1914-1917, a Personal and Historical Record*, offers an excellent lens into the viewpoints from one of the more prominent actors within this saga. As the dominant voice for the Government of India in Mesopotamia, this volume of Wilson's work provides an account of how administration developed in Mesopotamia with Indian auspices. *The Memoirs of Sir Ronald Storrs*, provides a nice bias balance to Wilson because of Storrs' role in the Foreign

and Colonial Offices. While Wilson personified the Government of India, Storrs represented the opposing government offices that often attempted to undercut the Government of India in negotiations. As World War I progressed, the two men and the offices they represented offered diametrically different views about Mesopotamia's future. Gertrude Bell's insights provide another perspective into decision-making at the time. As one of the main actors influencing the Empire's knowledge on the Middle East throughout and before the war, Bell's perspective on the events developing in Mesopotamia provide context for the mentality of the standard Briton within the Empire upper governmental echelons. Elizabeth Burgoyne's *Gertrude Bell: From Her Personal Papers, 1889-1914* makes Bell's insights accessible and easy to follow. Additionally, towards the end of the war, Bell's *Review of the Civil Administration in Mesopotamia* documented the administrative developments within Mesopotamia, making it possible to evaluate how British officials analyzed the Government of India's actions in Mesopotamia. Outside of the British Empire's official government structure, J.T. Parfait's *Mesopotamia*, published in 1917, represents one of the many travel books Britons wrote about the Middle East. Reading his account gives insight into the deep symbolic value the standard Briton placed upon Mesopotamia.

Indian and Mesopotamian participants' memoirs comprise a different, but important memoir category. As the soldiers fighting the battles and the civilians experiencing the waves of change emanating from the British Empire, their stories serve an important role this story. Yet, few sources exist that document these perspectives, indicating a key shortcoming in the primary source historiography. Despite this overall lack, two books focusing on Amar Singh, a Rajput Officer from Jaipur, represent a first step in providing perspective from Indians. *Between Two Worlds: A Rajput Officer in the Indian Army, 1905-1921* and *Reversing the Gaze: Amar Singh's*

*Diary, A Colonial Subject's Narrative of Imperial India* rely on Singh's letters and diaries to provide some insight to how a very limited subsection of the Indian population viewed the British Empire's policies shaping India and Mesopotamia's relationship.

Beyond memoirs and first-hand accounts, the *Times* in London introduces key perspectives. As the dominant newspaper in London, the *Times's* archives provide opinion editorials, news reports, and Parliamentary coverage. This makes it possible to track news stories' development over time and evaluate how the British public viewed events happening within Mesopotamia. While the *Times* reported on these developments, their coverage also influenced the general public and alerted government officials to larger frustrations within the public. Thus, coverage in the *Times* represents a crucial resource in determining what factors eventually eroded India's authority in Mesopotamia.

In addition to the primary sources surrounding this topic, the plethora of secondary research helps explain the rise and fall of India in Mesopotamia. Within the historiography for this paper clear thematic separations exist that either focus on Indian involvement in the Middle East before World War I, the Mesopotamian campaign during World War I, or the foundation of the modern Iraq.

Within the literature focusing on India before World War I there are a variety of authors that provide different geographic focuses. John Blyth's *The Empire of the Raj*, James Onley's *The Arabian of the Frontier of the British Raj*, and John M. Willis' "Making Yemen Indian: Rewriting the Boundaries of Imperial Arabia," argue that India's involvement in the Middle East created spheres of influence, ultimately turning India into an empire within the region. These sources provide key analysis of the political ties India built and the strategies deployed to expand these ties. While useful to understanding how India developed into its own independent body in

the decades before World War I, these works remain limited in their application to Mesopotamia. Rather than center on Mesopotamia as this paper does, Onley and Willis focus on Bahrain and Yemen, respectively. Thus, the lack of specificity towards Mesopotamia requires taking their conclusions with nuance towards local conditions within Mesopotamia.

While also including World War I in the analysis, Stefan Tetzlaff's "The Turn of the Gulf Tide: Empire, Nationalism, and South Asian Labor Migration to Iraq, c. 1900-1935," acts as dominant source on analyzing the economic ties between Mesopotamia and India. While Onley and Blyth also include the trade relations between India and the Middle East that first developed under the East India Company, Tetzlaff provides analysis that extends beyond the East India Company, including the how Government of India's actions and individual merchants created integrated co-dependent markets.

Finally, Priya Satia represents the most recent addition to the historiography on the ties between India and Mesopotamia. Satia's books and articles take the debate on India in the Middle East during World War I beyond the political or military arguments, including social and cultural elements of the involvement. By looking beyond standard assumptions, Satia expands upon the critical role that knowledge played in building the Government of India's authority in Mesopotamia.

The historiography surrounding the Mesopotamian campaign during World War I comprises another literature body for this topic. The World War I historiography presents an overwhelming negative view of the campaign. With titles like *The Bastard War* and *Desert Hell*, literature on this topic highlights the military failures. Sources in this category serve a useful purpose for looking at how India's military and defensive claims to Mesopotamia fell apart as a result of their failures in the campaigns. Prior to the Siege of Kut, however, the British

government saw the Mesopotamian campaign as an overwhelming success. Thus, it becomes necessary to bring in World War I perspectives not inherently slanted towards the negative aspects of the campaign. Nadia Atia's *World War I in Mesopotamia: The British and the Ottomans in Iraq*, Colonel R. Evans' *A Brief Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914-1918*, and John S. Galbraith's "No Man's Child: The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914-1916," help fill this void. By not remaining exclusively in the military elements of the campaign, Briton Cooper Busch's *Britain, India, and the Arabs, 1914-1921* offers a more complete insight into India's involvement in Mesopotamia during the war. As a result, Busch tracks India's role in shaping the development in Mesopotamia during the war and the factors that ultimately spelled its demise.

The final main body of work supporting this topic focuses on the development of the Iraqi state and the surrounding British policy in the transition from Mesopotamia to Iraq. Phillip W. Ireland published the first and foundational work on the subject in 1938. Ireland's *Iraq: A Study in Political Development* relies on interviews with former top officials both within the Government of India and the British government in London and (at the time) newly released documents to provide a compelling analysis of Iraq's political development. With analyzing political development, however, time provides necessary perspective and greater insights, as with the case for Peter Sluglett's *Britain in Iraq 1914-1921*, published in 1976. Sluglett builds upon Ireland's legacy, but with a methodology that employs greater nuance towards the various actors at the time and relies on a larger body of accessible archival materials. Further, when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003 the increased interest in Iraq's early history resulted in new literature with new approaches such as Priya Satia's "Developing Iraq: Britain, India and the Redemption of Empire and Technology in the First World War" and a collection of articles Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian published within *The Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921*.

Overall, writing on British India's involvement in Mesopotamia requires sewing together a range of historiographic information, an experience consistent with other historians who attempt to connect these regions across history. In writing his book on the development of the British Raj, Onley summed up the challenge as, "Most historians of the Indian Empire consider India and Arabia in isolation of each other."<sup>5</sup> As Onley argues, this gap robs India of the recognition it deserves for its involvement in the Middle East, as well as falsely continues the narrative of a Middle East dominated by the likes of T.E. Lawrence during World War I. Thus, bringing together the various historiographies to track the rise and fall of India's involvement in Mesopotamia builds a more nuanced perspective.

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<sup>5</sup> James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 217.

## **Building the Government of India's Authority in Mesopotamia**

### *Introduction*

Unlike every other colony within the British Empire, the East India Company built the early colonial foundations in India. After first receiving a royal charter granting a monopoly on Indian trade in 1600, the East India Company spent the following centuries building both a substantial fortune and an unofficial sovereign state, backed with its own private mercenary army. The East India Company's private company status meant that the British government lacked any official jurisdiction over Indian affairs. Consequentially, when the Government of India assumed control of India from the East India Company following the 1857 Uprising, the British Empire added an independently-functioning colony to its colonial crown. Rather than overhaul the existing political system inherited from the East India Company, the British Empire cultivated this independence, creating a separate India Office outside of the Colonial Office to oversee India's affairs. Within this space, the Government of India assumed and maintained India's sphere of influence the East India Company developed beyond the reach of London.

As a region within India's sphere of influence, the Government of India used the East India Company's foundations to develop substantial ties to Mesopotamia in the decades between 1857 and 1914. Owing to these substantial ties, upon the eve of World War I, British government officials perceived the Government of India to be the natural and logical choice to head the Mesopotamian campaign against the Ottoman Empire and ultimately shape Mesopotamia's future. Despite India's colonial status, in the decades leading up to and the time during the war, the Government of India's independence in foreign affairs resulted in significant economic, political and administrative, military, and sub-colonial ties to the region that justified its assumed authority within the region after the war.

### *Economic*

Beginning with the East India Company, the economic and commercial interests laid the foundations for strong connections between Mesopotamia and India. Even though small-scale trading occurred from early in the 1600s when the East India Company first received its charter for exclusive trade rights in India, it was not until the early 1800s that the trade had grown to a level that justified more official action. As part of its quasi-legitimate state, in 1807 the East India Company established the first Residency Post in Baghdad, naming Claudius James Rich to be the inaugural resident.<sup>6</sup> From there, Rich served as the economic liaison between Mesopotamia and India, encouraging economic transactions and encouraging greater trade for the company. To best facilitate this expanding trade, until the 1820s the East India Company regularly employed Indian merchants in the Gulf, building interpersonal economic relationships between Indians and Mesopotamians.<sup>7</sup> After the 1820s, even though East India Company started switching to Muslim merchants from the Gulf region, the commercial ties between Indian merchants continued.

From this foundation, when the British government assumed control of India from East India Company in 1857, the new Government of India continued to facilitate greater economic ties to Mesopotamia. In 1862 the British India Steam Navigation Company opened a regular shipping path between Basrah and Bombay and soon expanded to other Gulf ports. After expanding this trade route, the Government of India “actively encourage[d]” increased trade between India and Mesopotamia, hoping to capitalize on the large economic availability with

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<sup>6</sup> Macintosh, Jane, *Ancient Mesopotamia: New Perspectives*, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, 218.

Basrah in Mesopotamia.<sup>8</sup> Within this active encouragement, the Government of India sought to strengthen ties between India and Mesopotamia by helping channel millions of rupees (known as the Oudh Bequest) from Oudh to holy sites in Mesopotamia.<sup>9</sup> This developed goodwill towards all Indians traveling within Mesopotamia and helped aid easier Shia pilgrimage to Najaf and Karbala, creating cultural ties grounded in economic transactions.

As the British government created projections for the war, the economic and commercial ties between India and Mesopotamia helped lay the foundations for Middle Eastern decisions. To examine British policies during the war, the British government convened the first wartime committee, the de Bunsen Committee, and tasked the committee with providing a policy roadmap for the Ottoman Empire territories in the post-war period. The de Bunsen Committee report concluded that British interests in the Ottoman territories centered on protecting India and securing the commercial ties.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, the de Bunsen Committee noted, “British industrial enterprise in Asiatic Turkey and the interests created by it are practically concentrated in the region included in the vilayets of Basra, Bagdad, and Mosul [the *vilayets*, or provinces, that constituted Mesopotamia].”<sup>11</sup> As a result, the committee encouraged that “commercial and strategic considerations therefore combine to make the Committee regard the vilayets of Basra, Bagdad, and the greater part of Mosul as the area of the *greatest interest* to Great Britain in the event of a partition of Turkey...”<sup>12</sup> Given the region’s immense significance to the larger British

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Tetzlaff, Stefan. “The Turn of the Gulf Tide: Empire, Nationalism, and South Asian Labor Migration to Iraq, c. 1900-1935”. *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 79, Labor Migration to the Middle East (Spring 2011): 9; Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 77.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart A. Cohen, *British Policy in Mesopotamia, 1903-1914* (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing UK Ltd), 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> “de Bunsen Committee Report” from J.C. Hurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics: A Documentary Record 1915-1945 vol. II* (London, 1979), section 27.

<sup>12</sup> “de Bunsen Committee Report”, section 28.

Empire, this Committee indicated that the British Empire should take every measure to strengthen Mesopotamia. Owing to Mesopotamia's existing ties to India and the highlighted commercial interests, strengthening British holdings in the region meant allowing the Government of India to assume control. While ultimately various actors in the British Empire ultimately disregarded most of the de Bunsen committee's recommendations as the war progressed and geopolitical realities shifted, the report reflects the perceived value of the Indian economic interests in Mesopotamia.

While the East India Company and the Government of India secured trade routes and set up formal economic ties through Residency Posts, the commercial ties also included Indians through economic immigration. Since the British viewed Indians as superior to Mesopotamians, British projects eagerly sought to employ Indians to help develop infrastructure in Mesopotamia. In 1904, the Collector in Karachi, reflecting from a large port of departure, reported that "a number of artisans, chiefly it is believed masons, migrate every year to Bussorah or Muscat in the expectation of obtaining employment."<sup>13</sup> To encourage greater economic migration, the Government of India adjusted Indian emigration laws to allow more travel to Mesopotamia in the interests of bolstering already high economic connections.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of mass migrations and economic development, in the decades leading up to the end of World War I the commercial landscape of Mesopotamia increasingly reflected India's dominant economic authority in the region. In 1916, while traveling up the Gulf, Retired Judge of the Bombay High Court, Cursetji Manockji Cursetji, called for another Indian immigration

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<sup>13</sup> Collector (Coll.), Karachi to Commissioner (Comm.), Sind, Feb 8, 1904. Revenue and Agriculture (R&A), Emigration (Emi.), Jul 1904 as cited in Tetzlaff, "The Turn of the Gulf Tide," 10.

