

# The Complications of State-Building

Reevaluating the Role of Britain  
in the Creation of Iraq

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## Abstract

When the defunct Ottoman Empire's Middle-Eastern territory was divided by Britain and France in the early 1920s as League of Nations Mandates, Britain received Iraq. Ostensibly, the French and British were to assist the people living within their respective mandates in nation-building. In reality, these mandates amounted to little more than watered down colonialism with these European powers determining their governments and borders. Indeed, the myth that Iraq's western border with Jordan cuts deeply eastward because Winston Churchill sneezed while drawing the map of Iraq at the 1921 Cairo Conference persists to this day. This paper argues that Britain's role in creating Iraq has been simplified and exaggerated, especially since the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003. Though Britain certainly played a large role in its creation and further sought to benefit from a neocolonial relationship with Iraq, to credit (or to blame) Britain solely for its existence is to ignore external factors that curtailed Britain's decision making. These external factors range from British dealings with Middle-Eastern elites to the need to appease the interests of other Western powers in the area, such as France, Russia and the United States. This is demonstrated by examining a series of primary sources, including: correspondences between British officials and Middle-Eastern leaders; as well as proposed treaties and actual treaties between Britain and other Western states.

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Opening the introduction to their edited volume, *The Creation of Iraq*, Reeva Simon and Eleanor Tejirian state that, “it has become a truism in writing the history of modern Iraq to say that Iraq was a country created by the British from the former Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul.”<sup>1</sup> Their words describe current assumptions, and accordingly, many critics blame the British for the problems in Iraq today. Indeed, as pointed out by Christopher Catherwood, himself a critic of Britain and its officers’ role in forming modern Iraq, some who hold this view posit that if ethnic and/or religious groups joined in a state of Britain’s creation were not tied together politically, this simple change alone would allow Iraq (or those states that could have existed in the same area) to enjoy far greater peace today.<sup>2</sup>

It is the case that Britain had a large colonial empire and campaigned to gain control of parts of the Middle East out of its own imperial interests at the end of World War I. That said, the truism Simon and Tejirian acknowledge above overstates the influence of the British in the creation of modern Iraq. Britain did not have the ability to draw whatever political lines it pleased on a blank geographical map, absent any input from the international community or those who lived in the three Ottoman *wilayats* (provinces) of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. In reality, the mandate largely grew out of territory that Britain had occupied at the start of World War I, an occupation that, according to Phebe Marr, “came about less by design than by accident.”<sup>3</sup> Even as this was happening, British leaders struggled throughout the whole war to agree on what they should do with the territory, both with each other and with their allies. Indeed, confusion, internal and external disagreement, as well as negotiating and concessions all played significant roles in modern Iraq’s boundaries. This essay argues that while Britain may have had imperialist interests and carried the lion’s share of the responsibility for the creation of Iraq, it was not strong enough to assert its will in the Middle East so forcefully that it could overpower all other influences, especially the will of other world powers. This will be demonstrated by: first, illustrating that Britain had initially hoped for peace with the Ottoman Empire at start of World War I; second, examining the internal confusion of the British government as it haphazardly conquered the Ottoman territory now called Iraq; third,

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<sup>1</sup> Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian, “The Creation of Iraq: The Frontier as State,” In *The Creation of Iraq 1914-1921*, edited by Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian, 1-15, (New York: Columbia Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Catherwood, *Winston’s Folly: Imperialism and the Creation of Modern Iraq*, (London: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 136.

<sup>3</sup> Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*. Boulder, (CO: Westview, 1985), 30.

showing the influence and discord of international secret agreements made during the war regarding the Middle East; fourth, analyzing the influence of Russia and the United States on the territories that later became Middle-Eastern mandates; and finally, explaining how all these factors had largely already shaped Iraq before the San Remo or Cairo Conferences, the latter of which is often seen as the moment when Britain created Iraq. Ultimately, it becomes clear that many influences beyond a few British officers after World War I had important roles in the creation of Iraq.

