

THOUGHTS ON THE FORMATION OF THE STATE OF IRAQ

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My talk tonight is going to focus principally on the formation of the state of Iraq, and then I shall take a short look at the various groups in the country and their leaders.

Let's look first at the creation of the state of Iraq. At the outbreak of World War I, the area which now comprises the state of Iraq was part of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the three provinces of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul in the Ottoman Empire comprise most of what is now the nation of Iraq. In 1914, the Ottomans decided to try to stop the expansionary desires of the Russian Empire, and they made the fateful decision to enter the First World War on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Consequently, in the summer of 1914, the British landed in Basra, and the recent history of the area called Iraq began. Initially, the British had intended to occupy little more than Basra to make certain that Britain was able to maintain control of the Persian Gulf so that the shipping routes to India would not be endangered. However, over the next several years, when they found that their way north was unimpeded, they first moved up to Baghdad and then, eventually, to Mosul.

The British occupation of Iraq encountered many problems, but probably the most far reaching was the lack of any sense of national unity.

As one author put it:

The diversity of the population within the three *wilayas* was more apparent than any unifying factors, while in terms of the 'traditional' commercial orientation of the three main towns, Mosul had always looked more towards Aleppo and south western Turkey than to Baghdad; Basra had long established trading connections with India and on the Gulf, while Baghdad itself was a center of the Persian transit trade. Encouraging either town, especially Basra, to surrender its traditional autonomy to Baghdad was not an easy task, although an extremely necessary one, as Basra's importance as an outlet to the sea had grown with increasing trade. Outside the towns, loyalty to the new government depended largely on the persuasive powers of British police officers and the British officials' 'advising' the local representatives of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior.

The population was about half Shia Muslim and a quarter Sunni, with other minorities from Jews to Christians, but another division ran across the religious one: while half the inhabitants were Arab, the rest were Kurds (mainly in Mosul), Persians or Assyrians. The cities were relatively advanced and cosmopolitan; in the countryside, hereditary tribal and religious leaders still dominated. There was no Iraqi nationalism, only Arab. Before the war, young officers serving in the Ottoman armies had pushed for greater autonomy for the Arab areas. When the war ended, several of these, including Nuri Said, a future prime minister of Iraq, had

gathered around Feisal. Their interest was in a greater Arabia, not in separate states.

By 1918, the Ottoman Empire and the power of the sultan had dwindled to almost nothing. The government, which had made the decision to fight with Germany and its allies, departed on a German warship early in the fall of 1918. A caretaker government, which controlled little more than Istanbul, negotiated terms of surrender with representatives of the British government in October, 1918.

The French and especially the British had been thinking about how the lands of the Ottoman Empire would be divided at the end of the war well before the fall of 1918. In 1916, the French, represented by Georges Picot, and the British, represented by Sir Mark Sykes, divided the Arab-speaking areas with the British getting the lion's share. The British attitude was best illustrated by Lloyd George, whom Arnold Toynbee heard ruminating one day during the Peace Conference, while delivering some papers to the prime minister. "Mesopotamia...yes...oil..irrigation...we must have Mesopotamia; Palestine...the Holy Land...Zionism...we must have Palestine; Syria...h'm...what is there in Syria? Let the French have that.' Thus the lineaments of the peace settlement in the Middle East were exposed: Britain seizing its chance; the need to throw something to the French; a homeland for the Jews; oil; and the calm assumption that the peacemakers could dispose of the former Ottoman territories to suit themselves. For the Arab Middle East, the peace settlements were the old

nineteenth-century imperialism again. Britain and France got away with it- temporarily-because the United States did not choose to involve itself and because Arab nationalism was not yet strong enough to challenge them.”

Mesopotamia, which is the term the British used to refer to the Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra, was destined to be a British mandate regardless of French desires. British and French wrangling culminated in May, 1919 with a violent scene between Lloyd George and Clemenceau over the disposition of the whole Ottoman Empire. However, the fact that British troops occupied the area, British administrators from India were running the area, and British ships were sailing up and down the Tigris settled the issue. At the end of the war, with British troops occupying the area from Basra to Mosul, Arnold Wilson was appointed head of the British administration. Wilson was described by MacMillan, author of an excellent and comprehensive study of the 1919 Peace Conference in Versailles, as a man who loathed dancing, gossip and idleness, who quoted scripture freely and whose finger never hesitated on the trigger. He had, in short, the qualities of a great proconsul of empire at a time when proconsuls were becoming obsolete. He firmly believed that Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul should be regarded as a single administrative unit under effective British control.

