

## Iraq's short century: old problems, new perspectives

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On 6 November 1914, a week after the Ottoman empire had entered the war on the side of the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary), Indian Expeditionary Force 'D' landed at Fao in the southernmost province of Ottoman [1] Iraq. Their subsequent occupation and de facto annexation of the area consolidated a connection with a region in which Britain had long been economically dominant.

The force marched swiftly northwards, at first meeting little resistance; the euphoria this created encouraged those in charge in Delhi and London to contemplate an immediate dash for Baghdad. But it was poorly supplied and, at least initially, badly led, and early in 1916 it was checked by a Turkish rally at Kut [2].

Eventually, reinforcements from Britain and the transfer of the military command to London made possible the capture of Baghdad in March 1917. In November 1918, a few days after the end of the war, the city of Mosul was occupied, and the surrounding province was also deemed to have fallen into British [3] hands.

### The end of the Ottoman period

In the course of the war, Britain, France, Italy and Russia had entered into a series of agreements under which Anatolia and the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire were to be divided between the Allies in the event of an Ottoman defeat. With a number of important modifications, this division formed the basis of the peace settlement in the Middle East [4], under which France was assigned the areas which became Lebanon and Syria, and Britain was assigned the areas which became Iraq, Transjordan [5] and Palestine.

However, the entry of the United States into the war in April 1917 had introduced a new, and somewhat unnerving, political element into the Allies' calculations. In the words of a senior member of the India Office late in 1917; '[w]e must at least consider the possibility of a peace which will not give us the absolute political control of Mesopotamia that we should like to have ...'

In early 1918, President Woodrow Wilson [6] stated his war aims in his famous Fourteen Points speech; the twelfth point promised 'absolutely unmolested autonomous development' to any territories that might be 'liberated' from Ottoman rule.

Although its precise form took some time to materialise, the eventual result of this significant change in the international climate was the mandates system, in which the newly-founded League of Nations [7] assigned territories to one or other great power on an avowedly temporary basis. In other words, the system was designed as a means of preparing the states concerned for independence within a period which, if not precisely defined, at least envisaged an eventual end point. Colonisation, annexation, or imperial incorporation were thus ruled firmly off limits.

## Iraq between Ottomans and British

On the Iraqi [8] side, it is difficult to gauge what those who had been 'liberated' from Ottoman rule would have wanted if they had been given any say in planning their own future. It is important to remember that there had never been, or at least not since the heyday of the 'Abbasid empire, an entity corresponding to what now became 'Iraq', and also that the vast majority of the population of the three former Ottoman provinces which made up the new state had been brought up to consider the Ottoman state as a given, a structure to be tolerated and endured rather than overthrown.

This same can be said to apply to much of the rest of the Ottoman empire, where 'Arab nationalism' [9] was a far weaker and much more incoherent sentiment than later generations of 'Arab nationalists' would have their fellow countrymen (and the rest of us) believe. Some Iraqi officers, graduates of military colleges in Baghdad and Istanbul, had been involved in more or less secret societies which had struggled against the despotism of 'Abd al-Hamid II, but at least some of their goals had been achieved in the Young Turk Revolution [10] of 1908-09, which ended in his overthrow.

Similarly, many Iraqi Shi'a [11] intellectuals and men of religion had been influenced by the constitutional movement in Iran, itself strongly affected by the more politically active leadership emerging in the Shi'a holy cities [12] of Karbala and Najaf in Iraq in the latter part of the 19th century. The general Shi'a distrust of secular authority meant that most Iraqi Shi'a had had little positive enthusiasm for the Ottoman sultan-caliph in Istanbul; yet they were to accept and heed – in so far as they were able – the sultan's wartime appeals to fight the infidels who were threatening the structures of the Ottoman state. Hence any talk of 'Iraqi national sentiment' at this stage is somewhat anachronistic.

On the British side, the mantra which appeared very quickly, especially after the *thawra 'ishrin*, or national Iraqi uprising [13] of 1920 against British rule, was that of *economy*. Like the other mandated territories, Iraq had to be run as cheaply as possible while ensuring the achievement of Britain's objectives. These were, in descending order of importance, access to the oil of the Mosul vilayet [14]; strategic considerations, given Britain's Indian empire, and, somewhat later, the security of the empire air route.

