
Postscript

Despite the Iraqi nationalist revolt of 1920, the British proceeded with plans to rule the mandate of Iraq awarded to them at the San Remo conference and confirmed by the League of Nations in 1922. The new state would consist of the three former Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul with their diverse religious and ethnic populations now welded into one country. But instead of direct colonial rule as advocated by the India Office, Winston Churchill, now the head of the newly formed Colonial Office decided that the British would rule Iraq on the cheap. Instead of occupying the country, an Iraqi government was to be linked to Britain by treaty. Instead of large numbers of troops, the British would use their air force, supported by the Assyrian Levies, a militia composed of refugee Christians, to suppress tribal and Kurdish revolts, and allow Iraq to develop its own military. British advisers would oversee the work of cabinet ministers who would head the departments of a new constitutional monarchy.

The Creation of Iraq was finalized by Churchill and his colleagues at a conference in March 1921 at Cairo. Most of the attendees were British officials serving in Mesopotamia. Gertrude Bell was there, as was T. E. Lawrence. The only Iraqis who were invited were Ja'far al-Askari and Sasson Hesqail, both of whom were to play major military and economic roles in the new state. While Churchill sat outside and sketched the pyramids, British officials met in a hotel where they drew

borders and made decisions about a government and an administration that would last until 1958.

The new country of Iraq was to be a constitutional monarchy headed by the Hashimite Emir Faysal, leader of the Arab Revolt against the Turks, who had been promised the throne of Syria but lost it when the French were awarded that mandate. Gertrude Bell was certain that Faysal would be acceptable to most Iraqis: as a member of Hashimite family and a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad, he would be respected by both Sunnis and Shi'is. Faysal was not easily convinced, however. At first reluctant to take on the position, he was, nonetheless, realistic and understood that in the new international political climate, there would be few leadership opportunities. He agreed to become king of Iraq if the Iraqi military officers who served with him in Syria could become part of the new government.

The British smoothed the way for the new administration. Alternative candidates were deported and a "referendum" was held. Declaring that 96 percent of Iraqis — some even voted twice — accepted the new king, the British invited Faysal to come to Iraq to rule. In August 1921, he was enthroned and the business of governing Iraq began.

Under British "tutelage" there was progress under the mandate. While Faysal always doubted that the country would remain welded together, institutions began to take root. In 1932 when the League mandate was ended and Iraq became independent, the treaty with Britain was passed and the accoutrements of a modern secular state were implanted: political parties, schools, medical care, civil service, and a military establishment. But the British remained the ultimate arbiter of power, as the Royal Air Force (RAF) retained its bases in Iraq. In 1940, as a new World War was beginning, an attempted nationalist coup was put down by Britain on behalf of the king, and Britain retained *de facto* power in Iraq until the end of the war. Similarly, as they had during World War I, the British and the Allies effectively divided the neighboring states into spheres of influence.

But by 1945 the world had changed. Britain had been weakened by the war, and in 1947 both India and Palestine left the British Empire. No longer was control of Mesopotamia and the Gulf necessary to preserve the route to India. Now the region was most valued not so much

for its geopolitical situation as for its oil, and in the aftermath of the war, the United States gradually gained hegemony. The British left the Gulf in 1970, ceding influence to the United States.

The parallels between the period of World War I and its aftermath and 2003 have been implicit, and sometimes explicit, throughout this volume. There have been many similarities between the British invasion of Mesopotamia in 1915 and the American invasion in 2003. But there are differences as well. In 1915 Britain controlled the greatest empire in the world, but it was engaged in a major war on its own doorstep, far from Mesopotamia. It suffered tremendous losses, especially human losses, during the war, and, as David Fromkin has pointed out, great political changes were occurring in Britain itself. Support for empire was eroding. This volume is an attempt, however brief, to recall a similar event in history, in the hope that memory will inform the future.