

# The British Mandate in Iraq, 1914-1932

Dr Toby Dodge, The International Institute for Strategic Studies

## Britain in Iraq: an introduction

Britain's direct intervention in Iraq lasted 18 years. This time, during which Britain struggled to build an Iraqi state, can be usefully divided into four stages, 1914-1920, 1920-1923, 1923-1927 and finally 1927-1932. The move from one period to another was triggered by major changes in British government policy as it attempted to meet international commitments under the Mandate, pacify an increasingly hostile Iraqi public whilst also diffusing the growing resentment at home about the costs of state building. The British state did not commit the time, amounts of money or levels of expertise necessary to fulfil its obligations to the League of Nations or to the people of Iraq. In 1932 the new Iraqi governing elite appointed by the British inherited a badly built and unstable state. This elite, along with British influence in the country, was swept aside 26 years later in a brutal military coup that ushered in an era of violence and instability that persists up until the present day.

Britain's formal involvement in the creation of the Iraqi state began in the early months of the First World War. On 6 November 1914, troops from the British Indian Expedition Force [landed on the Fao Peninsula](#) in Ottoman territory at the head of the Persian Gulf. Six years later, in April 1920, the British government formally accepted responsibility for building an Iraqi state out of the post-war wreckage of the Ottoman Empire. It received the 'sacred trust' of a [League of Nations' Mandate](#) at the San Remo conference. It publicly and self-consciously committed itself, under the oversight of the League's Permanent Mandates Commission, to turn three former provinces of the Ottoman Empire, Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, into a modern self-determining state. However, within 12 years the British government had persuaded the League to recognise Iraq's full independence. Britain had successfully divested itself of the very costly responsibility for Iraq's creation. It was during this period, from 1914 to 1932, that the institutional basis of the Iraqi state should have been built. It was the failure of successive British governments to fulfil the terms of the League of Nations' Mandate; to construct a stable, sustainable state in Iraq, that created the basis to the political instability and violence that has come to dominate Iraq.

One of the key reasons for Britain's failure in Iraq was the transformation of the international system between the First and Second World Wars. The idea that the developing world should be organised into self-determining states was a novelty at the beginning of the period but had become dominant by the late 1930s. The prolonged and devastating nature of the First World War and the consequent rise to dominance of the United States of America at its end were all symptoms of much larger structural changes to the global order. The power of Britain, France and Germany were greatly reduced by the

War, leaving all three struggling to regain domestic stability and international influence. The cumulative effects of these changes – military, economic, institutional and ideological – heralded the end of Britain's hegemonic role in the international system. This allowed the United States and then the Soviet Union to become key players, pitting the universalising ideologies of Liberalism against Marxism in a struggle for supremacy. The rise of this ideological battle led to the self-determining state becoming the international system's definitive unit of organisation. This signalled the death of the pre-war imperialism of the European powers based as it was on empire building and territorial annexation.

In Iraq under the Mandate it was left to four British High Commissioners, Sir Percy [Cox](#) Sir Henry [Dobbs](#), Sir Gilbert [Clayton](#) and finally Sir Francis [Humphrys](#) to navigate these turbulent political waters. Each attempted to interpret confused, contradictory and often non-existent instructions from London, whilst struggling to build the institutions of a functioning state and negotiate with the Iraqi politicians who were destined to run it. It was during this period that a small and largely unrepresentative Sunni Arab governing elite quickly came to dominate Iraqi politics. Until his death in 1933, King [Faisal](#) stood at the pinnacle of this group. Faisal was the son of the Sharif of Mecca who in 1916, during the First World War, triggered the Arab Revolt in favour of the British. In 1919 Faisal attended the [Paris Peace Conference](#) in an attempt to secure his family's political dominance over the Middle East. However, his trip ended in ignominy and he was ejected from Syria by the French government after they were awarded its Mandate. In 1921 the British chose Faisal to become [king of Iraq](#), their key tool of influence in the country. He brought with him 300 former Ottoman army officers who had either fought in the Arab Revolt or had been with him in Damascus. It was this small homogenous group who went on to form the core of Iraq's governing elite. Most prominent among them were [Nuri al Said](#) and [Ja'far Pasha](#) al Askari. Related to each other by marriage both had studied at the Military Academy and Staff College of the Ottoman army in Istanbul. Nuri went on to become the longest serving Prime Minister under the Mandate and the most powerful politician in the country. On 15 July 1958, Nuri al Said was murdered and the political system that the British built under the Mandate was swept away in a [military coup](#) carried out in the name of Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism

## **The First World War Years**

From the beginning of the War until 1920, the consensus of opinion amongst British politicians and diplomats was that Basra, as the most strategic and economically valuable area of Iraq, would be annexed to the Empire. In the political climate of the War's early years, the idea that once taken Basra would be handed back to the Turks or to its indigenous inhabitants seemed ludicrous to those involved

in the execution of military operations. It was the capture of Baghdad in March 1917, after a long and costly campaign, that led to this assumption being formally codified as policy. The ambitious nature of this approach, the certainty with which it was stated and the ideology which justified it, all sprang from the discourse of imperialism that had structured British foreign policy for the major part of the nineteenth century. It is testament to the extent of changes to the international system and the confusion they induced in British diplomats and politicians that it would not be until 1927 that policy towards Iraq would again gain any comparable degree of coherence or certainty.