Securing the oil [15] was accomplished by ensuring that the area where most of the oilfields were located became part of the new state; one by-product of this, incidentally, was that earlier promises of some form of Kurdish autonomy were rapidly forgotten.

The defence and internal security of Iraq were to be provided by a combination of the Royal Air Force (RAF [16]), a new branch of the British armed services anxious to define a viable role for itself in peacetime, and various local forces, principally the Assyrian levies, recruited from a Christian minority [17] which had arrived in Iraq as refugees during the first world war, and the Iraqi army.

## Creating the Iraqi state

In 1920-21, Britain spent £32 million on the defence of Iraq; by 1926-27 the figure had dropped to £4 million, and by mid 1930 to £480,000. In October 1921, seventeen battalions of the British and Indian armies were stationed in Iraq; by 1930, there were no British army units at all (apart from the individuals attached to the British military mission training the Iraqi army), but four squadrons of the Royal Air Force.

Although attempts were made to paper over the facts (notably in a series of evasive answers to questions in the British parliament), the RAF was regularly employed to bomb [18] or otherwise punish reluctant and/or indigent tribes, mostly in southern Iraq, whose crime was not to have paid the taxes they owed to the Iraqi government.

Perhaps the most serious long-term consequence of the ready availability of 'air control' was that it gradually developed into a substitute for administration; with such powers at its disposal, the Iraqi government was not encouraged to develop less violent methods of extending its authority.

The creation of the Iraqi army in many ways paralleled the constitutional arrangements arrived at for the new state, and, with hindsight, both the shape of the state and the shape of its military contained within themselves major elements of instability which gradually worked their way to the surface over time.

The army came into existence in January 1921, and increased in size in the course of the mandate from 3,500 to 12,000 men. Initially, it was little more than a glorified gendarmerie acting as an occasional adjunct to the RAF, and the Iraqi government knew this and resented it, but in the longer term, it functioned as another instrument of Sunni [19] Arab dominance, in the same way as the constitution and the other political structures. As late as 1941, there were no Shi'a officers at all, in the much the same way that all Iraqi cabinets contained only one, or at most two, Shi'a, even when the latter constituted at least 60% of the population.

Whether by accident or design, the ensemble of political and military institutions which the British created effectively gave most of the authority in the state to the Sunni Arab elite, now composed, on the one hand, of the former Ottoman land-owning, religious and service aristocracy, and on the other, of former officers in the Ottoman army, the most influential of whom had fought with Faysal ibn Husayn and his British associates in the Arab revolt [20] during the first world war.

### **The character of Iraqi leadership**

A certain degree of equilibrium was maintained for the duration of the mandate, partly because of Britain's supervisory role, and partly because of the personality of Britain's choice as ruler, Faysal, son of the Sharif of Mecca. Like his brother 'Abdullah, Faysal had been picked to play a certain role in the formation of a new state. To a certain extent he both did, and did not do, Britain's bidding. He died aged 50, in 1933, having piloted the state to a sort of independence.

Faysal [21] remains something of an enigmatic figure; one of the great 'what-ifs' of modern Middle Eastern history is the rather different course which Iraqi history might have taken if Faysal had still been alive in the 1950s (his father died at 79, his brother was 71 when he was assassinated in 1951) rather than dying twenty years earlier. Faysal was vital in the creation of Iraqi identity; he was a genuine war hero and came with a certain reputation both from the Arab revolt and from Syria. In addition, his descent from the Prophet gave him a certain cachet in the eyes of the Shi'a.

His successors were fashioned from much coarser clay; his son Ghazi (born 1912, reigned 1933-39), was a lightweight; his nephew, the Regent 'Abd al-Ilah (1913-1958, effectively on the throne between 1939 and 1958), was widely hated for his slavish obedience to Britain. His more innocent grandson Faysal II [22] (1935-58) was so tarred with his uncle's brush that neither of them stood much of a chance against the revolutionaries who came for them and for Nuri al-Sa'id in July 1958.

After Faysal's death in 1933, Iraqi politics degenerated into a series of unseemly struggles for power until 1941, when the exigencies of the second world war were such that Rashid 'Ali al-Gaylani's government's unwillingness to honour earlier treaty commitments to Britain precipitated a 'second British occupation'.