<sup>14</sup> Tetzlaff, "The Turn of the Gulf Tide," 15.

expansion to increase trade. Noting the “immense influx into middle-Asia of Indians”, Cursetji concluded that if British officials were serious about expanding Empire into Mesopotamia, then they “must of necessity extend the use of Hindustani, India's lingua franca...”<sup>15</sup> As he wrote this, Cursetji also likely had with him some of the Indian rupees that served as the monetary foundation for Mesopotamia’s trade and commercial interests.<sup>16</sup> Gertrude Bell, reflecting on the administration noted that these systems like using Indian rupees and encouraging “Hindustani” made sense as “the whole of their [Mesopotamia’s] trade is with India and in the hands of Indian merchants.”<sup>17</sup> While many of the economic ties between Mesopotamia and India remained dependent on the government actors, the increasing economic ties between Indians and Mesopotamians proved another key linkage between the two regions.

Reflecting this culmination of economic interdependence, in 1915 Lord Hardinge asserted that the economic ties transcended the geographic distance between India and Mesopotamia, noting, “Commercially, the connection of the province with India is closer than that existing in the case of Burma,” despite Burma being India’s far closer neighbor.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in the years leading up to World War I, the commercial ties between India and Mesopotamia

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<sup>15</sup> Cursetjee C., *The Land of the Date. A Recent Voyage from Bombay to Basra and Back, Fully Descriptive of the Ports and Peoples of the Persian Gulf and the Shat'-el-Arab, Their Conditions, History and Customs, 1916-1917*, as cited in Tetzlaff, “The Turn of the Gulf Tide,” 1.

<sup>16</sup> [unknown author, likely from the India Office], [untitled memorandum], January 11, 1921 cited in Helmut Mejcher, “British Middle East Policy 1917-21: The Inter-Departmental Level,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Oct., 1973), 99, retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260129>.

<sup>17</sup> Gertrude Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration in Mesopotamia* (London, H.M. Stationery Office, 1920), 121. Accessed on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t3319zt4k>.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Hardinge, ‘Note on the future status and administration of Basrah,’ 24 Feb, 1915, p. 5, L/PS/18/B249 as cited in Blyth, *The Empire of the Raj*, 136.

created foundations that justified the Government of India's assumptions about directing the country's future after the war.

### *Administrative and Political*

In addition to the economic links, India's claim to authority within the Middle East stemmed from the Government of India's involvement in pre-war political engagement in Mesopotamia and its oversight of Mesopotamia's administration during the war. Although the India Offices in London formally oversaw India's administrative decisions and political actions, the distance between London and India and time it took for any communications to be sent and received meant it was impossible for London to actually control and direct any of India's foreign affairs and immense foreign relations.<sup>19</sup> Even as telegraph lines linked the countries together, India's decision-making independence had developed so completely that London did not attempt to assert direct control. As a result, reflecting the political independence India had developed, it was the Government of India, not London, that directed most of the foreign diplomacy in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Considering that some scholars count India's sphere of influence as expanding from countries directly bordering India and all the way to the Levant, India set the stage for British involvement in Mesopotamia.<sup>20</sup> Consequentially, India became the British Empire's main face in the region, superseding London's authority in some areas. As the main political actor within the region before the war started and a highly prominent one during the war, India's supremacy in Mesopotamia created assumptions about a natural transition of power.

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<sup>19</sup> Dev Moodley, review of *The Empire of the Raj: India, East Africa, and the Middle East 1858-1947*, by Robert J. Blyth, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 38, no. 2 (2006): 339-41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3879997>.

<sup>20</sup> Willis, John M., "Making Yemen Indian: Rewriting the Boundaries of Imperial Arabia," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Feb., 2009), pp. 23-38; Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, 1-2.

India's broadest example of its political influence in both Mesopotamia and the Middle East is the Residency program. Through a series of agencies located in different states and political entities, the Residency program directed diplomatic relationships between the British Government and local political leaders.<sup>21</sup> Although British residencies in Mesopotamia originated with Claudius James Rich from the East India Company, after 1857 the Residency Program continued to grow and represent the Empire. Reflecting its foundations in the East India Company's system, the Residencies had an inherent bias towards India. In the Persia Gulf region, at the top of which sits Mesopotamia, virtually every political resident first had experience in the India Residency Program before his service in the Gulf.<sup>22</sup> India essentially operated as the training ground for authority within the Middle East. As political officers moved on to different assignments, they forget neither their roots nor their lessons they learned in India. As a result, the political structure development had sufficient Indian elements to match the increasingly Indian economy in Mesopotamia.

The structure of the Residency program's structure also created a very important perception in London about the Government of India's monopoly on Mesopotamian knowledge. In London, despite the deep fascination with Mesopotamia, very little real knowledge on Mesopotamia and the region existed. Even though travelers published many narratives on their Mesopotamian adventure, these reports emphasized exaggerated storytelling, resulting in neither accurate nor scientific reports. In one instance, Lord Hogarth, the director of the Arab Bureaus in Egypt during World War I, criticized a tourist's recount of her travels in Arabia because it involved too many facts and not enough of an "enthralling story of their daily contact with the

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<sup>21</sup> Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

incongruous Eastern society in which...they were adventuring themselves.”<sup>23</sup> In London, the lack of knowledge ultimately proved detrimental when at the start of World War I the War Office did not even have maps of the region.<sup>24</sup>

As a result of a tendency to avoid facts about Mesopotamia, a selective group of individuals claimed almost absolute authority on understanding Mesopotamia. John Lorimer, Sir Rupert Hay, Sir Bernard Burrows, Sir Donald Hawley, Glen Balfour-Paul, Sir Denis Wright, Sir Terence Creagh-Coen, and Charles Chenevix all published key accounts that ultimately shaped how British offices and political agents viewed the Middle East and how each determined policy.<sup>25</sup> Much like most of the political officers in the Middle East, each of these men had gained their prominence either in the Government of India or in the Gulf region and given the structure of the Residency program meant they had also served in India.<sup>26</sup> This meant perspective of Indian rule and political culture colored all knowledge generated in the region for the sake of the Empire. Even from a technical skills standpoint, the British Empire deferred to India’s knowledge. During the war military officials summoned Sir George Buchanan, an engineer, to Basra from India because they thought his time in India meant superior knowledge about engineering projects for Mesopotamia.<sup>27</sup>

India’s political knowledge about Mesopotamia also helped establish India as the leading actor to construct an administration during the war. In addition to paving roads, India’s administration-building also paved expectations that India would continue its work after the war

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<sup>23</sup> Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Charles Townshend, *Desert Hell: The British Invasion of Mesopotamia* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 194.

concluded. As early as August 1915 when the British captured Basra, the first major city within the Mesopotamian campaign, the Government of India took immediate action to establish an interim administration. Reflecting India's influence in the region, the resulting system mirrored Indian practices. Within a week of occupation, against London's recommendation, Indian Political Officers installed an Indian-style administrative system with Indian-style civil services in Basra.<sup>28</sup> Administrators shortly drew up new civil and crime codes based entirely upon the Indian Civil and Criminal Codes. Arnold T. Wilson, who would later serve as Mesopotamia's Commission, devoted an entire appendix of his memoir to the use of India stamps in Mesopotamia within months of occupation.<sup>29</sup>

Even Percy Cox, the Chief Political Officers in Mesopotamia, who said "the [Mesopotamian] administration is not in any way based on Indian models," relied upon the Government of India. A few weeks after his denial of Indian influence, Cox reported that he had "submitted to the Indian Office a copy of proposals for a temporary judicial system for the Baghdad Vilayet..."<sup>30</sup> Combined with Cox's desire to use Indian police to "form a nucleus for the training of the indigenous product," the result in Mesopotamia was an Indian system, even as key actors continued to resist the idea.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, the reality matched Gertrude Bell's perception that while there were efforts to make "amendments as might be necessitated by local conditions", the overall result in Mesopotamia "enforce[d] an Indian law."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Priya Satia, "Developing Iraq: Britain, India and the Redemption of Empire and Technology in the First World War," *Past & Present*, No. 197 (Nov., 2007), 247, doi: 10.1093/pastj/gtm008.

<sup>29</sup> Wilson, Arnold T., *Loyalties: Mesopotamia, Volume I, 1914-1917: A Personal and Historical Record* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), 76.

<sup>30</sup> Eastern Committee. *The future of Mesopotamia*. (Note by Sir Percy Cox.)' [2v] (4/6). Accessed 1/27/2018. Retrieved from

[https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023462308.0x000005](https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023462308.0x000005)

<sup>31</sup> Eastern Committee, *The future of Mesopotamia*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 4.; Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration in Mesopotamia*.

Even though London resisted establishing an Indian state in Mesopotamia, other contemporaries at the time viewed India's influence in the administration as a positive outgrowth. Wilson, reflecting on Indian administrative assistance noted that British efforts in Mesopotamia were "well-served" by Indian civil service officials with expertise in postal and telegram services.<sup>33</sup> Thus, not only had India established itself within the administration of the region, but had done so successfully. For Gertrude Bell the direct relationship with India contributed to a successful British occupation in Mesopotamia, making it possible for Britain to fulfill its pre-war aspirations for the region. Specifically, Bell argued in July, 1917:

"Mesopotamian administration benefited very greatly from being placed in direct connection with the India Office, where its needs and difficulties were the subject of careful attention. Sound advice and judicious support and help, as far as the India Office could supply them, were never lacking during the difficult years before the civil government came into being."<sup>34</sup>

Granted, the current historiography concludes Gertrude Bell originally went to Mesopotamia on Indian "auspices", skewing the objectiveness of her claims. Regardless of her agency, however, Britain treated Bell as a respected voice on Mesopotamia. Thus, even if her bias led towards one interest, her voice's weight meant her opinion mattered in shaping perceptions about how Mesopotamia's future should progress.<sup>35</sup>

Together, the extent of Indian-style systems and their perceived success, the Government of India already had the groundwork in place to continue their authority within the region. As the military campaign progressed, India considered itself prepared to serve as the permanent British government agent in Mesopotamia.

### *Military*

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<sup>33</sup> Wilson, *Loyalties*, 77.

<sup>34</sup> Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration in Mesopotamia*, 74.

<sup>35</sup> Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 51.

Even though Mesopotamia's military value would increasingly center on protecting oil, before the war started, the British government justified military action in Mesopotamia on the grounds of protecting India. As early as the East Indian Company's charter, the Middle East served as a strategically important role as part of the pathway to India. Even after 1857, the Middle East existed as a protective boundary of what would be one of the Empire's most important colonies. In fact, the term, the "Middle East" was first coined in 1902 and defined as "those regions of Asia...bound up with the problems of Indian...defense."<sup>36</sup> This quote, written by an outsider of the British Empire, American Captain Mahan, but published in the *British National Review*, demonstrate that the British Empire literally defined the Middle East according to India's defense. Within this context of Mesopotamia as India's frontier, World War I proved significant because it marked the beginning of extensive imperial reach into the heart of the Middle East, directly threatening India. Given that India defined Mesopotamia's geographical identity, separating Mesopotamia and India seemed difficult because even though a wide distance separated the areas, in the minds of British imperialists, the physical space failed to exist. As a result, the defense of the two regions became inseparable, making World War I a stage to showcase these ties.

Once the war started, Mesopotamia's role as India's protective frontier played into a British desire to engage in the Middle Eastern theater. Lord Hardinge summarizes the reasons for going to war in Mesopotamia as "strategic, commercial, political, and religious alike" but classified these interests as "mainly Indian."<sup>37</sup> While Hardinge saw the concerns as mainly

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<sup>36</sup> Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 14.

<sup>37</sup> Lord Hardinge, "Note on Future Status of Basrah," February 24, 1915 as cited in Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 98, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/detail.action?docID=291507#>.

Indian, the war's ripple effects did not remain constrained to India. Adding to the importance of Mesopotamian and Indian security, the De Bunsen Committee emphasized that failure to reinforce Mesopotamia would risk "a blow to our prestige, which might entail the loss of our eastern possessions."<sup>38</sup> Together, the wartime rhetoric surrounding Mesopotamia closely linked Mesopotamia's status to direct danger to beloved India.

Further, concerns over India's security during a potential war forced Britain to evaluate the potential combatants in the war as they related to India. Assumptions about German and Ottoman interest in gaining access and control over India heightened alarm about India's protection, changing the wartime calculations. The de Bunsen Committee used the concern surrounding Germany's desire to link together Berlin and India as justification to go to war. The Committee concluded that taking early steps in a potential war to control Mesopotamia would benefit the British long-term because "It would put an end, once for all, to the German dream of a high road to India from Berlin."<sup>39</sup> The de Bunsen Committee also argued for control over Mesopotamia in order to "settle the fate of German Concessions without more ado."<sup>40</sup> Given Germany's pre-war involvement in Egypt, often against British interests, the British entered the war with the explicit concern about protecting India from this potential challenger.

