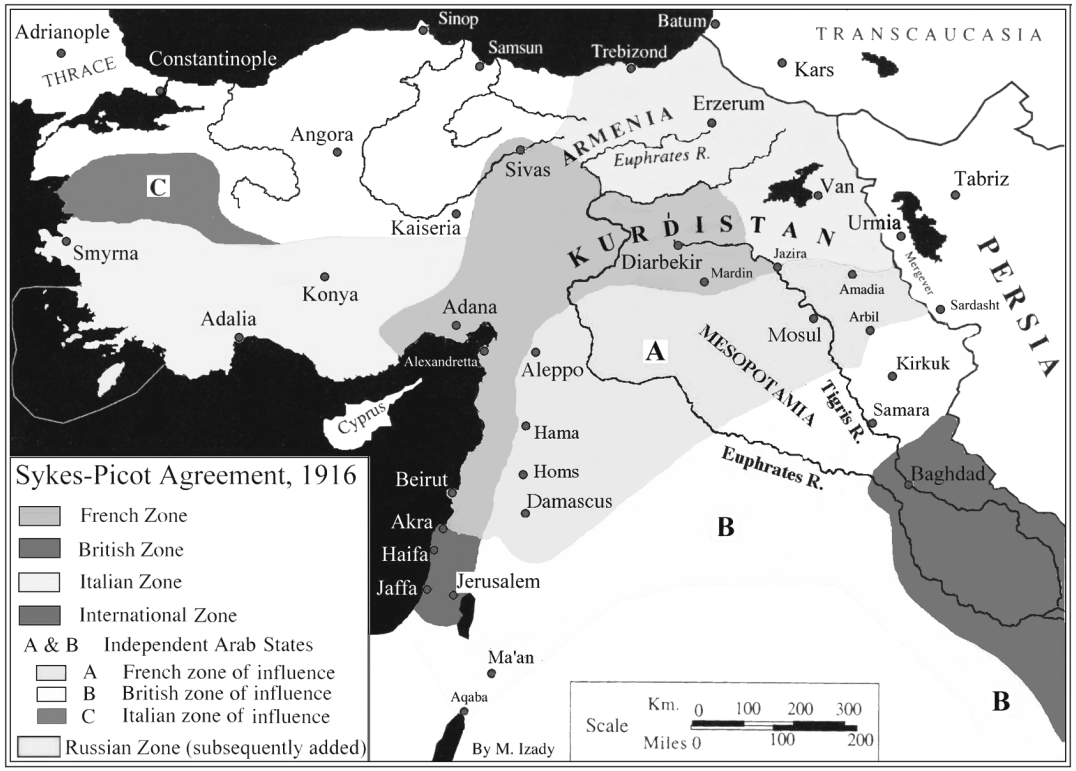
The Creation of Iraq, 1914–1921



The Sykes-Picot Agreement

The Creation of Iraq, 1914–1921

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Foreword

Shortly after World War I, the state we know today as Iraq was invented. Some eighty years later, the United States and a few other countries invaded Iraq with the declared objective of reinventing at least its system of government. The editors of this volume (who also organized the conference that gave birth to it) chose to explore the history of the creation of Iraq, but they also implicitly posed the question of whether the British experience in the early twentieth century had special meaning and lessons for the invaders and liberators of the twenty-first.

In fact, while there were many parallels between the two, it was also striking how many differences there were. The Iraq of 1915–1925 was a much more primitive place. Iraq in 2003 had an efficient and functioning bureaucracy. Although that bureaucratic machinery was at times used for nefarious purposes, it nevertheless provided an invaluable base of expertise and experience that was almost entirely absent when the British marched north to Baghdad. By 2003 Iraq was no longer an illiterate society; mass education had penetrated almost every corner of the populace. By the twenty-first century, oil had become the centerpiece of the Iraqi economy. In the 1920s it was not. Oil changes things. It is typically regarded as a blessing, since it generates great revenue. But oil also has a perverse effect on countries that have it, since money goes directly into the central state coffers with little or none going directly to

the people. It frees the government from dependence on the popular will, and thereby tends to discourage democratic behavior and accountability. It is as hard today to predict the effect oil wealth will have on the new Iraq as it would have been to predict the prospect of oil revenues in the 1920s.

What is similar? The Americans in 2003, like the British before them, did not arrive with a game plan that was reliable. One reason for this uncertainty is that matters of local interest always trump external interests. The effect of tribes, as well as the effects of individual interests and regional interests, were no less powerful eighty years on. Inevitably, it seems, the external "liberators" came in confident of their objectives and priorities, only to be surprised, and so, in the end, find they must adjust their thinking to take account of local demands. Despite the best laid plans, the new leaders inevitably find themselves improvising.

Another fact that emerged from this historical reevaluation was that the forms of democracy are an empty vessel unless endowed with genuine authority. No people will be fooled by a show of elections to positions without any power. Running for office, however democratic the process, will be meaningless unless those elected are actually running their own affairs. At the same time, that is an inherent risk, since genuinely democratic procedures may produce new leaders who are unsympathetic to the views (and interests) or the liberating power. The contradiction is not easily resolved.

In these presentations, I was struck repeatedly by the fact that ethnicity is different from politics. When the British after 1915 were considering the politics of what was to become Iraq, they expected someone who was a Shi'ite to vote one way and somebody who was a Kurd to vote another. Yet they repeatedly discovered that was not the case. I suspect that this is a lesson the United States and others will have to learn and re-learn in modern Iraq. We all have this model in our heads of a three-tier country: the Kurds in the north, the Sunnis in the center, and the Shi'ites in the south. In reality the biggest Shi'ite population is in the center, there are Kurds everywhere, and it is generally much more complicated than it appears.

Similarly, the Law of Unintended Consequences will be no less in force now than it was then. Things have a way of going wrong, of surprising us, of turning out quite differently than anticipated.

History warns us to beware of statements that say "It's all about oil (or religion or ethnicity)." In fact, it is not all about oil, it is not all about religion, it is not all about ethnicity. It is really about all those things, and circumstances refuse to fit themselves into such a tidy package despite our fervent wishes.

Finally, even a cursory look back should convince all of us to beware of predictions. People who are absolutely convinced that they know how things are going to work out are almost always wrong. They may be wrong for better or for worse, but they are going to be wrong. We cannot look at the world as a linear extrapolation when in fact the real world is extraordinary lumpy and endlessly surprising. Iraq has been — and will be — no exception.

These comments are simply a personal reaction to the presentations at the original conference and in this volume. It has been a valuable learning experience for me. And I recommend these accounts to anyone who is interested in understanding just how hard it is to "liberate" Iraq, and why any outside power should approach that task with a healthy dose of humility.

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