However, there were some at Whitehall who believed that both the British and the Arabs would be better off if the British were to pull out.

Whitehall was feeling pressure both from the Americans, led by Woodrow Wilson and his Fourteen Points and the Exchequer, which had been bled badly by the war. Arnold, not Woodrow, Wilson was not of that opinion. He believed that the Arabs needed British leadership, and eventually Whitehall bowed to his point of view and to that of Lloyd George and the strong commitment to empire.

At the San Remo Conference in April 1920, where the terms of the treaty with the Ottoman Empire were approved, the British and the French established mandates for themselves. The British got Palestine and Mesopotamia; the French got Syria. These mandates were later blessed by the League of Nations in 1922. The Arabs were not consulted in this process.

As you might expect, the Arabs were not wholly satisfied with this outcome, and in the summer of 1920 revolts broke out in the Euphrates valley and in the north in the Kurdish areas around Mosul. These revolts resulted in the almost total breakdown of order in the affected areas. British casualties numbered nearly 2,000 killed, wounded or missing. By October the British had restored order. Sir Percy Cox replaced Arnold Wilson, and he placated the Arabs to some extent by placing an Arab face on the administration. In early 1921, the British set up the Middle East department of the Colonial Office. Before that, British affairs in the Middle East had been run by the India Office. The new department took over the job of finding a suitable Arab to become king of Iraq. The British

needed to find someone who had developed some credentials as an Arab national leader during the war and yet who would accept direction from the new Middle East department. They settled on Feisal who was described by Margaret Macmillan as a descendant of the Prophet, a member of the ancient Hashemite clan who was clever, ambitious and dazzling. He had been brought up in Constantinople, but he was everyone's image of what a noble desert Arab should be. His father was Hussein, the sharif of Mecca, head of one of the Arab world's most ancient and distinguished families and guardian of Islam's holiest sites, and proud owner of the telephone number Mecca1. Hussein was the Arab leader of the province of Hejaz, which is now the country of Saudi Arabia. Hussein and his men had fought with T.E. Lawrence against the Ottomans. At the Cairo conference in March, 1921, Feisal, the third son of Hussein, was installed as the king of Iraq. (Hussein's two other sons were installed as the kings of Syria and Transjordan.)

The years following the Cairo conference were unsettled. Basic issues such as the relationship between the king and the real power in Iraq, the British, had to be worked out. The northern border with a resurgent Turkey under the leadership of Kemal Ataturk had not been delineated. The treaty between the Arabs and the British establishing the British mandate over Iraq was not signed until the summer of 1922 and then only because Feisal was struck with appendicitis, and the British got his plenipotentiary to sign. The treaty was not ratified by the constituent

assembly until 1924 because of strong opposition by both the Sunni and the Shia communities. The question of the northern border remained unsettled for a number of years. The British were uncertain whether they wanted to commit the resources to defend the former Ottoman province of Mosul against the Turks. The Admiralty convinced the government that it was in the nation's interest to do so. The British knew by the early twenties that the Mosul province contained substantial quantities of oil. They also knew that the Navy was going to be increasingly dependent on oil, and that the empire depended on the the Royal Navy. A memo from the Admiralty to the Foreign Office captured this sentiment succinctly "from a strategical point of view the essential point is that Great Britain should control the territories on which the oil fields are situated."

The question of the northern border was further complicated by the Kurdish issue. The Kurds had been pressing from the time of the Versailles Conference on for an independent Kurdistan. Unfortunately, the Kurds had neither a coherent history or identity nor a strong representation in Paris or at later conferences. They were faced with the British on the south and the Turks on the north. The British were Christians and the Turks were Muslims, and the Kurds, although initially divided over whose protection to seek, decided in the end, to side with the Turks. When the northern border was finally drawn, the British made certain that the territories that Britain wanted were in Iraq and the remainder , which included the vast majority of the Kurds, was incorporated in the new state

of Turkey. Turkey's borders, with the exception of the border with Iraq, were finally worked out in the treaty which was signed in Lausanne in the summer of 1923. The border between Iraq and Turkey was finally settled by a three man commission which submitted its report in July, 1925. The report was ratified by the League in January, 1926. The Kurds got no specific guarantees.