Similarly, the Ottoman Empire represented a unique threat to India because of its religious significance. Reflecting on her travels Gertrude Bell classified the area from the Mediterranean to the Indian frontier as the "devil's cauldron," which also happens to be the

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<sup>38</sup> "de Bunsen Committee Report," Hurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics*, 35.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

Ottoman Empire.<sup>41</sup> Bell's comment accurately reflects the British sentiment towards the Ottoman Empire. In the same report from before, the de Bunsen Committee noted that expanding the British goals to include Mesopotamia would change the "character of the war" away from a fight solely with the "German-led Government at Constantinople" to one that included the Turkish people as well.<sup>42</sup> As the last Islamic Empire, involving the Ottoman Empire in this way had dangerous implications for India because British officials feared that "Indian Moslem feeling would be painfully and possible dangerously affected."<sup>43</sup> With the British gearing up to go to war and putting themselves in a vulnerable position, they could not afford to spare resources to address instability in India. Together, the Ottoman Empire represented a difficult challenge of potentially undermining India even as the British acted to gain territory in order to strengthen and protect India.

The intense desire to develop Mesopotamia as a buffer state to protect India ultimately resulted in India serving as the military actors in Mesopotamia. Unlike other theaters in the war, from Lord Hardinge's and Sir Beauchamp Duff's strategic decisions to the vast supplies, finances, and personnel including logistics teams, medical personnel, and civilian administrators, India ran the Mesopotamian campaign.<sup>44</sup> Using the logistical transportation simplicity the Persian Gulf offered, the Government of India deployed Indian soldiers to the Persian Gulf even before the war against the Ottoman Empire officially started.

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Burgoyne, *Gertrude Bell: From Her Personal Papers, 1914-1926* (London: Ernst Benn, 1961), as cited in Aaron S. Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World: The Cairo Conference of 1921* (Johns Hopkins Press: Baltimore and London, 1970), 77.

<sup>42</sup> "de Bunsen Committee Report," Hurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> David E. McNabb, *Oil and the Creation of Iraq: Policy Failures and the 1914-1918 War in Mesopotamia* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 102.

As a result, when the British declared war on November 5, 500 members of the 16<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade quickly landed at Fao, commencing British military involvement in the Middle East.<sup>45</sup> In total, India sent 588,717 Indian soldiers to serve in the Mesopotamian theater of war and supplied 113,000 men in the Labour Corps and the Inland Water Transport Division.<sup>46</sup> Faced with shallow rivers, unpaved roads, and nonexistent air capabilities, the British relied on shipments of Indian water crafts suited to Mesopotamia's transportation needs, resulting in "the most heterogeneous collection of scrap-iron and remnants of river traffic..."<sup>47</sup> While the Division sounds scrappy, the Indian ships played a critical role in the war effort, rounding out India's wartime personnel contributions.

In addition to wartime personnel and vast numbers of watercraft, the Government of India also invested significant wartime capital in the region. At the start of the war the Government of India gifted London £100 million, followed with annual installments ranging from £20 to £30 million.<sup>48</sup> In total, one Indian historian writing in 1919 indicated the Government of India's financial contribution reached £305,000,000 by the end of the war.<sup>49</sup> In part, this money went to supporting Britain's war debts. The overwhelming majority, however, went to pay for military expenditures and infrastructure. The Government of India's armies built

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<sup>45</sup> Townshend, *Desert Hell*, 4-5.

<sup>46</sup> New York Times Current History, *The European War, Volume 18: January-February-March, 1919* (New York: New York Times Company, 1919), 242. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/newyorktimescurr18newyuoft>

<sup>47</sup> Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*, 97.

<sup>48</sup> Nadia Atia, *World War I in Mesopotamia: The British and the Ottomans in Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 4.

<sup>49</sup> Bhargava, M.B.L., *India's Services in the War, Imperial Edition*, (Lucknow: Bishambher Nath Bhargava, and published by the author, 1919), pp. 410, INR 5, cited in Arvind Gupta, "Indian Contribution to the First World War," *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, July–September 2014, 121–133. Accessed [http://www.idsa.in/system/files/jds/jds\\_8\\_3\\_2014\\_ArvindGupta\\_0.pdf](http://www.idsa.in/system/files/jds/jds_8_3_2014_ArvindGupta_0.pdf), 123.

vital wartime infrastructure such as railroads, water transit systems, telegraphic, and telephonic equipment.<sup>50</sup> Although later investigatory committees would reveal the shortcomings of the infrastructure projects, their creation indicated the extent of India's involvement in laying the foundations for a post-war society. This involvement increased the legitimacy of India's claim to the region as the war efforts ultimately turned Mesopotamia "into a de facto Indian colony."<sup>51</sup>

Overall, even though Mesopotamia originally drew British interest because of its buffer state status to protect India, this same interest resulted in India serving as the military force in Mesopotamia. This symbiotic relationship between the two regions during the war reinforced the conclusion that the Government of India would assume authority at the end of the war, continuing the work they had accomplished during the war and reaping the benefits of peacetime.

### *Sub-Colonialism*

In addition to wartime material flows creating perceptions of a de facto Indian colony, India also had colonial claims on Mesopotamia that increased ties between the regions. Even though India itself was a colony, prior to and during the war, India viewed Mesopotamia as a place to expand. Before the war, sending Indian troops abroad to the different far reaches of the British Empire to address various civil unrests became so common that it evolved into "Indian sub-imperialism."<sup>52</sup> The conflict in Mesopotamia shifted the conversation from sub-imperial troop deployment to direct settlement for Indians. Much like Britons viewed their African colonies as a place to send citizens, leading up to and during the war, British Indian officials viewed Mesopotamia the same

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<sup>50</sup> Priya Satia, "Developing Iraq", 240.

<sup>51</sup> Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*, 96.

<sup>52</sup> Dewitt C. Ellinwood, *Between Two Worlds: A Rajput Officer in the Indian Army, 1905-1921* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2005), 357

way. Wilson's grand view of Mesopotamia neatly summarizes the views of Mesopotamia in this regard, "I should like to see it announced . . . that Mesopotamia was to be annexed to India as a colony for India and Indians, that the government of India would administer it, and gradually bring under cultivation its vast unpopulated desert plains, peopling them with martial races from the Punjab."<sup>53</sup> The de Bunsen Committee reiterated Wilson's comments, recommending that the region should be exploited "as a granary and an area for Indian colonization."<sup>54</sup>

The aspiration to bring agricultural productivity back to the region and a desire to repaying Indians for their wartime service fueled interest in developing Mesopotamia as an Indian colony. As soon as the British seized Basra, Wilson wrote to London reflecting on the possibility of Mesopotamia supporting up to 25 million settlers.<sup>55</sup> As a future high-level administrator in Mesopotamia, Wilson's vision of Mesopotamia had lasting impacts on how the area would progress. Writing from outside the government complex, British engineer William Willcocks shared Wilson's future visions for Mesopotamia, painting a picture of "labourers from India...will...settle down in millions to reclaim and cultivate these lands potent with future wealth..."<sup>56</sup>

Nor did this vision remain limited to Anglo-Britons as Indian soldiers in the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force also saw the desire to settle Indians in Mesopotamia. When Lord Hardinge came to visit the front in Mesopotamia, Amar Singh, an Indian Officer in the

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<sup>53</sup> A.T. Wilson, "Letter to Col. C.E. Yate, MP," L/PS/10/463, November 28, 1915 as cited in Blyth, *The Empire of the Raj*, 134.

<sup>54</sup> "de Bunsen Committee Report," Hurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics*, 35.

<sup>55</sup> A.T. Wilson, "Letter to Col. C.E. Yate, MP," L/PS/10/463, November 28, 1915 as cited in Blyth, *The Empire of the Raj*, 134.

<sup>56</sup> William Willcocks, *The Restoration of the Ancient Irrigation Works on the Tigris, or, The Recreation of Chaldea* (Cairo, 1903), as cited in Tetzlaff, "The Turn of the Gulf Tide," 11.

Expeditionary Force, assumed the visit related to a colonization and the "...scheme to build a big dam and collect the water of the rivers and flood all the desert and thus bring it under cultivation..."<sup>57</sup> From Singh's perspective, it was "Not a bad scheme." By 1918 Britain's projects through the Irrigation and Agriculture Departments put this scheme into reality, indicating the drive to bolster agricultural output helped drive British planning throughout the war.<sup>58</sup>

A desire to repay Indian soldiers for their wartime contribution represented a second interest in treating Mesopotamia as a future Indian colony. As a colony, India did not choose to go to war. As part of the British Empire, the declaration of war against Germany on August 4, 1914 automatically applied to India, bringing a state of war to the country. While many Indians volunteered to serve in the war, the draft included many others who did not, forcing people to fight in a war they had no power to determine. By using Mesopotamia as a reward for Indian's sacrifices the British felt they could recognize the commitment its subjects dedicated to the Empire while still continuing to maintain India as a colony. Mesopotamia's reward element remained present even when discussing the economic prospects of expanding agriculture and the economic ties previously mentioned. When writing to Neville Chamberlain, Lord Hardinge demonstrated that the land's potential existed beyond agriculture, as he emphasized, "Indian people...look to Mesopotamia as a field for commercial expansion and emigration in return for the blood of their countrymen there shed."<sup>59</sup> Further, in addition to his convictions about the necessity of Indian languages to be the language of Mesopotamia due to the extensive Indian commercial ties, Retired Judge of the Bombay High Court, Cursetji Manockji Cursetji in 1916,

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<sup>57</sup> Ellinwood, *Between Two Worlds*, 431.

<sup>58</sup> Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, 20.

<sup>59</sup> Townshend, *Desert Hell*, 268.

ties Mesopotamia's "value" and "usefulness" to an obligation to "compliment to India for her sacrifices and services in opening out these ancient derelict lands to a new life of happy betterment, progress and prosperity."<sup>60</sup> Amar Singh writing in the Mesopotamian theater, committed the British promise to words in his diary writing that Mesopotamia "is to be given in grants to the Indian soldiers [soldiers] as rewards" for their service, with "the idea...being to found a colony for India and to give them an outlet for colonization."<sup>61</sup>

The reward element of Mesopotamia also gave the British a tool to maintain stability within India during the war. Very early on in the war, the India Office concerned itself with the sensitivities of the millions of Muslim Indians, fearing that religious ties to the Ottoman Empire would hinder Britain's war time efforts against the Turks.<sup>62</sup> As the war continued, so did this fear, especially when military conditions grew worse. Following the Expeditionary Force's failure to recapture Kut, when the military denied Amar Singh leave he speculated it was a result of military officials not wanting soldiers to return to India "probably because it was too soon after the fall of Kut and he did not want fellows to go to India and talk about it."<sup>63</sup> Amar Singh's later comments demonstrate the true extent of British fears over Indian soldiers spreading information on the losses at Kut noting that, "the fall of Kut is a serious blow and I am afraid it will be the cause of trouble amongst the Mahomedans. They will talk amongst themselves and say that the hour of the British is over..."<sup>64</sup> Faced with significant threats to its longevity across multiple theaters, from the British perspective, the Empire could not afford to also lose India in an already demoralizing war. In this context, the British used Mesopotamia as a bargaining tool

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<sup>60</sup> Cursetjee, *The Land of the Date*, as cited in Tetzlaff, "The Turn of the Gulf Tide," 1.

<sup>61</sup> Ellinwood, *Between Two Worlds*, 431.

<sup>62</sup> Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, 30.

<sup>63</sup> Ellinwood, *Between Two Worlds*, 443.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 440.

to stabilize India through rewarding India's contribution to a war that it had no choice in deciding with a colony. Overall, the desire for Indians to feel rewarded and recognized for their efforts served an important role in the war. Reflecting on India's "jewel of the Empire" status, going into a war with concerns about loss of imperial status and holdings, it was crucial that the British maintain the India's stability. Turning Mesopotamia into a colony and making Indians partners in imperialism, offered an option to do this, making India's claims to Mesopotamia stronger.

Last, but not least, the British attached moral justifications to India serving as the colonizing agent in Mesopotamia. Much like the language used to initially support its colonization in India, British Indian officials drew upon morality and man's sacred duty to make the world a better (more British) place. In discussing Indian administration in Mesopotamia, Lord Hogarth grandly concluded, "The British raj is the best form of government, and therefore to fail to impose it wherever possible is to fail in one's duty to mankind." By drawing upon similar language used to subjugate Britain's colonies, Hogarth directly compares future Indian colonization of Mesopotamia to Britain's actions. Through the use of language like Hogarth's, India maintained a moralistic duty that justified expanding their sphere of influence into a stronger, more legitimate hold. While this view of Mesopotamia existed before the war, scholars have noted that World War I was a "trigger for renewed sub-imperial impulses," increasing the demands of territory stemming from India.<sup>65</sup> Thus, looking at the division of Mesopotamia, it would seem India's sub-imperial claims only continued to expand during the war, making the assumption of India's control over the region more legitimate.

### *Conclusion*

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<sup>65</sup> Blyth, *The Empire of the Raj*, 5.

