Iraq

Full Text:
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Iraq's entry into the colonial period is closely connected to its entry into statehood. Iraq as a separate territory with state borders is a product of World War I (1914–1918), officially a creation of the League of Nations, but in fact a result of the expansion of Great Britain's influence in the Middle East. This does not mean, however, that Iraq was merely a Western design, assuming that the population was unprepared for statehood. In fact, the territory of Iraq had long been part of the Ottoman Empire and, to different degrees during different periods of history, its formidable system of state administration.

OTTOMAN IRAQ BEFORE 1914

Iraq was formed out of three former Ottoman provinces with Basra as a capital in the South, Baghdad in the center, and Mosul in the North. The provinces were first submitted under Ottoman rule in the sixteenth century, but remained a frontier land between the Ottomans and the Iranian Safavid Empire. Mesopotamia was of strategic and symbolic importance for both. The Euphrates and Tigris were important waterways and Basra, controlling the access to the Persian Gulf, was an important hub of Indian Ocean trade. Moreover, the country hosted the most important shrines of Shia Islam in the towns of Najaf, Kerbala, and others. The struggle between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shiite Safavids over Mesopotamia lasted until 1639 when the provinces fell, finally, into Ottoman hands. Iraq, however, remained a frontier region. The complex Ottoman system of central control and local autonomy was bound to give way to local forces. In the eighteenth century, the Ottoman provinces of Iraq became virtually independent under the rule of

local dynasties, the most important being Georgian Mamluks, a military elite of slaves that managed to take over governorship in Baghdad and Basra. They officially acknowledged Ottoman suzerainty, but coexisted with local elites in a complex system of checks and balances that guaranteed mutual interests.

In the early nineteenth century, the growing threat of European imperialism prompted reform efforts in the Ottoman Empire that would strengthen the state apparatus. In 1831 Ottoman troops started to reassert Istanbul's control over the Mesopotamian provinces ousting the Mamluk pashas. Efforts to integrate Iraq into a reformed and more centralized Ottoman state system were only partially successful against local resistance, though. The elite of Ottoman bureaucrats, therefore, had to enter arrangements with urban notable families and the tribal leaders. Increasing numbers of influential people in the provinces started to accept a state-centered system of power sharing and running political and economic affairs within a patronage system overseen by state authorities.

During this period colonial penetration affected Mesopotamia in the framework of the empire as a whole. In the nineteenth century, British merchants became a serious competition for local tradesmen. In 1861 the Ottoman government gave out a license to a British steamship company on the Tigris. It supported British interests in neighboring Iran in competition with tsarist Russia, and created a link to the British strongholds in the Persian Gulf. In the so-called Baghdad-Bahn project the German Empire convinced Istanbul in 1902 to grant a license for building a railway line that would link Berlin and the European railway network with Baghdad. This project was part of a wider German strategy to enter an alliance with the Ottoman Empire. Even though it was never fully realized, it stirred a lot of British anxiety about competition in the Middle Eastern region. This is the background of the decision to send British Indian troops to Basra almost immediately after the outbreak of World War I in August 1914.
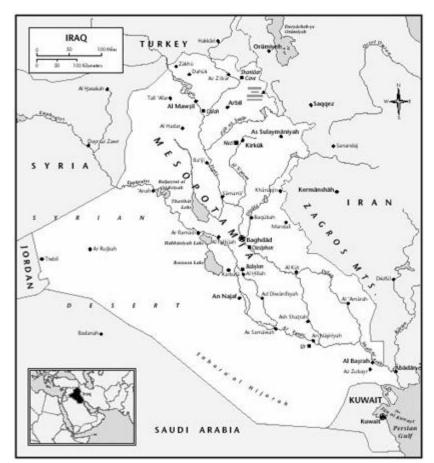
FROM MILITARY RULE TO THE MANDATE: 1914–1921

Basra was already under British control in November 1914. After a severe setback in 1916 at Kut, a town southeast of Baghdad where an entire British army surrendered to the Ottomans, the British captured Baghdad in 1917. Kirkuk in Northern Iraq fell in 1918, and British troops occupied Mosul after the armistice of Mudros in October 1918. After the war, both U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's (1856–1924) plans for the provinces of the Ottoman Empire and the secretly negotiated Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 between Great Britain and France envisaged a partition of the territory into smaller nation-states. The mandate system designed at the Paris peace conferences was, however, a means to reconcile colonial interest with the Wilsonian idea of self-determination. Iraq was already under British military rule when Great Britain was assigned the mandate over it. Now, it was responsible for preparing the country to become independent with viable institutions.