### British and Ottomans Hostilities in World War I

Amid the declarations of war and tension that existed between the most powerful European states in 1914, Britain had no interest in pushing the Ottoman Empire into war, nor any ambitions for taking Ottoman territory in the Middle East. In fact, right up to the moment when the Ottomans did enter World War I as a Central Power on November 2, 1914, the British government had hoped that they would remain neutral, or even join the Allies rather than the Central Powers. It is true that some in Europe thought—even hoped—that the “Sick man of Europe” would not last much longer.<sup>4</sup> It is also the case that France and Britain, two of the most prominent powers among the Allies, had already taken Ottoman territory in North Africa during the nineteenth century. At this point, however, Britain had no interest in purposely dragging the Ottomans into war. Already fighting the German and Austrian-Hungarian Empires gave the Allies enough concern, and adding the large, even if failing, Ottoman Empire would only make the war more difficult.<sup>5</sup> Further, Britain was feeling the strain of controlling its huge colonial empire. As such, adding more colonial territories was a management problem that even imperialist Britons did not want to have. These factors are all part of why British and Ottoman relations prior to World War I were good enough that some historians have even described the Ottomans as “Britain’s traditional ally.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jukka Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1969), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 23.

<sup>6</sup> Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 30.

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The fact is that prior to World War I, the British benefited from Ottoman rule in the Middle East. Britain had an interest in what is now called Iraq, but mostly because it wanted to protect the route to India and trade within the Indian Ocean.<sup>7</sup> As long as the Ottoman Empire allowed Britain to access both of these, its leaders were content. Another benefit was that, as long as the Ottomans still held nominal power in the Middle East, none of Britain's competing European counterparts, such as France, could gain any ground. It is no wonder then that prior to the Ottoman Empire entering the war, Britain was "committed to maintaining the political integrity of the Ottoman Empire."<sup>8</sup>

Western governments, including Britain, had become interested in the potential for oil in the Middle East within the last few years prior to World War I, but it is incorrect to think that oil would have induced Britain to try to take Basra, Baghdad or Mosul. Britain's military need for oil had grown as the navy moved from steam to oil-powered engines, which led the British government to become a majority shareholder of the Anglo-Persian oil Company in 1914.<sup>9</sup> By the start of World War I, however, all known oilfields remained in South West Persia (modern-day Iran) and not anywhere in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>10</sup> Oil was a growing interest, and the possibility of oil in the Ottoman Empire existed, but today's reliance on Middle Eastern oil is not quite reflective of the world prior to 1914. Thus, as long as India and trade in the Indian Ocean remained accessible and out of the colonial clutches of another European power, Britain had no incentive to upset Ottoman rule in what is now Iraq. With nothing to gain from a war with the Ottomans then, Britain and its allies "reckoned that they had done 'everything conceivable' as Lord Grey was later to write, to keep the Turks neutral."<sup>11</sup>

Britain's hope for a self-serving peace, or even alliance with the Ottomans, however, did not happen. Germany successfully convinced the Ottoman government to enter the war as its ally, which then caused Britain to react, mostly out of concern for its access to India and the Indian Ocean. There was also the possibility that the Ottomans may pose a threat to the Persian oilfields.<sup>12</sup> From the start of the war then, it is clear that Britain was not a completely controlling entity in the Middle East.

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, (London, I. B. Tauris, 2007), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Simon, and Tejrjian, "The Creation of Iraq: The Frontier as State," 9.

<sup>9</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 4.

Reacting to the Ottomans' entry into the war, Britain's position went from hoping to avoid conflict with the Ottoman Empire and wanting it to remain solidified, to sending forces from India to Basra in order to protect its interests.<sup>13</sup>

### **Basra's Fall, the Ensuing Confusion and Uncertain British Advancement**

On November 6, 1917, 5,500 men in Indian Expeditionary Force 'D' landed at Fao, a fort at the southern tip of Basra and on the coast of the Persian Gulf.<sup>14</sup> The Indian Office back in London expected a holding mission, the point being to deter Ottoman activity around the head of the Gulf.<sup>15</sup> As demonstrated above, Britain's great concern was preserving access to India, trade in the Indian Ocean, and to some degree the growing interest in Persian oilfields that were relatively close to Basra. Since the Ottoman Empire only entered the war days before the landing at Fao, and the warning signs that this might happen had only started a few weeks prior, Britain was still adjusting to the idea that it would have to fight its "traditional ally."<sup>16</sup> Britain still did not have a larger, longer-term strategy for what to do in the area. This lack of a clear vision by British leadership continued throughout the war.