Overall, although India did not border Mesopotamia, geography did not hinder ties between the two places as a series of intertwined and multi-faceted elements justified Robert J. Blyth's categorization of Mesopotamia as part of the Arabian Frontier of the British Raj.<sup>66</sup> India's economic, administrative, defense and sub-imperial ties to the region compensated for the geographic distance and validated why India dreamed of a combined India-Middle East Empire.<sup>67</sup> Pulling these factors together, Lord Chelmsford's comment that he "could not see how Iraq could realistically be 'cut away' from" India, has context.<sup>68</sup> From his perspective, India and Mesopotamia remained so intertwined that separation could not fulfill any interests. Yet, as the negotiations over Mesopotamia developed during and after the war it was clear that even before the mandate over Mesopotamia was decided, India and Mesopotamia could and would be separated, despite their connectivity.

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<sup>66</sup> Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, intro.

<sup>67</sup> Helmut Mejcher, "British Middle East Policy 1917-21: The Inter-Departmental Level," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Oct., 1973), 99.

<sup>68</sup> Townshend, *Desert Hell*, 271.

## Mesopotamia's Economic and Symbolic Value

Understanding the severing of the Government of India's place in Mesopotamia first requires understanding the framework through which actors within the British Empire viewed the region's symbolism and economic position. In the decades leading up the war, Mesopotamia had developed a powerful, magnetic draw for the British that made going to war in the region all the more significant. Even though the Government of India had substantive ties to Mesopotamia, when it came to the symbolic importance of the region, the Government of India shared Mesopotamia with the entire Empire. While trade, defense of India, and colonial aspirations made Mesopotamia strategically important to the British Empire, other elements that elevated Mesopotamia to a new level of importance in the Empire's grand plans. While Gertrude Bell may have called Mesopotamia a "source of political inspiration," Mesopotamia's true inspiration came from material wealth in oil and the region's symbolism which made a victory far greater and more important than raising a flag over a conquered city.<sup>69</sup>

While the Government of India valued Mesopotamia for its trade wealth prior to the war, Mesopotamia's oil field potential soon dwarfed the wealth in trade. In the decades before World War I, Germany's rapid naval build-up represented a significant threat to Britain's naval hegemony. Britain's naval hegemony had allowed the Empire to operate with far-flung colonies, making it the crux to British imperial pride. To maintain this hegemony the British switched its naval ships to oil from coal starting in 1909. In doing so, Britain improved their military prowess, but made their military vulnerable to an unstable supply chain as very few British territories had oil. As a result, Britain looked towards Mesopotamia and its oil fields. Even

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<sup>69</sup> Bell, *Review of Civil Administration in Iraq*, 74.

though Mesopotamia's oil fields did not start producing until 1927, oil's importance and its presence in Mesopotamia drew British interest even before World War I even started.

As a result, the Mesopotamian campaign centered on oil. In his memoir, Colonel R. Evans reflected how oil had changed the focus in Mesopotamia from solely about India's protection to an Empire-wide consideration. Evans writes, "...our interest in the Middle East had come to be considerably augmented. Now, they involved not only the security of India, in part, but also the safe-keeping of an important assets to the strength of the Navy, the...oilfields, pipelines, and refineries."<sup>70</sup> Wilson echoes this sentiment in his memoir writing that even before the British declared war with the Ottoman Empire, the Government of India deployed the Indian Expeditionary Force D to the Gulf region to "protect the oil refineries, tanks, and pipelines" in the likely scenario where the Ottomans entered in the war.<sup>71</sup> Reflecting interest beyond British companies' direct oil infrastructure, from London's perspective the Indian Expeditionary Force D's primary "duty was to protect the oil wells..."<sup>72</sup> As the war progressed, oil's importance only grew. In order to protect oil interests the de Bunsen Committee recommended that the British attempt to expand their control in Mesopotamia all the way north to Mosul, even risking contention with France over territory claims.<sup>73</sup> As the British troops approached Baghdad Sir Maurice Hankey, powerful Secretary of the British War Cabinet, wrote to Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, that controlling Mesopotamia's oil supplies is a "first-class war aim."<sup>74</sup> Towards

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<sup>70</sup> Colonel. R. Evans, *A Brief Outline of the Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914-1918* (London: Sifton Praed & Co, LTD, 1935), 3

<sup>71</sup> Wilson, *Loyalties*, 8.

<sup>72</sup> Wilson, *Loyalties*, 80.

<sup>73</sup> de Bunsen Committee Report," Hurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics*, 37.

<sup>74</sup> Mejcher, *Oil and British Policy towards Mesopotamia*, 385.

the end of the war, the British put the de Bunsen Committee's suggestion into action and moved to occupy Mosul, even after the armistice negotiations with Turkey concluded the war.<sup>75</sup>

The British Empire's ongoing interest in Mesopotamia's oil proved detrimental for the Government of India. Prior to the war India and the India Office did not show the same commitment to the Empire's oil needs as did other actors of the British government. Before the war, the Board of Trade established a committee in the Petroleum Department tasked with evaluating the Empire's oil interests. With representatives from the Foreign Office, the Board of Trade, the Treasury, and the India Office, the committee had broad perspectives from across the British government. Within this committee, when the opportunity arose to purchase 50 percent shares in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, the Government of India and the India office were only "coolly interested."<sup>76</sup> Conversely, other elements of the British government forcefully pushed to purchase the shares to secure oil. Reflecting the British government's keen interest in oil, ultimately the British government bought the shares owned 50 percent in APOC and eagerly advocated for British companies to maintain 50 percent control in any new concession granted in the Persian Gulf.<sup>77</sup> While at the time the APOC focused on Persia, India's lack of interest spoke volumes. This meant that as the war continued, and Mesopotamia's strategic value increased, India's credibility in the region decreased because it did not support the Empire's long-term goals in the area.

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<sup>75</sup> Helmut Mejcher, "Oil and British Policy towards Mesopotamia," *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 8, No. 3 (Oct., 1972), 382.

<sup>76</sup> McNabb, *Oil and the Creation of Iraq*, 81.

<sup>77</sup> Mejcher, "Oil and British Policy towards Mesopotamia, 378.

Not only did oil tie into Britain's long-term military development goals and indicate the Government of India's waning involvement in the region, but the oil issue also contributed to a perception of the British Empire's decline. For Britain energy defined national strength and power. When the world ran on coal Britain's extensive coal resources made it an unparalleled leader in industrial development. As oil started replacing coal as the faster, more efficient, and more powerful energy source, Britain's natural advantage rapidly dwindled, forcing the country to worry about its future energy and industrial status.<sup>78</sup> For Britain to maintain its dominance both as an Empire and as a leading industrial country it needed a constant supply of oil.

The perception of a declining empire also extended beyond oil and energy sources and included Mesopotamia's symbolic purpose of restoring imperial prestige. In the decades before World War I, Britons saw the Empire collapsing.<sup>79</sup> The losses in South Africa against the Boers and the Zulu, the embarrassments in Afghanistan, the failures in Sudan, and the ongoing resistance in Ireland all contributed to a severely bruised perception of British superiority. Compound the challenge, imperialists at home in London saw post-industrial lifestyles as creating weak men unfit to take up the mantle of civilization, leading the Empire desperate to prove strength and power.<sup>80</sup>

Thus as World War I started, Mesopotamia became the place where the British could "sooth nostalgia" for the lost lifestyles in pre-Industrial Britain and reconstruct a "new imperial identity."<sup>81</sup> Given Mesopotamia's grand, historic past, Britons treated Mesopotamia as the saving

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<sup>78</sup> A.J. Barker, *The Bastard War: The Mesopotamian Campaign of 1914-1918* (New York, The Dial Press, 1967), 22.

<sup>79</sup> Josh Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities: Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family, and Empire* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2005), 194.

<sup>80</sup> Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities*, 195.

<sup>81</sup> Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 72.

grace for the British Empire. When authors published on Mesopotamia, they invoked Mesopotamia's great legacy. First-hand narratives on Mesopotamia from the period before the war almost inevitably open by documenting Mesopotamia's list of illustrious leaders like Alexander the Great, Darius, and Hammurabi. In J.T. Parfit's book, *Mesopotamia: The Key to the Future*, the first chapter is appropriately titled, "Its [Mesopotamia's] Ancient Glories." The language Parfit opens with is a true indication of Mesopotamia's place in the British perception, grandly stating, "Mesopotamia and its adjacent plains have been associated with the most important turning-points of history." For the British, Mesopotamia remained "closely connected with the most thrilling epochs of history...and holds the key to the whole world's future."<sup>82</sup> As a result of Mesopotamia's illustrious history as the center of human civilization, there was a perception that the "...British could still civilize, even if they had lost civilization itself" and that the British could redeliver "the dawn" of civilization to a place that had fallen into "dreary desolation" under rule by the oppressive Ottomans.<sup>83</sup>

Since most people in Britain would never have a chance to visit anywhere in Mesopotamia, symbolic representations created a widespread conscious understanding of Mesopotamia. As much as political officers' accounts helped solidify India's monopoly on real knowledge of Mesopotamia, the travelers' literary ambitions and lofty narratives solidified Mesopotamia into "an essentially fictional place..." for the average Anglo-Briton.<sup>84</sup> As part of the Middle East, Mesopotamia captured the hearts and minds of the average Anglo-Briton unlike any other global region. Compared to the confined streets, dreary skies, and strict Victorian norms in London, Mesopotamia, with its yawning deserts and wide skies, was Britain's

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<sup>82</sup> Canon J.T. Parfit, *Mesopotamia: Key to the Future* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1917), 1.

<sup>83</sup> Satia, "Developing Iraq," 224-225; Parfit, *Mesopotamia*, 11.

<sup>84</sup> Satia, *Spies of Arabia*, 61.

antithesis. The vast differences between Mesopotamia and Britain and the resulting fascination with the different led Anglo-Britons to see Mesopotamia as a place that transcended the ordinary and border-lined on the mystical.<sup>85</sup> Mesopotamia became a place that could cast a spell over a person. As a Walter de la Mare poem, concludes “He is crazed with the spell of far Arabia,/ They have stolen his wits away.”<sup>86</sup> Similarly, books on the Middle East found their niche as adventure novels, capturing the intrigue and mystique of the unknown Middle East. As a result, the main narrative about the Middle East centered created a region built on imagination and grandeur, not reality. When Richard Francis Burton published the most popular version of *A Thousand and One Nights* in 1885, it only built upon existing impressions about Mesopotamia existing in a world of magical lamps and genies. As much as Mesopotamia captured the hearts and minds of the British, when war came, the British wanted to capture Mesopotamia for their own.

Combined, Mesopotamia’s mystical element, its large historic role in developing civilization, and its importance to the Empire’s future raised the region’s importance beyond strategic importance. When people later heard about the events of the war in the Middle Eastern theaters, many could only relate to the region through distorted narratives that transformed the region into a land transcending the beauty, importance, and majesty of anywhere else. When military missteps happened, it was not only strategic ground that the British might have lost. As a result of the enormous symbolic significance the average Briton attached to the region, military failures in Mesopotamia proved deeply damaging to British prestige and imperial might.

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<sup>85</sup> Satia, *Spies of Arabia*, 65.

<sup>86</sup> Satia, *Spies of Arabia*, 95.

## Government of India's Division from Mesopotamia

Reflecting on the multitude of ties the Government of India had to Mesopotamia, all the proper foundational relationships existed for a smooth peacetime administration. George Buchanan, a British engineer sent to Basra, seemed justified in asserting that “at the end of the campaign Mesopotamia would become a British possession probably controlled from India.”<sup>87</sup> “Probably” turned into never as the Government of India’s official authority in the region fell apart. Rejecting all arguments that supported recognizing the Government of India’s prerogative, the debate over Mesopotamia’s administration ended with all authority transferred to the newly created Middle East Department within the existing Colonial Office. Given the extent of the ties between the Government of India and Mesopotamia discussed previously, this decision represented a dramatic break from the status quo. The failures at the Siege of Kut, the implications of British government inter-departmental organization, the evolving international geopolitical situation, and the Government of India’s administrative failures can be understood as the four factors that dissolved the political, military, economic, and imperial bonds that tied the Government of India to Mesopotamia.