The creation of Iraq as a separate entity was not compelling, though. The Mesopotamian provinces of Basra and Baghdad constituted a separate geographical entity oriented toward the Persian Gulf, but Mosul had traditionally closer links with Syria than with Baghdad and Basra. Turkey put a claim on Northern Iraq, too, which promised the future

discovery of oil fields. It took until 1926 and the mediation of the League of Nations until Turkey acknowledged Mosul and Kirkuk as part of Iraq.

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FROM MILITARY RULE TO THE MANDATE: 1914–1921 © Maryland Cartographics. Reproduced by Permission.

British-controlled territories in the Middle East did not follow one stringent line of policy. Palestine had been occupied by the British command in Cairo, which was in close touch with the government in London, whereas the Iraqi occupation had been in the hands of British India. Delhi was less attuned to the new anticolonial atmosphere in international politics. The first years of British rule in Iraq therefore saw a competition between British Indian promoters of direct colonial rule and those who favored indirect rule more in accordance with the rules of the mandate. At the same time this would help to uphold British interests with minimal expenses, because it was nearly impossible to justify a costly commitment in Mesopotamia to the parliament in London. After a large

countrywide revolt in 1920 had absorbed a large number of troops and financial resources until it was suppressed, the option of indirect rule prevailed.

Other than usual, the British efforts in Mesopotamia had not been sufficiently prepared by intelligence work. Information about social circumstances and power structures were therefore scarce and rested to some extent on prejudices. British administrators believed that there was a clear-cut division between the urban and the rural spheres. The real Arabs were the tribes controlling the countryside, whereas the city dwellers, they assumed, were corrupt, unreliable, and under the influence of centuries of Ottoman Oriental Despotism. The rise of mostly Shiite tribes during the revolt of 1920 proved that the actions of Iraqis were less predictable. The Cairo Conference of 1921 therefore drafted a plan for the constitutional future of a self-administered Iraqi monarchy under British supervision.

THE MANDATE SYSTEM: 1921–1932

There was as little dynastic tradition in Iraq as there was a cohesive national territory and identity. London put Prince Faisal (1885–1933) on the throne, who was the son of Sherif Husayn ibn 'Ali (1854–1931) of Mecca and military leader of the Arab revolt of World War I. After his troops had captured Damascus in 1918, Faisal had ruled Syria. When the French removed him in 1920, it was a matter of disappointment for all Arab nationalists that British arrangements with Paris from the Sykes-Picot agreement weighed heavier than their commitment to support Faisal as an Arab leader. The throne of Iraq was meant to make up for this. Moreover, London believed that Faisal's family origin as a descendant of the Prophet would give him authority among the diverse groups of the country. Faisal, however, was aware that he was entirely dependent on British support, and while the urban notability acquiesced to the new state structures soon, the tribal realm of Iraq did not comply. Other than the constitutional structures imposed on the state suggested, the new government needed British military force necessarily to coerce the tribes into obedience. Aid troops recruited among Assyrian Christians that had fled from Eastern Anatolia into Iraq, and the British Royal Air Force took on this task. Tribes were bombed into paying taxes, whereas London was reluctant to give in to demands of the Iraqi government to form an Iraqi conscript army. Conscription would have aroused even more opposition from the tribes.

London wanted to get rid of the mandate duties as quickly as possible in order to reduce the burden on the British treasury. In order to do this they had to fulfill contradictory tasks: convince the League of Nations that Iraq was fit to govern itself democratically, and at the same time bind the existing power elites—tribes, notables, Ottoman administrative elites—to a state that was dominated by a foreign king together with a military elite that had no stake in the traditional patronage networks of the country. These so-called Sherifian Officers of Iraqi origin had fought under Faisal's command during the Arab revolt and formed his entourage in Syria. Later they joined him in Iraq and entered high government posts. In order to make Iraq presentable to the League of Nations, the British tried to strengthen the state by a mixture of coercive power and support of the state elite. Effectively, the old and new elites of the country joined interests as one landholding class.

The Sherifian Officers dominated this process through the legislative processes in the new state, creating possibilities to acquire large portions of former Ottoman state domain land, for example. The organic law of 1924 gave the overwhelming power to the executive, and in a society that lacked a developed public sphere, elections to the parliament could be easily manipulated. An abstract institutional power of constitutional structures therefore never emerged.