In the absence of a strategy, the spectrum of British leaders' views ranged from dreams of conquest to purposely avoiding acquiring any new territory. Only three days after the IEF 'D' landed at Fao, British Prime Minister H. H. Asquith predicted that the Ottoman Empire "would be dismembered," as did others within the weeks and months to come.<sup>17</sup> This did not necessarily mean Asquith wanted to acquire new territory, but others who agreed with his prediction—such as Winston Churchill—did.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Sir Edward Grey "clearly disliked the idea of further territorial expansion," favoring an Islamic Empire that could serve "as a counter-weight to German-influenced Turkey."<sup>19</sup> Initially then, there was no official strategy for the British government on what to do in the

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<sup>13</sup> Simon, and Tejjirian, "The Creation of Iraq: The Frontier as State," 10; Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East*, 24-25.

<sup>14</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 4; Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 8

<sup>16</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 8; Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 16.

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Middle East because various British officers and departments simply did not have a consensus on what to do there. Of course, the disagreement included the issue of what to do at Basra, meaning the troops received conflicting instructions. London told the IEF 'D' not to advance (at least not for the time being), while the India Office and the local leaders wanted to take Baghdad.<sup>20</sup>

This environment of uncertainty and disagreement, mixed with the minimal resistance against the IEF 'D' troops given by the Ottoman defense at Fao, created a "temptation to advance [that] proved irresistible, and it was not checked by any serious hesitation from behind the scenes."<sup>21</sup> The troops on the ground began moving up the Tigris "on their own initiative."<sup>22</sup> The writings of Sir Percy Cox, the Political officer attached to the IEF 'D' (who later played a significant role in the mandate for Iraq), demonstrates how the weak resistance at Basra excited him about taking more territory. On October 8, 1914, the day the IEF 'D' left for the Persian Gulf, he disagreed with the mission, both because war had not yet broken out with the Ottomans and because "the local authorities in Mesopotamia," he wrote, "appear to be more hostile than those in Constantinople, and this perhaps makes the risk all the greater."<sup>23</sup> Only six weeks later, when this proved to not be the case, he wrote that he "could not see how 'we can avoid taking over Baghdad'."<sup>24</sup> Clearly then, it is the weak resistance offered by the Ottomans combined with the discord between British departments that led British troops to move in on Ottoman territory, even without specific orders to do so. Britain was gaining territory it was not even sure it wanted.

This continued to be the case for the first year or so of the war. In general, London discouraged advancement while the officers in India and Mesopotamia encouraged it, leading the IEF 'D' to continue to push north, from Fao, to Basra, to Kut and finally, 'Aziziya, which lay a mere 50 miles from Baghdad, all of which was done by October 1915.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately for the IEF 'D,' its luck seemed to run out shortly after this as the reinforced Ottomans pushed back. After months of sliding back, the British suffered a humiliating defeat in April 1916 at Kut. It would not be until the following year that the British would regain the lost ground.

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<sup>20</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 9; Marr 31.

<sup>21</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Cox's own words (Graves, 1941: 179) quoted in Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 10.

Even as the Ottomans pushed back, “the absence of any clear-cut or comprehensive instructions (either from India or from London)” was ever present.<sup>26</sup> The famous Middle East specialist, Gertrude Bell, who was sent to Basra to report the activities of the Arab Bureau and of IEF ‘D’ to India, said in April 1916 that the British had “rushed into the business with our usual disregard for a comprehensive political scheme,” and again later that year, that “the real difficulty here is that we don’t know exactly what we intend to do in this country.”<sup>27</sup> So it seems that even as late as the spring of 1916, Britain still had not decided what it intended to do with Ottoman territory in the Middle East, though the local leadership and troops had already conquered a significant portion of what today is called Iraq. Britain was on its way to colonizing within the Middle East without ever officially ordering the troops there to do so. New territory was quickly becoming the reality though. As such, British leaders began negotiating with other political entities on how to divide the Middle East after the war not because they were the master minds of expansion, but because they could not maintain control of their troops.