In 1936, Iraq had the dubious distinction of hosting the first military coup in the Middle East, and the eight ministries formed over the next five years were largely dependent on the favour of a tightly-knit group of army officers known as the Golden Square [23]. (In spite of occasional claims to radicalism, Rashid 'Ali's prime ministerial predecessors between the coup of October 1936 and his own second ministry of April 1941 had generally been careful not to fall out with the British). British troops stayed in Iraq until the end of the war and the RAF bases were only evacuated after the revolution of July 1958.

### **The nature of British control**

Most accounts of Iraq [24] in the 1930s and 1940s paint a picture of a struggle between various kinds of 'Arab nationalism' and a more or less determined, if officially disguised, British imperialism.

There is no doubt that Britain's strategic and oil interests in Iraq were predicated on the existence of a friendly government in Baghdad. British Petroleum and the Anglo-Dutch company Royal Dutch Shell controlled the majority of the shares of the Iraq Petroleum Company [25], a situation which pertained until the Iraqis nationalised IPC in 1972, and Iraq was a vital link in the chain of imperial defence between Britain and India.

Iraq had become independent of Britain in 1932, but although only a handful of British officials remained, Iraq was still part of the sterling area and remained linked to Britain by a series of long-standing economic ties and a number of more recent financial and military agreements.

Nevertheless, Britain was not overly concerned with the day-to-day details of what went on in Iraq, provided the various agreements were upheld and the oil continued to flow. The situation had been rather different during the mandate; to give an obvious example, Britain strenuously resisted the introduction of military conscription, on the not unreasonable grounds that this would cause great discontent among the Kurds in the north and in the *Shi'a* tribal countryside in the south.

Thus conscription was not introduced until 1934, a year after the Iraqi army had distinguished itself in massacring the unarmed and defenceless dependents of members of the Assyrian levies in the village of Simeel [26]. Although conscription was not entirely responsible for a major rising of the southern tribes in 1935, it was certainly a contributing factor.

### ***Shi'a* and *Sunni*: some familiar misconceptions**

It seems important to stress some of these aspects of the 'British legacy' [27] at a time when Iraqis are bracing themselves for another round of 'reconstruction' in circumstances in which the United States [27] seems not to have any clear vision of the road, or roads, ahead. (By 'British legacy' I mean the political and military arrangements created under the mandate, some of whose consequences are still with us today). There are matters of fundamental importance which the would-be 'reconstructors' [28] will need to bear in mind.

Those who seek to create a peaceful and democratic Iraq should begin by giving several of the received perceptions of Iraqi society a decent burial.

First, 'tribes' and 'tribal leaders' were largely reinvented [29] by Saddam Hussein in the late 1980s and 1990s as a means of exercising social control, but have little influence on the ground and thus need not be taken seriously (outside Kurdistan).

Second, it will be vital to assure the Kurds [30] that they will continue to enjoy as much autonomy within Iraq as they do now. Some sort of federal structure for the Kurdish area – promised by Britain in the early 1920s and then swiftly forgotten – is necessary. The Turks [30] will not be especially happy, but they will have to make similar arrangements for their own Kurds if they want to join the European Union.

Third, it is necessary to discard the notion that the *Shi'a* are simply waiting for an opportunity to secede from Iraq, a notion largely invented to justify American inaction [30] during the risings in the south after the end of the Gulf war in 1991. Iraqi *Shi'a* are Arabs who have, for the most part, little connection with, and less desire to be part of, the Islamic Republic of Iran – or, for that matter, of an Islamic Republic of Iraq.

There are of course exceptions, but the overwhelming majority of *Shi'a* know that their future is as part of a secular democratic Iraqi state where the rule of law prevails and where parliaments and cabinets better reflect regional, ethnic and sectional interests. This is the message of, amongst others, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim [31], forty of whose family members were killed by Saddam Hussein's regime.

Thus the resentment felt by *Shi'a* towards the power imbalance which has been in place since the foundation of the state is not primarily *religious*, but has to do with access, or more accurately lack of access, to power.

Thus in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s [31], when the appeal of 'Islam' was undergoing a general eclipse, the influence of the Holy Cities also began to wane. It was replaced by the Iraqi Communist Party [32] (the have-nots), which many *Shi'a* and Kurds joined, until it in turn was largely eclipsed by the persecution and massacres of the 1960s and 1970s – at which point clerical voices (some of whom were personalities of considerable weight, especially the late Muhsin al-Hakim and the late Baqr al-Sadr) began to make themselves heard and heeded again.