The treaty of independence between Iraq and Great Britain was signed in 1930 and became effective with Iraq's entry into the League of Nations in 1932. The treaty remained contentious, though, because it provided for a continued British military presence in the country. Two air bases were maintained, and Britain had the right to use Iraqi communication and transport lines in the case of war. Furthermore, Great Britain remained the exclusive supplier of military hardware and took responsibility for military training. On top of that, a large number of British advisers stayed in Iraqi ministries. The British ambassador remained highly influential, and Britain virtually controlled the Iraqi economy.

IRAQ IN THE 1930s

Nevertheless, Iraqi politicians had a wide leeway after 1932, even in foreign policy, which became the most contentious issue of the British-Iraqi relationship in the 1930s. The treaty remained a major concern of the Iraqi opposition, which ranged from pan-Arab nationalists and moderate socialists to the nascent communist movement. Ideological concerns were overshadowed by personal competition inside the existing patronage system. The Sherifian Officers and members of the old elites had all built their own power bases. After the unexpected death of King Faisal in 1933, the rivalries broke open and initiated a period of political turmoil and violence. Members of the opposition instigated tribal uprisings in order to put pressure on the frequently changing governments. The contradiction between the official statements of politicians and their pragmatic reliance on British support when they were in power led to growing

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frustration and political extremism among a younger generation of graduates from high schools, universities, and military academies.

The most important challenge to the authority of the pro-British Sherifian regime was the Iraqi army. It adopted British military tactics of coercion against tribal disobedience and applied them with brutal force against the Assyrian Levies and their families, who were stripped of their task in independent Iraq. In 1932 many were massacred by Iraqi military units after they had unsuccessfully pledged for autonomy. This created an international outcry, but no action followed. General Bakr Sidqi (1890–1937), a former Ottoman officer of Kurdish origin, gained a lot of authority in the army from his vital role in this and other internal military campaigns against rebellious tribes. In 1936 he staged the first military coup of Iraq, but in 1937 he was assassinated and his anti-Arab nationalist and moderately socialist government removed in a further military coup. During the following years, a clique of younger military officers with a strong Arab nationalist commitment dominated Iraqi affairs in a series of putsches. They represented a section of the younger generation

that was highly critical of Iraq's close association with Great Britain

WORLD WAR II AND THE NATIONALIST CHALLENGE

The British did not interfere directly during these tumultuous years. Even during the period of military coups, the civilian governments would not put into question the Anglo-Iraqi treaty. Only with rising tension in Europe toward the outbreak of World War II (1939–1945) did London perceive political and ideological conflicts in Iraq differently. The young intelligentsia of Iraq used the nascent public sphere in newspapers and political clubs to challenge the Iraqi alliance with Great Britain. Many still supported a close relationship with London, but British officials reported with growing frenzy about a potential alignment of Iraq with Nazi Germany. This anxiety grew when German armies defeated France and pushed into the Mediterranean during 1940.

The new situation with a British Empire on the defense created two camps in Iraq: The throne and Nuri as-Said (1888–1958), a Sherifian officer and leader of the pro-British faction, demanded unconditional support for Britain, whereas a second camp in the officer corps, especially a group of four younger officers, the so-called Golden Square, demanded that Iraq should at least remain neutral, if not take sides with a victorious Germany. In April 1941 the Golden Square organized a military coup that ousted the pro-British regent Abdullah (1882–1951)who ruled on behalf of the minor Faisal II (1935–1958), and Nuri as-Said. Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (1892–1965) became prime minister of a government of national defense. In London, Winston Churchill (1874–1965) decided that it was time to act. Insisting on the provisions of the Anglo-Iraqi treaty, he demanded rights of passage for large British Indian military contingents. Hostilities broke out on May 2. The British forces defeated the Iraqi army within one month. German and Italian air support arrived too late and had no impact. On May 31, Baghdad surrendered and submitted the country to the second British occupation.

THE DEMISE OF THE SEMICOLONIAL STATE: 1941–1958

The British occupation prompted a restoration of the monarchical state, its patronage system, and the dominance of the Sherifian paradigm. Nuri became the guarantor of the status quo and a close alliance with Britain. Iraq after World War II was a different country, however. Expanding state education, the military service established in 1934, beginning industrialization, and urbanization had turned the state from a closed elite affair into a daily reality for even the remotest places of the country. The growth of an urban proletariat accompanied the emergence of a mass society. Young men of underprivileged communities, such as the Shiites, demanded access to the state resources. It became more and more difficult to uphold a patronage system and legitimize the Sunni dominance in the inner government circles. Illegal parties such as the Iraqi Communists and later the Baath Party gained in influence among the masses. In this context, Iraq's economic and military dependence on Great Britain became the dominant symbol for the corruption of the old regime. Mass protests made the government revoke the Portsmouth treaty in 1948, which would have ended the British military presence in Iraq, but would have bound military planning, training, and expenditures to Great Britain for another twenty-five years.