### *Military Failures at Kut*

Within the framework of protecting Mesopotamia for its value to the Empire, the Government of India’s military failures destroyed perceptions about its ability to serve the Crown’s interest. As previously noted, the Government of India directed much of the war effort in Mesopotamia. Spurred by the campaign’s initial successes, the justification for the Government of India’s prerogative in the area continued. A few months into the campaign, the *Times* ran an article on

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<sup>87</sup> George Buchanan, *The Tragedy of Mesopotamia* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1938), 261 as cited in Priya Satia, “Developing Iraq,” 247.

the Mesopotamian campaign, extolling its successes, “Of all the campaigns now in progress that in Mesopotamia is the only one in which the Allies can claim continual success from the outset, unmarred by a single failure.”<sup>88</sup> Published around the time of the catastrophic losses of life in the Dardanelles, the successes in Mesopotamia provided a much needed positive update on the war. As the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force continued up the river towards Kut, newspapers presented the city of Kut itself as a symbolic victory to shift the Ottoman Empire’s war efforts. At the end of September, 1915, the *Times* heralded, “The news of the victory at Kut-el-Amara will have a great effect on the Turks at Baghdad, many of whom, according to recent letters, would welcome the arrival of the British...”<sup>89</sup>

At the time of the articles’ publication, however, the Government of India was directing its armies towards its own Icarus moment. Bolstered by the rampant successes in the campaign thus far, General Townshend, with Commander Duff’s blessing from Simla, started the advance towards Baghdad, assuming it would be an easy march. Yet, as the Force marched inland to Ctesiphon, the foundations for failure already existed. General Townshend, despite having the Government of India’s full confidence from his prior military heroism in India, commanded troops that he neither trusted nor could communicate with since he lacked command of an Indian language.<sup>90</sup> At Ctesiphon, General Townshend’s poor leadership provided the Ottomans the opportunity to regroup and retaliate.<sup>91</sup> Unfortunately, the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force, a disease-ridden army, lacking desperately-needed reinforcements and faced with low river water

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<sup>88</sup> [No author], “Why is the Persian Gulf Campaign Ignored?” *Times* [London, England] September 22, 1915: 9. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>89</sup> [No author], “The March On Baghdad.” *Times* [London, England] September 30, 1915: 6. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>90</sup> David French, “Review of The Siege of Kut-al-Amara: At War in Mesopotamia 1915-1916, Nikolas Gardner,” *Journal of Military History* Volume 79, Issue 4 (October 2015), 236.

<sup>91</sup> French, “Review of The Siege of Kut-al-Amara,” 236.

levels making resupplying impossible, could not fight back. In an attempt to maintain existing ground, General Townshend ordered a retreat and led his troops to the garrison city in Kut, thus beginning a 147-day siege that would alter the military course in Mesopotamia.

From December 7, 1915 to April 29, 1916, 13,300 British and Indian soldiers remained besieged under appalling conditions including lack of food, freezing conditions, limited supplies, and almost no medical treatment. By the end of January, the troops resorted to slaughtering the transport animals and eventually the cats and dogs populating the city.<sup>92</sup> Repeated British attempts to rescue their besieged brethren resulted in battle losses as high as 75 percent and all failed to reach the garrison.<sup>93</sup> One rescue effort led by General Aylmer had 7,000 casualties in a force of 9,000.<sup>94</sup> Poor planning resulted in terrible medical treatment with soldiers arriving to the downriver city of Amara with “wounds which for eight days had remained untended...”<sup>95</sup> When the resulting prisoners of war reached the Turkish prisoner of war camp, their conditions even shocked the existing prisoners as “many [of Kut’s prisoners] were half out of their minds with exhaustion” and “most of them rotten with dysentery...”<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, after the deadly siege conditions, a brutal march to Turkish prisoner of war camps, and horrific treatment in said camps, only 3,000 men of the original 13,300 survived, a 78 percent mortality rate.<sup>97</sup> Even the Battle of the Somme, the deadliest battle in human history, had a mortality rate less than half of the rate at Kut.

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<sup>92</sup> Barker, *The Bastard War*, 231.

<sup>93</sup> Townshend, *Desert Hell*, 206.

<sup>94</sup> Wilson, *Loyalties*, 94.

<sup>95</sup> Evans, *A Brief Outline of the Mesopotamian Campaign*, 71.

<sup>96</sup> Wilson, *Loyalties*, 140.

<sup>97</sup> McNabb, *Oil and the Creation of Iraq*, 123.

The disaster of Kut cannot be understated. Major-General Townshend compared the siege to Britain's failure at Yorktown, while Lord Kitchener, the secretary of state for war said the catastrophe would be "forever a disgrace to our country."<sup>98</sup> While Lord Hardinge writing in a letter to the Secretary of State in the India Office felt "no anxiety about Kut...", the same could not be said about the War Office, which requested the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to launch an investigation into Kut.<sup>99</sup> The most obvious conclusion centered on the Government of India's planning failures. General Townshend picked a location that made reinforcements difficult and handled the entire siege poorly.<sup>100</sup> The long distance to Kut up difficult rivers exposed any reinforcements to Ottoman attacks, while the entirely flat plain surrounding the garrison made it also impossible for British and Indian troops to launch a ground offensive to break the siege. When it came to the medical response, the investigation revealed that poor planning meant injured soldiers with fractured legs had to crawl upwards of 4 miles to find medical treatment and that the high casualty numbers quickly overwhelmed the closest military hospitals.<sup>101</sup> Even worse, the investigation showed that the Government of India knew of its medical response inadequacies before Kut and failed to make any correction.<sup>102</sup> Within planning efforts, the investigation found fault with Townshend's food rations management during the siege. Citing humanity reasons, General Townshend did not expel Kut's women and children

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<sup>98</sup> Charles Townshend to GHQ, 13 Feb. 1916, W.O. 158 as cited in John S. Galbraith, "No Man's Child: The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914-1916," *The International History Review*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Aug., 1984), 358, retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/stable/40105392>.

<sup>99</sup> Evans, *A Brief Outline of the Campaign in Mesopotamia*, 71.

<sup>100</sup> Barker, *The Bastard War*, 124.

<sup>101</sup> Townshend, *Desert Hell*, 203.

<sup>102</sup> John S. Galbraith, "No Man's Child: The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914-1916," *The International History Review*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Aug., 1984), 358, retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/stable/40105392>, 362.

into the cold plains.<sup>103</sup> This decision, however humane, forced British troops to go hungry, reduced their fighting capability, and made capitulation necessary, a fact the investigation did not miss.

The investigation into Kut also revealed far larger issues with the Government of India's control over the campaign. The *Times* published an article titled, "Mismanagement from Mesopotamia," which criticized even the supplies India contributed. In looking at the Mesopotamian campaign the *Times* noted, "Incidentally, we may note that bitter complaints are made about the deficiency of bombs and hand grenades, and also about the defective quality of such of those munitions as are manufactured in India."<sup>104</sup> As a result of these embarrassing supply failures, the article concludes "that far too little has been made public about the trials of the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force."<sup>105</sup>

As a result of this inquiry, the War Office concluded the Government of India should no longer direct the campaign and assumed strategic and decision-making responsibility in Mesopotamia. Yet, as the *Times* noted, in this transfer of control "the duties of organization and supply, [were] still to a large extent directed from Delhi."<sup>106</sup> While India may have maintained some of its authority, this transfer marked the first step in the Government of India's declining involvement in the region. By only supplying people and supplies, not ideas and leadership, the British government relegated the Government of India to a wartime colony. British officials

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<sup>103</sup> Barker, *The Bastard War*, 124.

<sup>104</sup> [No author], "Mismanagement in Mesopotamia," *Times* [London, England] March 14, 1916: 7. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>105</sup> [No author], "Mismanagement in Mesopotamia," *Times*.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

made this shift abundantly clear when British officials discussed how to break the siege and “the Government of India was ignored...”<sup>107</sup>

Yet transferring military operations away from the Government of India did not end scrutiny over the campaign. Following up on the War Office’s report, Parliament opened a second investigation into the military disaster, resulting in the Mesopotamia Commission of 1917. Much like the Imperial General Staff inquiry found rampant inadequacies, the Mesopotamia Commission revealed even more information about the Government of India’s military failures. Investigating the siege exposed extensive shortcomings in the military operations of the entire campaign. The commission thoroughly invalidated the campaign’s successes and ultimately concluded the “Indian Government’s management of the “expedition was...unworkable.”<sup>108</sup> Even though the Commission placed the most blame on Sir John Nixon, the commanding officer at the time in Mesopotamia, the Government of India suffered the greatest consequences for the blame they received.<sup>109</sup> The Parliamentary minority report Josiah Wedgwood submitted placed all of the blame on the Government of India, arguing that officials showed “some desire actually to obstruct” the war’s success while giving “ill-informed advice.”<sup>110</sup> This report shattered the rose-colored lens through which different actors within the British government viewed the Government of India’s place in Mesopotamia.

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<sup>107</sup> Wilson, *Loyalties*, 99.

<sup>108</sup> [No author], “The Mesopotamia Commission,” *British Medical Journal*, 1:2948 (1917 Jun 30), 875–877. Accessed November 29, 2016, retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2348899/?page=2>.

<sup>109</sup> [No author], “The Mesopotamia Commission,” *British Medical Journal*; Galbraith, “No Man’s Child,” 362.

<sup>110</sup> Mesopotamia Commission, Wedgwood’s Report, CAB/19/26 as cited in Paul Davis, *Ends and Means: The British Campaign and Commission* (London: Associated University Press, 1994), 209.

This challenged the Government of India's future because its role in the region remained fundamentally tied to its military function. At the start of World War I in reference to the Government of India's authority in Mesopotamia, Mr. Tennant, the Under-Secretary of War reported, "It may be true that Egypt is nearer than India, but the arrangement has been made for military convenience, and I do not see any possibility of it being altered."<sup>111</sup> With the Siege of Kut, however, the military convenience disappeared, undermining the heart of the Government of India's claim to Mesopotamia. The failure of Kut changed the conversation around Mesopotamia from the Government of India's assumed position to the Government of India's inability to protect a strategically and symbolically important area. The humiliation of such a catastrophic loss and military shortcomings marked the first formally severed tie between India and Mesopotamia. As a result of Kut, the Government of India had to take a subordinate role, supplying the war, but not deciding how it progressed. The loss and the resulting public and government outrage over the disappointing military efforts, eroded trust in the Government of India, challenging assumptions over Mesopotamia's future.

### *Bureaucracy*

The bureaucratic web surrounding Mesopotamia during World War I also threatened the Government of India's dominance in Mesopotamia. Before the war, the Government of India acted as the primary British representative within Mesopotamia. Through the Indian Political Service, the Government of India developed the political expertise and knowledge to act mostly uncontested in the region before the war. As the actor with the most interest in the region, this system worked. During World War I, however, the situation changed. With a war theater in

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<sup>111</sup>G. Lorimer to Government of India, 20 Aug. 1910: PRO, FO 371/1015. W as cited in Satia, "Developing Iraq," 110n.

Mesopotamia, large-scale geopolitical implications in the Middle East that included Mesopotamia and oil, the British Empire's interests extended beyond the Government of India. Coupled with the military failures, the increasing complex bureaucratic web ultimately excluded the Government of India from determining Mesopotamia's future.

Reflecting the bureaucratic complexities in Mesopotamia, eighteen different individuals had authority in the region.<sup>112</sup> These eighteen individuals included: from Egypt, the Commander-in-Chief, Higher Commissioner, Director of Military Intelligence, the Director of the Arab Bureau, the British Sirdar in Sudan; from Mesopotamia, the Commander-in-Chief and several political officers; from the Admiralty, the naval commander for the East Indies Station; from India the Viceroy and Foreign Secretary; and finally the Foreign Secretary and India Secretary in London.<sup>113</sup> Post-1916 and the Siege of Kut, this authority web also included the War Office and the representatives on the Middle East Commission. And in the words of Sir Ronald Storrs "...it seemed to be nobody's business to harmonize the various views and policies of the Foreign Office, the India Office, the Admiralty, the War Office, the Government of India, and the Residency in Egypt."<sup>114</sup> In the war, Mesopotamia turned into a quagmire of bureaucratic entanglements.

While overwhelming even on paper, the reality of this many voices undermined the Government of India's authority by pitting its interests against those of other departments. Previously, the Government of India had no competition for Mesopotamia's future. With the war and Mesopotamia's symbolic and material importance, the new bureaucratic competition to

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<sup>112</sup> Townshend, *Desert Hell*," 262.

<sup>113</sup> Townshend, *Desert Hell*," chapter 3, 7n.

<sup>114</sup> Sir Ronald Storrs, *Orientalism* (London, Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1937), 179 as cited in Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, 31.

control the territory devolved into a battle in its own right. Ultimately, other actors sought to directly delegitimize the Government of India's claims to Mesopotamia, damaging the Government of India's claims to Mesopotamia.

Mark Sykes in the Arab Bureau represents an example of how the competing interests manifested themselves. Sykes sought to remove the Government of India entirely from the process and create a system similar to that in India but with a Middle Eastern viceroyalty based out of Cairo that would oversee Mesopotamia.<sup>115</sup> To achieve this reality, Sykes reframed Mesopotamia to emphasize its Arab background and delegitimize the extensive Indian ties in to the region. Based on this framework, Sykes argued that the Government of India could not administer the territory as "Circumstances, atmosphere, and tradition had rendered the Government of India incapable of handling the Arab question."<sup>116</sup> Further bolstering his position Sykes continued, "India's customs and laws were radically different from those of Arabs," and indicated that operating out of Cairo would be more effective.<sup>117</sup> Although the cultural and economic ties between India and Mesopotamia demonstrate shortcomings in Sykes' argument, his forceful opposition demonstrate how competing interests broke down the ties that used guarantee the Government of India's prominence in Mesopotamia.

Nor was Sykes alone in his criticism. In the 1918 Mesopotamian Expenditure Report the Secretary of State concluded that "Control over Mesopotamia should be turned over to "a Department of State which has a real knowledge and experience of the administration and

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<sup>115</sup> Mejcher, "British Middle East Policy 1917-21," 81.

<sup>116</sup> Hirtzel, Arthur, "Viceroy to S/S," L/P+S/10/683, p. 205, May 17, 1917, as cited in John Fisher, *Curzon and British Imperialism in the Middle East: 1916-1919* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1999), 48.