### **(Dis)agreements Behind Closed Doors**

While British troops conquered Ottoman territory without direct orders from London, British leadership tried to make arrangements for how the Middle East would function after the war with the other Allies. As discussed at the beginning of this essay, Britain had been happy to let the Ottomans rule in the Middle East because they allowed Britain do as it pleased in terms of India. To upset this balance of power would only force Britain to compete and fight with other European powers that also had interest in the area (specifically Germany and France). War had already upset the balance; thus, British leaders felt they had to seek a new arrangement. Not only did Britain need to figure out what it wanted then, but it also had to do so with the competing interests of its allies, France and Russia. Thus, bickering and disagreeing, British leaders engaged in discussions with French and Russian leaders about their interests, which started nearly immediately after the Ottomans declared war.<sup>28</sup> Similar to the British officers’ disagreements, these discussions and tentative

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<sup>26</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Liora Lukitz, *A Quest in the Middle East: Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq*, (London, I. B. Tauris, 2006), 110.

<sup>28</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 13.

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agreements between Britain and its allies, most notably the Hussein-McMahon correspondence and Sykes-Picot Agreement, conflicted with each other at times. These negotiations demonstrate how the other allied governments and local Arab populations further curtailed Britain's influence and decision-making in the Middle East.

By March 1915, Britain, France and Russia had voiced some of their Middle-Eastern interests to one another. Russia's Tsar, Nicholas II, wanted Constantinople and the Dardanelles, which upset the French.<sup>29</sup> Despite the continuing disagreements among British leadership of what it should do after the war, Winston Churchill and Lord Kitchener both pushed for the coastal city of Alexandretta to go to Britain, which David Lloyd George believed would also upset the French.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, Lord Crewe, then the secretary of state for India, thought Basra and maybe even Baghdad should be put under the government in India.<sup>31</sup> The discussions would last well into the next year before any initial agreement was made.

Needing to make some sense of its own goals and what arrangements could be acceptable to its allies, the British government commissioned a committee to assess both of these factors. It was purposely interdepartmental, which forced "Members of the Foreign Office, War office, and India Office, Admiralty and Board of Trade to sit down together and thrash out a programme."<sup>32</sup> Sir Maurice de Bunsen, a former minister of the British embassy at Vienna, served as the chairman as it completed its work between April and June 1915.

The committee came up with no less than four different potential divisions of the Middle East. Russia's interests gained special favor in each proposal, as the committee saw Russia as an important counter-balance against both the central powers and possibly against France in the event of any fighting after the present war.<sup>33</sup> All four proposals gave Basra to Britain outright. Even the fourth option, which kept the Ottoman Empire whole, though decentralized and with spheres of influence, did so. This last option was of little consequence though as by this point the Allies no long agreed that the Ottoman Empire should continue to exist.<sup>34</sup> Aside

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<sup>29</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East*, 29.

<sup>33</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 19; 20-21; see also 18-25.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.



from this last option, the other three also gave Britain all of the territory it had taken thus far in the war, as well as the territory the British troops were in the process of taking: the *wilayas* of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, the last being due to British economic interests in potential oilfields, trade and even Indian colonization.<sup>35</sup> Aside from the first option, British annexation or influence was not proposed to go any further north than Mosul in order to please the French and the Russians. Though the committee's proposals were compiled quickly and as such, "open to criticism," the options were already leaning towards the areas that now make up the modern states of Syria and Lebanon going to France, Mesopotamia and Palestine going to Britain.<sup>36</sup> These concessions to other European states show again exactly why Britain had wanted the Ottomans to remain in power and that it could not make decisions without external input.