### **Increasing American Influence**

The second change in British government policy was triggered by the rise of American power and US President Woodrow Wilson's active liberalism. It now became increasingly obvious that the annexation of Basra was not an option that American diplomacy would tolerate. The realities of this new situation began to become apparent to those British diplomats involved in the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, the construction of the League of Nations and negotiations surrounding the **terms of the Mandates** themselves. Those based at the heart of government in London were the first to recognise the impossibility of annexation. The British colonial civil servants in Baghdad however, cut off by geography, ideology and experience, were loath to accept these new policy constraints. On 2 July 1920, a **revolt against British rule** broke out across rural areas in Iraq. The ferocity and geographic extent of the revolt meant the cost of suppressing it was high in terms of both expenditure and casualties. It took an overstretched British army three months to regain control of the country. The uproar that this costly revolt caused in Britain forced a **radical change** in the way Iraq was controlled. In October 1920 Sir Percy Cox was sent back to Baghdad to take up the role of High Commissioner, the chief instrument of British policy. His task was to tailor Britain's role in the country to conform to new international norms and the government's pressing need to reduce expenditure in line with its weakened strategic and economic position. Cox had to find a way of creating a government that would publicly devolve power to Arab politicians while codifying Britain's position under the Mandate regime, opening it up to international scrutiny. The result was the speedy construction of **'an Arab façade'** for the Mandate. This involved the appointment of Faisal as king and the devolution of political power to a cabinet made up of Iraqis. Once this process had been set in motion, as real political power was given to Iraqi politicians, British influence over the country began to wane. Iraqi politicians, from Faisal downwards, came to realise that they were now key to the success of British policy. They demanded greater and greater autonomy in the hope that they could rally public support to their new government.

## Rise of Arab Nationalism

It was the growth of organised Arab nationalism amongst the urban population of Iraq that became the main drive behind the continuing evolution of British policy after 1920. The coordination of mass protest by the urban educated classes against the Mandate meant that from 1923 the British further redefined their policy. This involved a move away from Mandated control, wrapped up as it was with notions of direct long-term (if constrained) rule. For 1923-1927, the approach of the British authorities in Baghdad and their masters in London can be best described as advisory. Politicians in London and civil servants in Baghdad came to realise that Iraq was going to become independent much sooner than any of them had predicted. Under these new realities Britain's aim in interacting with Iraq's politicians was to try and ensure that the state being built operated as efficiently, but as cheaply as possible.

## Moves to Independence

Policy towards Iraq was riven with contradictions. It was attempting to meet international commitments given to the League whilst minimising political pressure from both British and Iraqi public opinion. In 1927 these tensions led to another and final shift. The idea of creating a sustainable, stable Iraqi state with the ability to rule efficiently over its population was dropped altogether. Britain's primary policy aim from 1927 onwards, was to unburden itself of its international responsibilities towards Iraq as quickly as possible. British drafted reports to the League of Nations Mandate Committee were actively falsified. Those in Iraq who complained about the abuses of central government rule were silenced or ignored. Britain had decided to construct a 'quasi-state', one that had the appearance of a state but was in fact a façade built in order to allow Britain to disengage as quickly as possible.

The tensions inherent in the conflicting responsibilities faced by the British government; to a domestic population demanding a reduction in expenditure, to the international community calling for the construction of a viable state and to the Iraqi people demanding self-determination, were to set the pattern for the end of the European Empires. When Iraq entered the League of Nations in 1932, it was granted *de jure* independence as a self-determining nation state. In reality the situation was altogether different. The state was run by a small clique of mainly Sunni politicians who could not control the country without the bombs and machine guns of the Royal Air Force. In addition, Iraq was still financially dependent upon the British Exchequer. The commitments given to the League by both Britain and Iraq about protecting the country's different ethnic and religious communities were simply ignored in order to facilitate Iraq's independence. The British state actively colluded with the new Iraqi political elite to create the

impression that Iraq had fulfilled the criteria set down by the League for statehood, when it clearly had not.

Throughout the 12 years of the Mandate the British High Commissioners charged with state building were painfully aware of the constraints and limitations that they felt themselves to be working within. The primary and constant goal of those in London was to reduce the costs of the Mandate by forcing the Iraqi government to take greater financial and strategic responsibility for its own government and defence as soon as possible. But, juxtaposed against this was the contradictory goal of securing and furthering Britain's strategic interests in Iraq and the wider Middle East. These tensions created the incoherent and frequently changing policy towards the building of a state in Iraq. The result of these conflicting pressures was that by the time of its **independence** in 1932, Iraq could neither defend itself against its neighbouring states, nor impose order unassisted across its territory. It depended on the RAF as the final guarantor of its internal and external sovereignty. Internationally its *de jure* statehood rested not on the creation of sustainable governmental capacity or the ability to hold its own militarily, but merely on its recognition by the League. Iraq in 1932 was a quasi-state, dependent for its survival not on its military strength or administrative capacity but on international guarantees of its borders. In that sense it was the first post-colonial state, a harbinger of what was to become commonplace thereafter.

### **Citation:**

Toby Dodge, 'The British Mandate in Iraq, 1920-1932', *The Middle East Online Series 2: Iraq 1914-1974*, Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, Reading, 2006

© *Middle East Online: Iraq*, Cengage Learning, 2006