<sup>117</sup> Satia, "Developing Iraq," 247.

development of these wild countries...”<sup>118</sup> This quote indicates that the Government of India had lost its knowledge monopoly and political training dominance. Before the war, actors in the British Empire assumed the Government of India had the most real knowledge on Mesopotamia since every political officer serving in the region first served in India. This reality concentrated authority in India and spread the Government of India’s political mentality and culture to other areas in the world. The war ended this dominance. With the Empire assigning people to the region that had never served in India and increasing the number of people who knew the area, the Government of India lost its political edge within the British Empire. General Maude replacing General Townshend in Mesopotamia demonstrates this reality. Right before World War I, General Townshend served on the Indian frontiers. Much like the Political Officers in Mesopotamia, Townshend percolated British-Indian administrative culture. General Maude did not. As a man who had most recently served in France and Gallipoli before Mesopotamia, his most recent military perspective shared neither Indian perspectives on the war or Mesopotamia’s future.<sup>119</sup> Ultimately, as other people outside of the Government of India developed expertise, the Government of India lost its advantage.

In addition to the decline in knowledge superiority, the British government’s extensive use of committees to make decisions for Mesopotamia challenged the Government of India’s dominance. In the committee system, representatives from the relevant departments of the Empire came together to determine the direction and policy options available on a specific question. To decide Mesopotamia’s future, the British government convened a series of four Committees: the Mesopotamia Committee (1917), the Middle East Committee (1917-1918), the

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<sup>118</sup> Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, 87.

<sup>119</sup> McNabb, *Oil and the Creation of Iraq*, 124

Eastern Committee (1918), and the Interdepartmental Conference on Middle Eastern Affairs (1919-1920). As a result, the Government of India's voice did not supersede any other department within the British government, reducing the Government of India's weight in the debate. For example, Lord Curzon, a former viceroy of India, headed the first Mesopotamian Administrative Committee, but shared the decision-making with individuals like Mark Sykes, who openly opposed the Government of India's dominance in the area. As a result, Sykes tempered Curzon's interests, reducing Curzon's influence. The dilution of India's power on the committee continued throughout the course of committees assembled on Mesopotamia. While Lord Curzon headed the first Mesopotamian Commission, by the last committee the Government of India did not participate.<sup>120</sup>

Overall, the war brought a dramatically altered bureaucratic norm within the British government, ultimately at the expense of the Government of India's authority. Despite the historic ties, the reality had changed, resulting in new approaches to Mesopotamia. In the words of one opinion piece in the *Times*, "It is highly important for the Government to decide upon a clear policy for the whole of the future operations in Egypt and the Middle East, to give up campaigning by compartments, and to place all these issues in the direct charge of one man on the spot..."<sup>121</sup> With efforts to delegitimize the Government of India's claims, the committee system, and public pressure mounting, the Government of India no longer represented the Empire's "one man on the spot" in Mesopotamia. Thus, when combined with the failure and the subsequent report on Kut, the British bureaucracy created a political reality that reflected Sykes'

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<sup>120</sup> Satia, "Developing Iraq," 248.

<sup>121</sup> [No author] Still Waiting for the Man." *Times* [London, England] 12 Jan. 1916: 9. *The Times Digital Archive*.

stance on Mesopotamia, “We have suffered, are suffering, and shall continue to suffer owing to the fact that political control in Arabia is divided between India and Egypt.”<sup>122</sup>

### *Geopolitical Context*

Even as the Siege of Kut and bureaucratic maneuverings undermined the Government of India’s claims to administer Mesopotamia within the British Empire, greater geopolitical forces at play during and after the war also changed the circumstances of Mesopotamia’s future. Competing imperial interests are the first major geopolitical shift. Even though India and Britain had long-established dominance in Mesopotamia, the same could not be said for other parts of the Middle East. As a result, much of the Middle East including Mesopotamia became part of a larger negotiation for imperial control. Early on in the war, Mesopotamian annexation was out of the question because “...it would arouse French and Russian suspicions and would be contrary to the principle that occupation of conquered territory by allies is provisional pending final settlement at close of war.”<sup>123</sup> After 1917 and the Russian Revolution, Russian territorial interests in the Middle East did not concern the British government. The contention with France over land continued to shape the policy in the region. When deciding on the best approach for invading the western Ottoman Empire the French did not want the British to land a force Alexandretta because they were concerned about the British using the war to expand their territorial powers.<sup>124</sup> To allay these concerns, the British instead chose to land at Gallipoli, resulting in a butchered operation. Within the context of outwardly suspicious allies, Britain could not be obvious in its

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<sup>122</sup> Townsend, *Desert Hell*, 262.

<sup>123</sup> SSI telegram to Viceroy, December 16, 1914 as cited in Briton Cooper Busch, *Britain, India, and the Arabs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 20.

<sup>124</sup> Busch, *Britain, India, and the Arabs*, 115.

claims to Mesopotamia. As a result, the Mesopotamia became caught within greater international geopolitical boundaries.

The British government and its allies further exacerbated this geopolitical reality with conflicting promises during the war. In order to gain support and undermine the Ottoman Empire during the war, various actors within the British government made politically expedient promises to groups across the Middle East. This included promising a Jewish homeland in the Balfour Declaration, declaring an independent state for Arabs who took up arms against the Ottomans, and supporting opposing families in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>125</sup> This myriad of promises indicated challenges to India's claim to Mesopotamia. No longer did the Government of India have exclusive claims on Mesopotamia. As such, much like the bureaucratic changes reduced the Government of India's voice, the wide promises to other actors further hindered the Government of India's claims to Mesopotamia.

Towards the end of the war, the United States' entrance into the war changed the rhetoric and post-war peace plans, creating the second major geopolitical shift. Even though the United States never declared war against the Ottoman Empire, the ideas Wilson espoused proved influential to the direction of the Ottoman Empire's division. When Colonel House, President Wilson's advisor traveled to the Ottoman Empire, he looked unfavorably upon "the secret treaties between the Allies."<sup>126</sup> When House learned that under the wartime agreements between the British and the French "the British take in Mesopotamia and the region which is closest to Egypt" he inequitably stated, "...This is all bad, and I told Balfour so. They are making it a

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<sup>125</sup> Susan Kingsley Kent, *A New History of Britain Since 1688: Four Nations and an Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 349.

<sup>126</sup> Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq, 1914-1932* (London: Ithaca Press, 1976), 18.

breeding ground for future war.”<sup>127</sup> Faced with the outwardly negative pressure from the American delegations the Britain altered its control over territories and future territories to appear less direct and more in line with Wilson’s goals.<sup>128</sup>

As the Government of India struggled to maintain its hold on Mesopotamia, it recognized that if it had any chance of claiming the territory, the administration had to embrace Wilson’s idealism. An India Office Memo of January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1918 argued that “The US President’s notions of self-determination” meant that Britain would have to act as a “candidate towards” Mesopotamia’s “constituents.”<sup>129</sup> A few months later, the India Office explicitly outlined the need to embrace Wilsonian politics in their bid for Mesopotamia. On April 3, the India Office wrote that “The conclusions that seem to follow a reconsideration are as follows: i) That if our claim to control the destinies of Mesopotamia after that war is to be established, it will have to be based on either grounds that mere right of conquest and ii) that the nature of British supervision will have to be less direct and overtly than was contemplated in March 1917.”<sup>130</sup> The India Office’s outlined requirements demonstrate the extent to which Wilsonian values permeated into the British bureaucratic mindset. For decades, the British Indian form of direct rule equaled the most effective option to maintain British hegemony. Yet with the entire culture surrounding colonies shifting in theory (but not practice) to be based more on self-determination and the rights of citizens, the Government of India’s system no longer represented a politically

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<sup>127</sup> Charles Seymour, *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, Volume III (Boston: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928) as cited in Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 19.

<sup>128</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 14.

<sup>129</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 54.

<sup>130</sup> [no author] India Office Printed Memo B.281 of 3 April 1918, LP & S 10 2571/1917/18 as cited in Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 55.

appropriate option. Thus, the British government had no incentive to give the Government of India an opportunity to spread its diminishing governmental system.

The Government of India's declining importance as a result of geopolitical shifts ultimately culminated in the mandate requirements outlined in Article 22 in the Treaty of Versailles. In order to support the "sacred trust of civilization" the Allied countries divided up the territories of Germany and Ottoman Empire, including Mesopotamia. Reflecting the Wilsonian political atmosphere, the mandate system entrusted "to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position" other states (conquered territories) that were "not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world."<sup>131</sup> For the British Empire, this meant mandates for Mesopotamia, Palestine, and modern-day Tanzania.

Article 22 had more specific requirements for Palestine and Mesopotamia. Owing to a perception that "Certain communities formerly belonging to the Turkish Empire," compared to African nations, "have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized," Mesopotamia and Palestine's mandates only needed "administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone."<sup>132</sup> From the perspective of the League of Nations, as a result of their advanced development, Mesopotamia and Palestine qualified to have the "wishes of these communities [to] be a principal consideration in the selection of the Mandatory."<sup>133</sup> These Mandate requirements proved problematic for the Government of India because the Government of India

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<sup>131</sup> "Treaty of Peace with Germany (Treaty of Versailles)," *Library of Congress*, Article 22.

<sup>132</sup> "Treaty of Versailles," Article 22.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

never advocated Arab independence in Mesopotamia.<sup>134</sup> Establishing a separate form of government with greater representation did not fit into the Government of India vision of an expanded British Raj. In fact, as Commissioner in Baghdad, Wilson actively resisted the changes to give the Mesopotamian Arab population more autonomy. When instructed to release a government communique to announce a “predominantly Arab Council of States under an Arab President,” Wilson changed the text to omit “predominantly Arab.”<sup>135</sup>

For the British government, the Government of India’s resistance to indirect rule represented another challenge in an already complicated situation. Within the post-war negotiations the British government had come to terms with the many conflicting wartime promises made. In regard to Mesopotamia, this notably included the promises T.E. Lawrence made to Arabs during the war guaranteeing autonomy and independence within the Middle East and Mesopotamia. Promising direct rule with British officials at the top and Indians both in the civil service and occupying valuable agriculture land, the Government of India’s projected future in Mesopotamia could not have conflicted more with this promise. Faced with these diametrically opposed interests, India represented a barrier to the British government’s post-war promise balancing. As result of the promises and evolving colonial expectations, the Government of India’s post-war administrative plans appeared to not align with the British government’s broader interests in the Middle East, making the Government of India ill-suited to assume the Mesopotamian mandate.

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<sup>134</sup> Busch, *Britain, Indians, and Arabs*, 146.

<sup>135</sup> Young, memorandum, n.d., c. July 1920, FO 371/5228 as cited in Timothy J. Paris, “British Middle East Policy-Making after the First World War: The Lawrencetian and Wilsonian Schools Author(s),” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Sep., 1998), 780.

Further, the Wilsonian shifts in the global political conversations also undercut the Government of India's claims because it spurred a series of reforms in India. Even though some in the British Empire like Edwin Montagu argued that, "there are in India millions who do not, cannot, and probably never will aspire to a share in the government of their country...", the political context after the war changed this perspective.<sup>136</sup> Lord Ronaldshay, who would later serve as India's Secretary of State noted in June, 1917,

We are really making concessions to India because of the free talk about liberty, democracy, nationality and self-government which have become the common shibboleths of the Allies and because we are expected to translate into practice in our own domestic household the sentiments which we have so enthusiastically preached.<sup>137</sup>

Even Montagu, with his skepticism about Indians wanting to participate in their government, recognized that in order for British legitimacy to continue India needed a political "machinery...suited to the twentieth century" based on "cooperation and devolution."<sup>138</sup> On August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1917, the Government of India attempted to make this political machinery a reality by announcing a policy to increase "association of Indians in every branch of the administration" and gradually develop "self-governing institutions."<sup>139</sup> The Government of India publically announced the reason for the changes as a "progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire."<sup>140</sup> The government released these changes amidst Indian demands for Home Rule. Within the calls for change to the Government of India's system, the British government had no confidence the Government of India's long-term stability.

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<sup>136</sup> Edwin Montagu, *A Memoir and an Account of his Visit to India*, as cited in Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 53.

<sup>137</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 53.

<sup>138</sup> Edwin Montagu, *A Memoir and an Account of his Visit to India*, as cited in Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 53.

<sup>139</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 16

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

Since the changes represented a greater movement towards reforming India to reflect Woodrow Wilson's ideals, the Government of India had no credibility to establish an outdated and changing system in Mesopotamia.

Thus, between the requirements and obligations of a Mandate and the perception that India's system of government needed to change, the Government of India had no credibility to add Mesopotamia to its formal network. The British Raj's moral obligation to expand disappeared with a new set of moral standards. This reality ultimately severed the colonial ties the Government of India placed on Mesopotamia, even in light of the sacrifices Indian soldiers made during the war.<sup>141</sup> The British Empire had no interest in expanding a dying system from India to Mesopotamia during a time when colonial auspices were under attack, ultimately pushing the Government of India out of a position to claim authority in Mesopotamia. Overall, even though the Government of India may have had substantial ties to Mesopotamia before and at the beginning of the war, larger political shifts changed the world in which colonies operated, making it difficult for the Government of India to claim the territory.

