Chapter One

Understanding the Mandate in Iraq

I spent several hours by his bedside while the old man lamented the passing of the good old days. It was impossible to listen to the words of this old aristocrat without an overwhelming sense of the smallness of the world and the sameness of human nature. With a few changes in names and localities, his words might have been used by any old English landowner of a generation ago. . . . Government was undercutting the roots of the old society, by strengthening the lower classes and by sacrificing the noble. —*John Glubb, reporting a conversation with the dying Fahad ibn Hadhdhal, Shaikh of the Amart division of the Anaizd in June 1923.*[1]

Between 1914 and 1932, the British government created the modern state of Iraq. In the aftermath of the World War I British foreign policy was dominated by financial and military weakness, as President Woodrow Wilson and the United States were driving attempts to re-establish international order. Wilson strove to rework the Westphalian system, dating back to 1648, on a global, extra-European basis. At the heart of this project was the Mandate system, designed to establish the universal ideal of the sovereign state, with comparatively open markets and politically independent government. The creation of the Iraqi state represented a break with traditional territorial imperialism and signaled the beginning of the end of British international dominance. Under the Mandate system real political power had to be devolved to the institutions of the nascent Iraqi state and the Iraqi politicians running them.

Once British tutelage and supervision over the creation of Iraq gained international recognition through the League of Nations in 1920, it was perceptions of Iraqi society by its British rulers that had the major influence on how the state was built. Inserted into an unfamiliar society and charged with building the institutions of a modern state, British colonial officials had little choice but to strive to understand Iraq in terms that were familiar to them. The conception of society that colonial officials deployed to order an alien population, sprang in large part from their own

understandings of the evolution of British society.[2] At the heart of British thinking was a dichotomy between the explanatory weight to assign to individuals as independent agents and that to assign to social structure and 'traditional' institutions and practices.[3] Rational individualism was dominant, but a romantic collectivism also played an important role.[4] British attempts at state-formation in Iraq revolved around arguments between these two positions. Should the state form direct institutional links with individuals, or should it rule through tribal organizations and their shaikhs? The conflict between these two competing conceptions of social order ultimately determined—and doomed—British attempts to successfully create state institutions through which the Iraqi people could exercise national sovereignty and self-determination within a reestablished system of international order.

The goal of creating a self-consciously 'modern' state made British colonial presence in Iraq different from previous versions of British rule throughout its Empire. After 1920, as new governmental institutions were built, it slowly became apparent to British officials that the Iraqi state was to be run by and for Iraqis. By the mid-1920s it was realized (if not accepted) by the British administration that, with Iraq's entry into the League of Nations, the Iraqis running the state would, within a very short period of time, be given autonomy. Far from consciously creating an 'informal empire' in the Middle East, as some scholars have argued, the British in Iraq were very aware of the temporary nature of their tutelage.

The period during which modern Iraq was created, 1914–1932, is situated in the interregnum between two epochs — that of free-trade imperialism dominated by the British and U.S.–promoted international liberalism. The First World War delivered a systemic shock and represented the culmination of several trends within the international system. The three pillars of nineteenth-century international relations — British hegemony, free trade imperialism and international stability — all came under siege from forces whose origins dated from early in the previous century. The obvious failure of the system to prevent war, the economic and military strain that the conflict placed on the British treasury and army, and the social turmoil that erupted in the aftermath of the ceasefire highlighted a long-term international crisis.

Britain as the first industrialized power, was clearly going to find it dif-

ficult to defend its head start, as industrialization spread throughout Europe and beyond. From the 1870s onwards, although Britain's output of coal, textiles and iron increased in absolute terms, it began to decrease in relation to other producers.[5] The First World War exacerbated this decline in economic dominance as Britain's trade deficit with the United States greatly expanded. The combined effects of these developments caused the center of gravity of the international economy to shift to the United States. Britain exercised decreasing control over the European balance of power.[6]

After the economic chaos of war, the United States reverted to the Gold Standard in 1919, followed by the rest of Europe in the 1920s. The rise of protectionism was matched by a decline in the economic dominance of the City of London. Despite British government attempts, the City could not regain its authoritative position at the heart of a free trading world economy. Global economic consensus was not regained until 1945.[7] This breakdown in the system of international economics, due in part to a decline in British hegemony, was matched by the end of the balance of power system in the run up to the First World War. No alternative system of international power appeared to take its place in the Great War's aftermath.

The rise in American economic power led, initially at least, to a more assertive U.S. post-war foreign policy. An ascendant America, in conjunction with the old hegemon Britain, attempted to provide solutions to international economic instability and the revolutionary political movements sweeping across Eastern Europe. Like Britain in 1815, the U.S. attempted to reestablish, along reformed lines, the Westphalian system. It was hoped that reformed Westphalian principles would create a coalition of states who would act collectively in ways that favored the United States. Unlike Britain and in reaction to the overtly internationalist stance of the Bolsheviks in Moscow, President Woodrow Wilson proposed remaking the Westphalian system into a global order that would extend the principle of state sovereignty beyond Europe and use it to meet the world-wide challenges of revolution and instability.[8]

It is within the international system of the twenty-year crisis, during which no hegemonic state dominated, that Iraq was constructed.[9] The slow international decline of Britain combined with the tentative asser-

tion of U.S. power, created an international system organized around two poles. Materially British economic and military power was in disarray. The United States' economy, expanding since the end of the Civil War behind an array of tariff barriers, was now of a size and dynamism to cast its influence across the world. Conceptually Woodrow Wilson's dominance of the Paris Peace Conference along with his demands for open seas, open markets and self-determination, gave rise to the possibility of a new organizing principle for the international system. Order would be based on the universal unit of the sovereign state, fostering comparatively open world markets and politically independent governments. Even with Wilson's death U.S. isolationism was confined to the political sphere. Economically the U.S. continued to push for open markets for its exports. Politically Britain's comparative post-war weakness led to the interregnum, with a dying hegemon unable to assert its dominance, but with the nascent hegemon unprepared and unwilling to assume the burdens of world leadership.

The structural and material changes, on both the domestic and international levels, had far-reaching ramifications for British politics and foreign policy. The historic bloc that structured the British state had to be reconfigured to meet destabilizing economic and political challenges. Lloyd George's wartime coalition government had already increased the power of the state to intervene in and direct the economy.[10] Post-war domestic instability and the global decline of the City of London, gave further impetus to this process. Gentlemanly capitalists and industrialists were forced to cede power to civil servants and politicians.

British politicians, diplomats and colonial civil servants were experiencing the change in the international system from 1920–1932 first hand. Their understanding of this change was the immediate response of people reacting to day-to-day events, with little time to devote to gauging the larger mechanisms at work.[11] The majority of them nonetheless perceived that far-reaching changes were taking place. The degree to which these changes heralded an absolute break with the past and were initiating a new system of international politics was a matter of debate amongst those involved in policy formation and implementation. Few had the time or inclination to speculate on the meaning of the larger process in which they were caught up.