The British set up a government in Iraq modeled on their own system. They installed a king and established an elected assembly. The majority party in the assembly chose a prime minister. During the middle years of the 1920's, the focus of the government in Baghdad was the establishment of an independent Iraq. This meant recognition by the League of Nations. In order to achieve this, the Iraqis needed to present a united front. This was neither simple nor easy since the government was dominated by the Sunnis. Feisal was a Sunni, and the prime ministers were Sunni. The Shia community was split. Some of the Shia leaders favored cooperation with the Sunni leaders, but many other prominent Shia leaders wanted to focus on increasing the number and power of the Shias in the Iraqi government and in the civil service, and they looked more to the British for leadership. The Sunni-Shia antagonism persisted throughout this period, but it erupted into violence only a few times and not on a large scale. It is relevant to point out that the Shias in Iraq were isolated. Persia, whose population was overwhelmingly Shia, was not in an expansionist mode, and as far as I can tell made no effort to reach out to

its Shia brothers in Iraq, although one must always keep in mind that the Shia in Iran are Persian and the Shia in Iraq are Arab and relations between Persians and Arabs have historically been quite unfriendly. When the Arabs built their empire in the centuries after the death of Mohammed in 632 A.D., they spread west and north but not east because the Persian Empire lay to the east, and it proved impregnable. From 1914 on, as a result of Shia impotence, the British had dealt almost exclusively with Sunni sheiks. As a result, the Iraqi leadership, for the most part, was able to keep the government focused on its main goal of achieving independence from the British. Initially, it wanted to be recognized by the League as an independent nation by 1928. The British fought this particularly after significant amounts of oil were discovered around Mosul. The British wanted to solidify their control of this discovery before they relinquished control of Iraq, and they were successful in pushing the date for independence back for four years.

During the period leading up to 1932, the Iraqi government continued to have problems with both its Shia citizens and in an even more pronounced way its Kurdish citizens. The Shias were badly underrepresented in the Iraqi government. Unofficial censuses, taken in 1920 and 1931, show that the Shia were about 55% of the population, the Sunni Arabs about 22% and the Kurds about 14%. Despite this, the Shia did not play a significant role in the government of the area either during the Ottoman period or the the period of the mandate. For example, in

1929 in the government of al-Mushin, there was one Shia in the cabinet. By the way, that Shia's name was al- Husein Chalabi, presumably a forebearer of the Chalabi who has been hanging around Washington for the last decade or so. In part because the Shia community was badly fractured, it did little more than complain, and those complaints were largely ignored, both by the British and by the Sunni dominated Iraqi government. The Kurdish question was much more vexing. As one author put it, " In 1924, the Kurds had been promised an independent Kurdistan under the terms of the treaty of Sevres (which was never ratified by all the parties); in 1926, they were offered a special regime and limited autonomy; in 1930, even this had been whittled away." In the years after 1926, the Sunni Arab government in Baghdad was not willing to listen to Kurdish complaints and demands. The British, who were keenly aware that the Kurds had been promised a number of things, none of which had been carried out, were inclined to be sympathetic to Kurdish requests. The Kurds wanted, first and foremost, for the Kurdish language to be the official language of their area. They wanted the language used in the schools and in all local government proceedings and publications. There were some practical problems with this. Very little had been written in Kurdish, and there were certainly no textbooks in Kurdish. Despite this, the Kurds were determined to achieve these goals, and they believed that the British were their only hope of doing this. At one point, a prominent Kurd stated " our obedience is to the British Government and not to

Iraq.” This position made sense because the policy of the Iraqi government was the full integration of the Kurds into Iraq, which meant that the Kurds would speak the Arabic language and accept Sunni Muslim laws and customs. However, a number of Iraqi officials suspected that the British were pursuing a policy of generous accommodation with the Kurdish leaders. The British did push for a number of things, including having a Kurd at the top of the Ministry of Interior, having all court proceedings involving Kurds in Kurdish, having all police officers in Kurdish areas speak Kurdish, and having Kurdish as the official language in the predominantly Kurdish provinces. However, the British-Iraqi Treaty of 1930, which was to take effect when the League of Nations recognized Iraq in 1932, did not mention the Kurds and did not extend any guarantees to the Kurds. The Kurds were aware of its terms and their concern propelled them to action. In September of 1930 there were riots in the Kurdish areas which resulted in numerous deaths and widespread arrests. The Kurds also began to flood the League with petitions which varied from demands that guarantees made in the past be carried out to demands of complete independence. The League became seriously concerned about the Kurdish problem as a result of these petitions, and although it did not recommend independence for the Kurdish areas, it did recommend that previous guarantees with regard to the Kurdish language and to the governance of the Kurdish areas be implemented. The Iraqis were smart enough to figure out that there were