#### *Failed Administration*

The collapse in administration brought the final challenge to the Government of India and Mesopotamia's relationship. Similar to how the Siege of Kut eroded confidence in the Government of India's military connections, post-war Mesopotamia challenged the Government of India's suitability to continue administering the region. Even as the war drew to a close, ending the expensive financial wartime obligations, Mesopotamia's administrative costs did not decrease, creating substantial pressure to change the administrative structure. This pressure

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<sup>141</sup> Townsend, *Desert Hell*, 271.

ultimately collapsed the final assumptions of the Government of India's competency in Mesopotamia.

As World War I drew to a close, the British Empire faced dire financial straits. From 1920 to 1921, Britain's economy hit a recession that rivaled the Great Depression's impact on the country. Soldiers returning home created high unemployment and volatile labor markets. The Empire's war debts threatened the government's fiscal stability and reduced Britain's foreign assets by 10 percent.<sup>142</sup> In the post-war years the country spent £1,282,274,000, approximately six times its pre-war expenses.<sup>143</sup> In addition to the high costs, escape seemed impossible. In comparison, other European countries, even ones that saw their entire country destroyed in the war, showed faster post-war recovery than Britain.<sup>144</sup> Further, Britain did not have the infrastructure to face new competition from rising industrial powers like the United States and Japan, even seeing New York displace London as the superior financial market.<sup>145</sup>

In this context, the costs in Mesopotamia felt exorbitant. Lord Islington, arguably the British involvement in Mesopotamia's biggest critic, asked his peers, "Can the British Exchequer afford to meet the annual expenditure entailed by this system?"<sup>146</sup> Saving them from having to answer, Islington continued, "Assuredly not" because "last year the figure for the Mesopotamian garrison, including Civil administration (but not the Air Force) was put down at £32,890,000 pounds."<sup>147</sup> Other estimates at the time placed the cost closer to £50,000,000, while others still

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<sup>142</sup> Eichengreen, 7.

<sup>143</sup> [no author], "Great Britain: A Plea for Economy." September 1920; *Bankers' Magazine (1896-1943)*, American Periodicals.

<sup>144</sup> Eichengreen, 12.

<sup>145</sup> Kent, *A New History of Britain Since 1688*, 80.

<sup>146</sup> [no author], "Mesopotamia." *Times* [London, England] June 1, 1920: 17. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

placed the cost at £30,000,000.<sup>148</sup> The numbers range so much because, adding to the frustration associated with Mesopotamia's expenditures members of Parliament found it "impossible to find out the true cost of Mesopotamia to the taxpayer...."<sup>149</sup> Building upon the frustration, former Prime Minister H. H. Asquith in a campaign speech at the Isle of Wight said "Nobody knows and no responsible Minister can tell us what gain it [Mesopotamia] will bring in the long run to the British Empire or to what additional figures it will go."<sup>150</sup> Not only was Parliament unhappy with the sheer cost of operations in Mesopotamia, but they could not even get assurances for the purpose of such costs nor projections for future expenditures. This lack of accountability deeply insulted those tasked with the Empire's financial stability.

Further, the size of the garrisons in Mesopotamia drew criticism, forcing connections between costs abroad versus costs at home. In June, 1920 (before the Revolt of 1920 started and even more troops were deployed from India), Mesopotamia and Persia had 88,500 British and Indian troops stationed in its borders.<sup>151</sup> While certainly smaller than the mobilized force during the war, this number equaled the entire "effective strength of the British Regular Army at home and in the Colonies" before the war.<sup>152</sup> Highlighting the perceived irrationality of this disproportionate military presence, Asquith in the aforementioned speech drew the comparison between Mesopotamian costs and domestic financial struggles:

"We know we are committed to an expenditure in Mesopotamia which cannot be less than 30 millions a year. Look what that would mean if it could be applied to a

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<sup>148</sup> [no author], "More Trouble in Mesopotamia." *Times* [London, England] June 12, 1920: 17. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>149</sup> [no author] "Mesopotamia." *Times* [London, England] June 1, 1920: 17. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>150</sup> [no author], "Reckless Waste." *Times* [London, England] June 21, 1920: 5. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>151</sup> [no author], "More Trouble in Mesopotamia." *Times* [London, England] June 12, 1920: 17. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>152</sup> [no author] "More Trouble in Mesopotamia." *Times*

drastic dealing with the housing problem. What is Mesopotamia to us or we to Mesopotamia (A voice [in the crowd]: oil.) There it comes in. I was not going to give that explanation. But what is Mesopotamia to us or we to Mesopotamia compared with the obligations which we owe to those within our shores, many of them people who have returned from the war in which they risked their lives for their country and who now cannot find accommodations for themselves and their families?"<sup>153</sup>

Faced with decision between domestic moral obligations (and appeasing voters) and financing a mandate territory whose value the government would not articulate, Lord Islington insisted, "Every conceivable step should be taken to reduce this enormous expenditure to the taxpayer by reducing the garrison of Mesopotamia..."<sup>154</sup> Mirroring Islington, Mr. Athelstan a member of the Liberal Coalition declared, "I feel that, with the recent knowledge of the Government's tremendous and unjustified commitments of British money and lives in Mesopotamia... I have no choice but to join the opposition."<sup>155</sup> While likely an insignificant move in the grand scheme of British politics at the time, Athelstan's decision reflects the deep-seeded concern that Parliament felt over Mesopotamia's costs. At a time when domestic worries dominated concerns, to have a member of Parliament leave a coalition for the reason of Colonial administration is telling. And while the voice in the crowd correctly articulated in the value of oil in Mesopotamia in shaping decisions, when it came to finances, oil in Mesopotamia was not commercially exploitable until 1927, making its contribution to the struggling British Treasury negligible in face of the cost to administer Mesopotamia.

Amidst the dominance of financial concerns, debates over Mesopotamia's administration tied back to costs. The debate boiled down to two schools of thought advocated by two

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<sup>153</sup> [no author] "Reckless Waste." *Times* [London, England] 21 June 1920: 5. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>154</sup> [no author] "The Future Of Mesopotamia." *Times* [London, England] June 26, 1920: 9. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>155</sup> [no author], "News in Brief." *Times* [London, England] July 14, 1920: 14. *The Times Digital Archive*.

prominent government of officials: T.E. Lawrence representing the Foreign Office and Arnold T. Wilson, representing the Government of India. T.E. Lawrence, Britain's wartime hero at the time and perceived expert on the Middle East after the war, advocated for Feisal from the Hashemite family to reign as king with limited British involvement that would encourage Arab national ideals. Conversely, Wilson advocated for direct British administration, similar to that in India, with a member of the Saud family. Specifically, Wilson believed that Mesopotamian Arabs are "no more capable of administering severally or collectively than the Red Indians," warranting full-scale British-led administration.<sup>156</sup> Wilson's plan for direct rule inevitably cost more and war debt challenged this system's feasibility.<sup>157</sup> Comparatively, Lawrence argued that influence could only be exercised indirectly through mandates for far cheaper. Churchill seconded this perception, writing to Lloyd George on March 14, 1921, "I have no doubt personally Feisal offers far away best chance of saving our money."<sup>158</sup> Of the two paths Wilson and Lawrence offered, the financial situation of the Empire pushed London to prioritize Lawrence's plan. Owing to the Government of India's more expensive administrative option, that the British government choose Lawrence's administrative plan indicates the lack of trust in the Government of India to manage Mesopotamia at a reasonable cost.

Unfortunately for the Government of India, politicians in London did not miss the connection between administration and finances and directly blamed the Government of India for Mesopotamia's excessive costs. Reporting on a House of Commons Debate on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1920, the *Times*, citing Winston Churchill and John Seely, concluded, "There seemed a very general

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<sup>156</sup> [no author] 0 Minute, 6 Nov. 1915, L/P&S/10 as cited in Paris, "British Middle East Policy-Making after the First World War," 779.

<sup>157</sup> Paris, "British Middle East Policy-Making after the First World War," 793.

<sup>158</sup> Churchill to Lloyd George, received at the Colonial Office, March 14, 1921, CO 732/4/17976 as cited in Paris, "British Middle East Policy-Making after the First World War," 66.

feeling that if Mesopotamia was to be manageable at a reasonable cost we must get rid of the Indian mortgage.”<sup>159</sup> H. H. Asquith, looking ahead, argued that “there was no chance of a substantial reduction in the course of the next six, nine, or even 12 months” because of “the tendency...to employ the Anglo-Indian methods.”<sup>160</sup> As a result of the debate over Mesopotamia and the high cost, a *Times* editorial called for “constant pressure of...public opinion to chasten Government extravagance and the tendency towards the ‘Indianization of Mesopotamia...’”<sup>161</sup> Lord Lamington in a House of Lords debate summed up the sentiment towards India concluding, “it was time that the present elaborate administration of Mesopotamia should cease.”<sup>162</sup> Even George Buchanan, an Anglo-Indian engineer who formerly extolled the merits of Indian colonization in Mesopotamia agreed in a Letter to the Editor “...that by a better form of administration than obtains at present we can make the mandate a success and greatly reduce the expenditure.”<sup>163</sup> Harking back to Mesopotamia’s symbolic importance, Lord Islington argued that reducing the garrison in Mesopotamia and stabilizing the finances would create security in “the very pivot of the Mid-East position,” leading to “peace and contentment” extending “the east and west of that country...”<sup>164</sup> With the Government of India associated with the high costs and Mesopotamia’s mismanagement, its involvement in administration became a threat to both

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<sup>159</sup> [no author], “Mesopotamia.” *Times* [London, England] June 24, 1920: 16. *The Times Digital Archive*; Tetzlaff, “The Turn of the Gulf Tide,” 19.

<sup>160</sup> [no author], “House Of Commons.” *Times* [London, England] June 24, 1920: 9+. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>161</sup> London *Times*, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1920 as cited in Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, 84

<sup>162</sup> [no author], “The Future Of Mesopotamia.” *Times* [London, England] 26 June 1920: 9. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>163</sup> George C. Buchanan, “Mesopotamia.” *Times* [London, England] 21 June 1920: 10. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>164</sup> [no author], “The Future Of Mesopotamia.” *Times* [London, England] 26 June 1920: 9. *The Times Digital Archive*.

the Empire's entire financial condition, as well as the stability of the entire Middle East. Thus, in order to preserve its finances, the British government faced significant pressure to remove the Government of India's authority from Mesopotamia.

### *Conclusion*

The Government of India's decline from authority in Mesopotamia ultimately left Mesopotamia beyond the Government of India's reach. While the Government of India started the war with substantial ties to the region that only continued the growth, war challenged this progression. Ultimately the difficult realities of operating a campaign and later an administration, coupled with changing geopolitical and bureaucratic norms meant the Government of India could not achieve the British Empire's goals. When faced with Mesopotamia's enormous economic and symbolic importance, granting the Government of India authority looked risky to the British government. Thus, when the Revolt of 1920 provided a catalyzing event to spur action, the British government wasted no time in creating a new system, ultimately ending the Government of India's long history of ties to Mesopotamia.

## The 1920 Revolt

The start of World War I to the immediate post-war years represented a gradual decline in the Government of India's involvement in Mesopotamia. Military failures, bureaucratic systems, geopolitical conditions, and poor administrative capacity eroded government and public confidence in the Government of India, leading to calls for investigations and greater oversight. These factors, however, did not represent the catalyzing event that would formally end the Government of India's involvement in Mesopotamia. Instead, the Mesopotamian Revolt of 1920 permanently and irrevocably shattered any residual ties between India and Mesopotamia, forcing the British Government to reevaluate their Middle Eastern policy. Instead of rebuilding the Government of India's presence, revolt resulted in the British government creating the Middle East Department in the Colonial Department, formally and finally transferring all authority over Mesopotamia away from the Government of India. Ultimately, through shattering British conceptions about actions in the Middle East and placing significant financial strains on an already struggling Treasury, the Revolt of 1920 provided the final event to end decades of India's involvement in Mesopotamia.

In hindsight, the first sign of trouble in Mesopotamia came from Gertrude Bell. Earlier in the year Arnold T. Wilson warned of anti-British sentiment and looming unrest. The British government dismissed Wilson's concerns as overstating the threat. Bell, conversely, had felt confident going into June 1920 that any small disputes resulting from the May 5<sup>th</sup> announcement about the mandate system ended as "the bottom seemed to have dropped out of the agitation, and most of the leaders seem only too anxious to let bygones be bygones."<sup>165</sup> A mere 11 days later,

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<sup>165</sup> General Sir Aylmer Haldane, *A Soldier's Saga* (London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1948) as cited in Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, 55

however, Mesopotamia's climate seemed to abruptly shift with Bell writing home about nationalists attempting to create a "reign of terror" in Mesopotamia.<sup>166</sup> Moving into June, Mesopotamia's political climate seemed poised for a large-scale revolt, ready for a single event to set off a chain of revolt.