In principle, the same is true of the *Sunni*, who have never tried to impose any sort of 'religious' agenda as part of a political programme. Most *Sunni* outside the charmed circle of power and *Shi'a* generally want an end to the dictatorship of a single individual and his extended family and clan; this sentiment has little or nothing to do with religion.

### **Facing the past, to move beyond it**

What else will need to be done to undo some of the legacy of the past? At least three further steps are needed.

First, it will be vital to create a sense, for all members of the Iraqi population [33], that they have a genuine stake in state and society. There has, for instance, been a great deal of internal displacement [34], with a view to creating artificial majorities or minorities in different parts of the country (or emptying areas like the marshlands), so people will need to be asked whether they wish to return to the areas from which they have been forcibly removed [35].

Second, as far as the Iraqi military [36] is concerned, there will need to be a massive amount of dismissal and retraining, and the armed forces need to be placed squarely first under an international regime and then only very gradually handed over to Iraqi civilian control. Over the

past fifty years, the greatest threat to the stability of Iraq has always come from a small clique (sometimes officers, sometimes civilians) taking control of the military and using it (or paramilitary forces like the Republican Guard [37]) against various elements of the population for that clique's own ends. Easy solutions, involving more or less persuasive retired, dismissed, or 'neutral' army officers heading or taking part in some sort of interim government will not be acceptable to most of the population who will see it as 'business as usual'.

Third, a 'truth and reconciliation' commission [37] and/or a war crimes tribunal [37] and other measures of de-Ba'athification are absolutely essential if the regime's victims are ever to find closure. Furthermore, the United States would be well-advised not to be too hasty in handing out senior positions to individuals who were heavily implicated in policy implementation under the Ba'ath [38].

### **A democratic possibility?**

Of course, not all the deficiencies of Iraq society can be traced back to the circumstances and institutions of the mandate; other even more heterogeneous societies experienced and emerged from colonialism without subsequently enduring the abominations that the people of Iraq have suffered since the 1960s. The immense wealth which Iraq derived from oil in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s proved a double-edged sword; while it produced a fair degree of prosperity, it also enabled the regime to act and entrench itself independently of the rest of society, by using its monopoly of the means of coercion to expel, repress, or murder [39] those elements which protested or otherwise tried to move against it.

And of course Iraq acquired the means to manufacture weapons of mass destruction, and the means to wage chemical and biological warfare – although whether they were ever manufactured is still not clear – because the United States and most of the rest of the international community supported these activities while Iraq was busy neutralising Iran [40] in the 1980s.

However, the political and military institutions imposed by the British, with the exclusion from power and participation which the various structures implied for most of the population, will need fundamental review if Iraq is ever to be able to emerge from the pariah status with which Saddam Hussein and his cronies have so richly endowed it.

The task is obviously daunting. To those who protest that there is no democratic tradition [41] in Iraq, it should be pointed out that neither democracy, where the government agrees to become the opposition when the electorate so wishes, nor the application of a legal system by an independent judiciary, had flourished in Nazi Germany or inter-war Japan [42], or indeed before that time. The results of both those experiments, however, show that the imposition of democracy and the rule of law are highly sought after, and also widely accepted, by those who have long been denied them.

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[3] <http://www.btinternet.com/~britishempire/empire/maproom/iraq.htm>

[4] <http://www.cet.edu/earthinfo/meast/MEmain.html>

[5] [http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/his\\_transjordan.html](http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/his_transjordan.html)

[6] [http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/woodrow\\_wilson.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/woodrow_wilson.htm)

- [7] <http://worldatwar.net/timeline/other/league18-46.html>
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- [11] <http://www.bartleby.com/65/sh/Shiites.html>
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- [15] <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/iraq/history/1976britiraq.htm>
- [16] <http://www.raf.mod.uk/history/line1918.html>
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- [19] <http://www.bartleby.com/65/su/Sunni.html>
- [20] [http://www.kinghusein.gov.jo/his\\_arabrevolt.html](http://www.kinghusein.gov.jo/his_arabrevolt.html)
- [21] <http://www.bartleby.com/65/fa/Faisal1.html>
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- [26] [http://www.atour.com/State\\_of\\_Assyria.html](http://www.atour.com/State_of_Assyria.html)
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- [34] <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/iraq0303/Kirkuk0303.htm>
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