During the period, semicolonial dependence became increasingly intertwined with Cold War issues. After the Egyptian revolution in 1952, the people of the Arab world had won an idol in Egypt's President Gamal 'Abd an-Nasir (1918–1970). His nonalignment policy and inclination toward the communist camp challenged Nuri as-Said's clear pro-British and pro-Western commitment. Nuri presented himself as an Arab nationalist, but under the condition of the regional dominance of the Iraqi monarchy and the internal status quo. The Baghdad Pact of regional cooperation between Great Britain, Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan signed in 1955 was a clear sign of alienation between Iraq and revolutionary Arab nationalist regimes such as the ones in Syria and Egypt.

By joining the pact, the Iraqi regime underlined its self-perception as more of a regional player than as a forerunner of an Arab unification. Furthermore, the pact underlined Britain's role in Iraq's foreign policy.

The Iraqi monarchy fell in 1958, when important sections of the Iraqi officer corps had lost confidence in the regime. It was outdated, a product of the colonial past that had given way to the new Cold War world order. In that, a conspiratorial group of Free Officers, inspired by the Egyptian revolution of 1952 and the creation of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria early in 1958, staged a coup on July 14. Many of the officers had a vivid memory of the 1941 war against Great Britain and the following suppression of pan-Arab tendencies in the Iraqi army, which they considered a humiliation. Politically, however, the officers entered the center stage unprepared and without a clear ideological commitment. The revolution of 1958, therefore, brought an end to Iraq's close association with Great Britain, but it also started a period of turmoil, dictatorship, and unprecedented violence that has still not come to an end even with the demise of Saddam Hussein in 2003 (b. 1937).

GREAT BRITAIN AND IRAQI OIL

Even after the 1958 revolution, the Iraqi oil industry remained largely under international control until it was nationalized in 1972. The dictatorial regimes of the following decades depended on the regular revenue guaranteed by state licenses given to the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC).

Already prior to World War I, the Ottoman government had granted the first licenses to explore Iraqi oil fields to the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), an international consortium. After the Ottoman defeat, British companies dominated the consortium, and the British government held a substantial part of the shares. The precarious financial situation of the Iraqi state made it easy for the TPC, from 1929 named IPC, to exert pressure. Oil was discovered in 1927 only, and exporting did not start until 1934. After independence, the Iraqi government began to issue limited concessions for further exploration to other companies, such as the British Oil Development Company (BOD), with a major Italian interest.

After 1936 the German government wanted to combine an investment in the BOD with a concession over a large railway construction project to be shared with France. It would have linked the northern oil fields via Mosul to the railway network of French Syria and its Mediterranean ports. However, the British convinced Italy to cede the majority of BOD shares to the IPC in exchange for oil supply during the Second Italo-Abyssinian War (1935–1936). The Iraqi government chose a southern railway option, which should link Iraq to Palestinian ports; therefore, British control over Iraqi oil remained unchallenged. After the war, oil royalties became the most important component of Iraqi state revenues, but IPC control over oil production underlined the public impression that Iraq remained dependent on the former mandate power.

IRAQI JEWS AND ZIONISM

When Iraq was founded as a state in 1921, Jews entered many state offices because they were better prepared than others to serve in the new administration. The Iraqi Jewish community had been one of the most intellectually and economically successful Jewish communities in the Arab world. Jewish schools were the first to offer modern education starting from the 1860s.

After World War I, Iraqi Jews were very skeptical about Zionism that struck roots in Palestine. They considered themselves Iraqi patriots, faithful to the Iraqi state. During the late 1920s and the 1930s, however, Arab nationalist rhetoric identified the Zionist project more and more with British imperialist policy in the Arab lands and no longer made a clear distinction between Jews and Zionists. After the downfall of the Gaylani government in 1941, between 100 and 200 Jews fell victim to a pogrom mostly committed by youth bands in Baghdad. The situation of Jews in Iraq improved slightly under the restored old regime, but it became increasingly unbearable after the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, when the Arab-Israeli conflict became a propagandistic device of Arab governments in general. The majority of Iraqi Jews left for Israel in 1951.

SEE ALSO Mandate Rule ; *Mandate System*; Oil .

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