limits to how far the British would push on this subject because they knew that the British wanted good relations with Turkey and especially, with Iran where considerable quantities of oil had been discovered by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Further, the Iraqis knew that, in the end, the League would do what Britain wanted it to do and that Britain would back Iraqi admittance to the League regardless of the situation in the Kurdish areas. Therefore, the Iraqis procrastinated. They paid lip service to satisfying Kurdish demands and did nothing. Open warfare broke out in the spring of 1931, but a combination of Iraqi forces and the RAF quickly put an end to the fighting. The fighting did prompt some action from the central government, and that, combined with the belief that the League was going to keep a watchful eye on the Kurdish situation, was enough to keep peace in the Kurdish areas. In October, 1932, Iraq entered the League of Nations.

British influence in Iraq did not cease with Iraq's entrance into the League of Nations as an independent nation. As one writer put it, "whatever the true nature of British power and influence after the country entered the League, it was widely believed by Iraqis that they were not the true masters of their country. Victory, of a kind, had been won, but it was a limited victory, and the independence was conditional. Further, it had not been won by the country as a whole, but only by a small clique imposed on the country from outside, which had few claims to the acceptance, approbation or trust of the rest of the population. Having

proclaimed that it would give up the mandate, Britain was determined to do so, but naturally took good care to see that its influence over the things that mattered remained as it had been before as far as possible. The end of the mandate had significance for the small group of Sunni officials and soldiers gathered around King Faysal, in giving them a freer hand to exercise control within the country, but the British authorities still retained supreme power, and the vast majority of the population still possessed no power at all."

C.J. Edmonds, a former High Commissioner in Baghdad, put it slightly differently. He wrote after the general strike in 1931, "The general impression left on the mind is that the bases of the Iraqi state are still not as broad as one would wish: it dangerously resembles a pyramid balanced on its point. The government is- I suppose inevitably-in the hands of a limited oligarchy composed essentially of Sunni Arab townsmen really representing a very small minority of the country. It is therefore easy for any agitator to play on the racial religious or personal prejudices of anybody who is not an Arab, or a Muslim, or if Muslim not a Sunni or a townsman, or educated: when to these is added a proportion of the very class from which the oligarchy is drawn, the list is indeed a formidable one."

The form of government set up by the British and British influence in Iraq came to an end in 1958 with the overthrow of the monarchy in a very bloody episode in which the whole the whole royal family was

slaughtered.

I want to conclude this discussion of the British period of influence in Iraq by reviewing what the British knew at the end of WW1. By that time, the British had been in Iraq for a number of years, and they had been warned that combining the three provinces of Mosul, which was Kurdish, Baghdad, which was Sunni, and Basra, which was Shia, which the Ottomans had been smart enough to keep separate, was a mistake. In fact, according to one author, their local administrators argued that it was ludicrous. The local administrators knew that the three groups hated one another, and this hatred existed before the Kurds and the Shia were exposed to the barbarity of a Sunni dictatorship. I want to close this section with a quote from Gertrude Bell because it gives such a clear picture of the type of problem that the British faced. Bell was an English woman from a very prominent family who, although Oxford educated, had no academic training in international affairs and no experience in government either as a policy maker or as an administrator, but who had developed a deep knowledge of the Arabs through her decade-long travels in Arab lands and through her relationships with Arab leaders and men like T.E. Lawrence. She became a senior political officer in Basra during WW1, and in 1920, wrote the following, " if it took longer to open some of the Baghdad schools than expected, the delay may be attributed to the people themselves, who looted all the furniture and equipment of the schools and carried off the doors, windows, and portable fittings." It

reminds one of a similar problem that was faced at a later time.

During this period from the end of the Ottoman rule to the admission of Iraq to the League of Nations and after, it is worthwhile to look at who was in the area encompassed by the newly formed state of Iraq and what the relationship between the groups was. Under the Ottomans, the area consisted of a number of groups who were weakly connected. From an ethnic standpoint, there were Kurds, Arabs, Turkomans, Armenians, Arameans, Persians, and Georgians. From a religious standpoint, there were Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Sabians. There was a mass exodus of Jews in the late forties and early fifties, which, of course, coincided with the founding of the state of Israel. At the top of the social ladder in Baghdad were the Turks and the Georgians, both of whom were Sunni, and in the countryside were the Arab sheiks, who were also Sunni. At the other end of the scale were the Shia Muslims. In Iraq, in Afghanistan, and in Pakistan, the Shia were the underclass. In Afghanistan, they were and are ethnically distinct as well. The Afghan Hazaras are more Asian in looks. It is interesting, although it has nothing to do with this paper, that Benazir Bhutto's father was Shia. He was, of course, the prime minister of Pakistan until he was deposed by a Sunni general, who was bent on reestablishing Sunni dominance in Pakistan. Benazir later styled herself a Sunni, but her roots in the Shia sect, namely, an Iranian Shia mother, a Shia husband, and a Shia father were always very evident. The Ottoman policy toward these