On June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1920 the Assistant Political Officer in Rumanitha in the Middle Euphrates arrested a local tribal leader over an agriculture loan dispute.<sup>167</sup> The tribe in return besieged the Political staff and garrison located in Rumanitha. Legacies of the Siege of Kut and fears about mass waves of revolt spurred a heavy-handed British response. Yet when the British sent reinforcements, heavy fighting and damaged railroad lines resulted in high casualties and an isolated force. Reflecting escalating concerns about the situation, the British responded by using the newly-installed Royal Air Force to bomb the town and drop supplies after a second wave of reinforcements again failed to reach the garrison.<sup>168</sup> Faced with an increasingly unstable system, the British once again mobilized Indian troops to prepare for warfare in Mesopotamia.

What could have remained a local issue, had the British's initial response succeed, soon spread across much of the Mesopotamian provinces. Across the three provinces, the revolt ignited a variety of long-simmering resentment against British involvement in the region. Some who took up arms did so in defiance of the mandate systems and Britain's failed promises of political engagement. Others joined to contest the taxation system.<sup>169</sup> Surrounded by flames from their ruined city, the local leaders in Karbala declared a jihad against the administration.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, 55.

<sup>167</sup> Phillip W. Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1938), 266.

<sup>168</sup> Busch, *Britain, India, and the Arabs*, 406.

<sup>169</sup> Ireland, *Iraq*, 266.

<sup>170</sup> Busch, *Britain, India, and the Arabs*, 408.

Matching the sentiment, on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, the General Headquarters issued a statement proclaiming, “In consequence of aggression of certain tribes on the Euphrates it is notified that a state of war exists through-out Mesopotamia.”<sup>171</sup> A month later, Gertrude Bell wrote that the British found themselves “in the middle of a full-blown Jihad” led by “the fiercest prejudice of a people in a primeval state of civilization.”<sup>172</sup>

July and August marked the revolt’s peak, after which hostilities started to decline. By late October the British had suppressed most of the revolt, dealing with a few remaining isolated incidents. By February, General Haldane, the head of forces in Mesopotamia officially informed the War Office in London that the military response had ended.<sup>173</sup> Yet, with the end of the revolt came the cost calculation. Throughout the conflict, Britain sent 18 battalions from India (24,000 troops). 300 to 450 British and Indian soldiers lost their lives, with 2,000 additional casualties and 450 missing.<sup>174</sup> Financially, suppressing the uprising cost the British government £35,000,000.<sup>175</sup> For a country still reeling from a catastrophic war that had ended a mere two years ago, these consequences felt severe.

The revolt did not just represent a loss of life and money. Mesopotamia’s symbolic importance and British mentality around Mesopotamia turned the revolt into a demoralizing event, escalating the Government of India’s failures. When British and Indian forces captured Baghdad during the war, Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Maude issued a proclamation to the

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<sup>171</sup> Wilson to Montagu, telegram of August 9, 1920, E10172, F.O. 371/5229 as cited in Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, 56.

<sup>172</sup> Lady Bell, ed., *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, vol. 2 (London: Ernst Benn, 1927) as cited Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, 56

<sup>173</sup> Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, 57.

<sup>174</sup> Busch, *Britain, India, and the Arabs*, 409; Kent, *A New History of Britain Since 1688*, 357.

<sup>175</sup> Douglas, “Did Britain Use Chemical Weapons in Mandatory Iraq?” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (December 2009), 862.

residents of Baghdad, “I am commanded to invite you, through your nobles and elders and representatives, to participate in the management of your civil affairs in collaboration with the political representatives of Great Britain who accompany the British Army.”<sup>176</sup> This represented the mentality British officials brought into Mesopotamia and the one they shared with the British public to justify actions in distant lands. The British saw themselves as welcomed friends, bringing light and democracy to the cradle of humanity and rebuilding the former Garden of Eden. During the war and in the immediate post-war years, the British public assumed their government had Arab support backing their decisions, lending military and political involvement credibility in the post-Wilson idealism years. Instead, the revolt revealed to the British public that British policy centered more on exploitation and unwelcomed involvement, crushing these rosy assumptions.<sup>177</sup> With their domestic life in shambles the British had looked towards colonies and mandates to provide stories of British success and to rebuild national pride. Amidst the ongoing challenges to the British Empire in Ireland, India, British Somaliland, and Egypt, the revolt revealed that Mesopotamia meant yet another demoralizing failure.

Within this sentiment of failure, death, and exorbitant costs, the blame for the revolt and resulting anger fell upon the Government of India and Indian connections. Even though the War Office led the response to the revolt, the British government ignored their participation because of the intense focus on the Government of India. Government officials and members of Parliament blamed the rebellion’s root cause on the inherent inability of Arabs and Indians to cooperate. In a Parliamentary debate, members dismissed all other factors that could have

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<sup>176</sup> Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Maude, “The Proclamation of Baghdad,” World War I Document Archive, 1917 Documents at Brigham Young University, March 17, 1917, accessed November 7, 2016. Retrieved from [https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The\\_Proclamation\\_of\\_Baghdad](https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Proclamation_of_Baghdad).

<sup>177</sup> Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, X.

explained the revolt, pinning the uprisings entirely on Indians in Mesopotamia.<sup>178</sup> Reporting on this debate, a *Times* Editorial, concurred, "... mutual hostility between the Arabs and the Indian troops were the real causes of the frequent outbreaks..."<sup>179</sup> James Wishart Thomson reiterated this point, claiming, "It is true from my experience that the Arabs and Indian troops cannot agree."<sup>180</sup> Even if these sentiments only initially stemmed from faulty Orientalist perspectives, because the British officials so often blamed the revolt on the "Indianization" of Mesopotamia, Mesopotamians started to "hate Indians for the first time."<sup>181</sup> Combined with the brutality of the Amritsar Massacre a little more than a year ago that horrified the British public, violence and incompetence defined the Government of India's place within the Empire. With this mentality percolating in both Great Britain and Mesopotamia, the Government of India and its insistence on involving Indians in Mesopotamia had resulted in unforgivable crimes against the Empire.

In addition to London blaming Indians and Indian connection in Mesopotamia for the revolt, the British government blamed the Government of India's entire administrative structure. T.E. Lawrence lamented the "willfully wrong policy of the civil administration in Baghdad."<sup>182</sup> A month later, as the Revolt progressed, Lawrence continued, describing Wilson's "bloody and inefficient administration as worse than the old Turkish system."<sup>183</sup> Outside the direct governmental structure, Dr. Addison Apologia, a proclaimed "student of politics," after reading

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<sup>178</sup> Tetzlaff, "The Turn of the Gulf Tide," 21.

<sup>179</sup> [no author], "Mr. Lloyd George in the Garden of Eden." *Times* [London, England] June 24, 1920: 17. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>180</sup> James Wishart Thomson, "Mesopotamia." *Times* [London, England] June 30, 1920: 12. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>181</sup> Tetzlaff, "The Turn of the Gulf Tide," 21.

<sup>182</sup> Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, 84.

<sup>183</sup> T.E. Lawrence, August article, *The Sunday Times*, as cited in Paris, "British Middle East Policy-Making after the First World War," 789.

about the initial phases of the revolt urged that “there is clearly something very wrong with the administration, and the House should insist on finding out what it is.”<sup>184</sup>

Overall, in a country recuperating from wartime death, debts, and prestige, this revolt represented a brutal blow. Faced with the mounting psychological and physical costs, the revolt finalized the belief that the Government of India administration should not continue. The post-war British government could not afford, both politically and financially, the Government of India’s inability to neither lower expenses nor maintain stability. Thus, the Revolt of 1920 pushed the British government to conclude that dividing policy decisions between the Foreign, India, and War Office was ineffective, warranting the creation of a new department.<sup>185</sup> Even the India Office, faced with the mounting costs, both in lives and money, admitted that the time had probably come for the Government of India to “contract their foreign responsibilities.”<sup>186</sup> Thus, on December 31, 1920 the Cabinet officially transferred control of Mesopotamia over to the newly created Middle East Department within the Colonial Office, officially ending the Government of India’s reign in Mesopotamia.

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<sup>184</sup> [no author], “Grave Trouble In Mesopotamia.” *Times* [London, England] 16 July 1920: 12. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>185</sup> Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World*, 87.

<sup>186</sup> Mejcher, “British Middle East Policy 1917-21,” 99.

## Conclusion

Signaling the beginning of a new era, the British government officially transferred authority over Mesopotamia to the Middle East Department on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1920 at midnight. As the sun rose on the new year, the sun set on the Government of India's time in Mesopotamia as an independent actor. Over time, the final vestiges of the relationship ended. Reflecting the extent of the break, even though Lord Curzon chaired the original committee on Mesopotamia, at the Cairo Conference of 1921 to finalize the plans for Mesopotamia, the Indian government was not invited.<sup>187</sup> The great Indian workforce that had once justified traveling judges to advocate for Mesopotamia to adopt Indian languages no longer existed. Within the private sector, Indian employment in Mesopotamia decreased dramatically. From 1920 to 1931, for example, the number of Indians employed with the railways dropped from 26,120 to 304.<sup>188</sup> Faisal, the Arab king the British king placed on the throne, pivoted the county to focus westward, realigning it away from India. Similarly, India turned inward, no longer the great Empire of the British Raj. Instead of overseeing a colony a sea away, the Government of India focused on maintaining its own administration in the face of growing Indian nationalist resistance. As influenza and economic downturns hit the subcontinent, the Government of India's task grew increasingly difficult. In short, an era of Indian and Mesopotamian relationships was over.

While the transfer of Mesopotamian administration to the Colonial Office marked the end of the Government of India's role in the country, the transfer did not end the British Empire's involvement. Instead, under the Colonial Office, Mesopotamia saw a continuation in British interest. In the years following the Cairo Conference general acrimony defined the

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<sup>187</sup> Satia, "Developing Iraq," 248.

<sup>188</sup> Tetzlaff, "The Turn of the Gulf Tide," 21.

relationship between Britain and Mesopotamia. The Revolt of 1920 left a legacy of anti-British sentiment, forcing King Faisal to balance his need for British financial, military, and political support with the need to not appear as British puppet ruler.<sup>189</sup> The British made this balancing act exceptionally difficult because they held all of the power in the relationship. As a result, as nationalist tendencies grew in Mesopotamia, Faisal could never build the credibility necessary to legitimately gain popular support.<sup>190</sup> All the while, as Mesopotamia moved further along into the 1920s, oil's tantalizing riches drew closer to reality. As a result, the British had an intense desire to ensure stability within the region.

Fortunately for the British government, the transfer of Mesopotamia to the Colonial Office supported efforts to maintain stability within Mesopotamia. As the first head of the Department, Winston Churchill sought to dramatically reduce the costs he had deplored during the Government of India's tenure. To do so, the former secretary of war deployed a rather novel approach: airpower. Justifying the decision on false conclusions about Mesopotamia's topography and geographic isolation, Churchill and other Middle Eastern experts he recruited to the Middle East Department, like T.E. Lawrence, deemed air-based power projection the best option.<sup>191</sup> The air force's desirability once again invoked Mesopotamia's romanticism from before the war with pilots exploring and commanding the wide blue skies, restoring justice to symbolic value Britons placed on Mesopotamia. Unfortunately, the Mesopotamian villages the pilots bombed took a far less romantic view of these planes, especially as the British saw no need to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 67.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>191</sup> Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 241.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

Even though the Royal Air Force only represented a small part of the Mesopotamian experience after the war and the Revolt of 1920, the desire to maintain stability reflected the ongoing reality for Mesopotamia. With the promise of oil, Mesopotamia devolved into an extractive colony whose sole purpose was to provide a valued resource. Given oil's benefits it is unlikely that the Government of India would have chosen a different path. Yet post-war Mesopotamia had a far different experience with the Colonial Office. It was this experience that laid the foundations for Mesopotamia as it transitioned to an independent state. Ultimately, the British Empire held the Mesopotamian mandate until 1932, when the newly-renamed Iraq gained its independence. Yet even after independence the British government continued to stay involved in its affairs. This lasting involvement is crucial to remember in looking at modern day Iraq. Even though British India's role in the region may be often overlooked in analyzing foreign involvement in Iraq, India's role nevertheless laid the foundations that shaped how the British Empire managed the country.

Thus, looking forward to Iraq's future requires looking back at its past and the relationships that defined its growth. This period of time is illuminating because it demonstrates how independent India had evolved into an independent actor within Mesopotamia, creating a sphere of influence that at times bordered along the relationship of that of a colonizing force. Its economic, political, military, and sub-imperial ties to Mesopotamia established India as the British Empire dominant actor within the region. As a result, India's actions morphed into assumptions that, when the time came for the British Empire to extend its control into Mesopotamia, India would be left to tend to its sphere of influence. Yet, this dream never became reality. World War I fundamentally altered both the internationally accepted governmental norms and Britain's geopolitical stake in the Middle East. With these evolving

standards, the Government of India no longer represented a strong player capable of protecting British interests. Combined with substantial military and administrative failures, cutting the Government of India off from Mesopotamia represented the most logical choice for the British government to take in the name of self-preservation. When the Revolt of 1920 even more acutely challenged British rule in Mesopotamia, the government finally had the catalyzing event needed to swiftly and completely sever ties between India and Mesopotamia, turning Britain towards new policy approaches in the Middle East. No matter how long ago the ties between Mesopotamia and India ended, the fact still remains that at one point the British Raj based in India developed a significant and important relationship with Mesopotamia. Thus, even though geography and modern geopolitics and perceptions today divide India and Mesopotamia, as the superior field, history shows this was not always the case.

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