various religious and ethnic groups was one of tolerance but initially not of equality. Non-Muslims paid special taxes and, in return, got state guarantees of religious protection. Between 1829 and 1856, these discriminatory laws were abolished. The new laws sought to make all males in the Ottoman Empire equal although in reality, the laws never were fully implemented. Under the British occupation and later, mandate, this policy was continued.

The fractured nature of the area called Iraq was carried further by urban cleavages known as mahallahs. Mahallahs were essentially city quarters, but they were much more than a district, like Chinatown, in an American city. For example, in April 1915, when the inhabitants of Najaf drove the Turks from the city, each of the four quarters of the city became independent. Each had its own constitution, its own laws, and its own police until the British occupied the city in 1917 and put an end to the divisions. During WW1, there were instances of cities splitting along geographical lines, one side for the British and one side for the Ottomans. The first king of Iraq, Feisal I who was installed by the British as the first king of Iraq, summed up the consuming problem of the deep divisions within Iraq as follows:

In Iraq, there is still -and I say this with a heart full of sorrow- no Iraqi people but unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy and perpetually

ready to rise against any government whatever. Out of these masses we want to fashion a people which we would train, educate, and refine....The circumstances, being what they are, the immenseness of the efforts needed for this can be imagined.

Two other aspects of Iraqi society are worth mentioning. First, the society, even then, was highly urbanized. One article which I read, estimated that about 75% of the population lived in urban areas at the end of the eighties. Baghdad grew from 150,000 in 1908 to 350,000 in 1935 to 2,600,000 in 1977. In the same period, Basra grew from 55,000 to 550,000 and Mosul from 70,000 to 450,000. The process of urbanization had the effect of diminishing the influence of the tribal sheiks in the Sunni community and of the religious leaders in the Shia community. Urbanization and secularization usually go hand-in-hand, and tribal structures are stronger in pastoral settings. Nevertheless, both tribal loyalties and the influence of the Shia clergy remain very significant in Iraq today.

Second, it is worth noting that the type of both Shism and Sunnism that was and is practiced in Iraq is different from that of its neighbors. The Wahabbism that is practiced in Saudi Arabia and, in particular, the extreme and rigid form of jurisprudence which it demands, was never practiced in Iraq. Iraq's Sunnism was and is much more moderate, and, therefore, more amenable to Western concepts of jurisprudence. Similarly,

Iraqi Shiism is different from that of Iran. The theological state erected by the Iranians has never been a goal of the Shia community in Iraq. With the fall of Saddam and the end of the Sunni dominance of Iraqi politics, the Ayatollah Sistani emerged as a critical figure in the shaping of Iraq's political future. As one author put it, "Sistani sees the ulama (the Shia clergy) as teachers and defenders of the faith which are roles not be filled by an Islamic government. He put forth a simple model of government based on the principle of majority rule and demanded an accountable and representative government that would reflect and protect the Shia identity." What he meant by protecting the Shia identity, he left vague. However, he certainly envisioned a secular and democratic government, comfortable in the knowledge that the Shia made up the vast majority of Iraq's Arabs and that it was highly unlikely that the Kurds, although Sunni, would ever ally themselves with Iraq's Arab Sunnis, given Arab Sunni treatment of the Kurds. Sistani was and is not a Khomeini style theocrat who sees the Koran as a constitution. His political position is clearly more secular and more moderate than that of the leading Shias in Iran.

There is a theme to this paper, but I do not subscribe to the theory that history repeats itself, i.e. that lessons learned from an earlier experience can be applied to a later one. For one thing, historians rarely agree on what happened in the earlier experience. Furthermore, two incidents or experiences or whatever separated in time are never precisely

the same. The actors and the settings are always different. However, historical knowledge is a useful tool to have when it comes time to make big decisions. Some knowledge of this period in Iraq's history certainly would have been useful. One wonders how much Tony Blair knew about his country's involvement in Mesopotamia.