The British government now had a rough idea of what it could expect its part to be in the Middle East after the war, and negotiations started. In July 1915, Sir Henry McMahon started what has come to be called the Hussein-McMahon correspondence. Writing one another until January 1916, McMahon and Hussein, the Sharif of Mecca, sought a mutually beneficial arrangement. This exchange again highlights the limits of British power.

In order to convince Hussein to ally with the British by revolting against the Ottomans, McMahon had to make some significant concessions. Throughout the correspondence, he sought to convince Hussein "that Arab interests are English and English Arab."<sup>37</sup> Much of their correspondence revolves around defining what territory would become Hussein's after the war. On this point, McMahon was beholden in part to French interests as seen in his letter on December 14, 1915. Responding to Hussein's desire to control Aleppo and Beirut, he responded that "the Government of Great Britain has fully understood and taken careful note of your observations [claim of control in Aleppo and Beirut], but, as the interests of our ally, France, are involved in them both, the question will require careful consideration."<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, McMahon found himself having to promise more than Britain would eventually be able to deliver to satisfy Hussein. Despite setting up potential conflict with the French,

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<sup>35</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 22.

<sup>36</sup> Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> "Letter number two," *The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence*, Jewish Virtual Library.

<sup>38</sup> "Letter number six," *The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence*, Jewish Virtual Library.

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he allowed Hussein to believe that Syria “would be wholly independent.”<sup>39</sup> In addition to making territorial promises, Hussein asked Britain to finance his military. He asked the British to pay £50,000 per month, in gold, in addition to supplying:

*20,000 sacks of rice, 15,000 sacks of flour, 3,000 sacks of barley, 150 sacks of coffee, 150 sacks of sugar, 5,000 rifles of the modern pattern and the necessary ammunition, and 100 boxes of the two sample cartridges (enclosed) and of Martini-Henry cartridges and "Aza," that is those of the rifles of the factory of St. Etienne in France, for the use of those two kinds of rifles of our tribes; it would not be amiss to send 500 boxes of both kinds.*<sup>40</sup>

With the understanding that he would receive the territory and support he had asked for, and out of the fear that the Ottomans would depose him if the Allies did not prevail, Hussein agreed to help the British. In June 1916, he proclaimed the revolt. His call to arms, however, “fell on deaf ears.”<sup>41</sup> This failure may have actually saved Britain later diplomatic headaches. McMahon’s negotiations with Hussein, in point of fact, contradicted the arrangements another British official had been arranging with the French government at the exact same time.

On November 23, 1915, the French career diplomat François George-Picot went to London to negotiate Britain and France’s interests in the Middle East.<sup>42</sup> He first met with Sir Arthur Nicolson, from whom the experienced French statesman demanded that France receive “nothing less than the whole of Syria from Taurus to the Egyptian border,” the only exception to this being an enclave around the Holy Places.<sup>43</sup> The negotiations went nowhere, and by December of that year Sir Mark Sykes, a lieutenant-colonel in the War Office who served on Bunsen’s committee only a few months prior, started meeting with George-Picot instead.

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<sup>39</sup> Monroe, *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East*, 33.

<sup>40</sup> “Letter number nine,” *The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence*, Jewish Virtual Library.

<sup>41</sup> David Fromkin, “Britain, France, and the Diplomatic Agreements,” *Britain, France, and the Diplomatic Agreements*, In *The Creation of Iraq 1914-1921*, edited by Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian, 134-145, (New York: Columbia Press, 2004), 144.

<sup>42</sup> Fromkin, “Britain, France, and the Diplomatic Agreements,” 140.

<sup>43</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 31.

The now somewhat infamous plan for the Middle East that George-Picot and Sykes created became known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Negotiations went more smoothly with Sykes than with Nicolson, in part because Sykes was both a Francophile and a Catholic. For these two reasons, he had some sympathy for “France’s position in the Levant.”<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, they came to an agreement that closely followed the thinking of the Bunsen committee. As the map in the agreement shows (below), the intent was to create a British sphere and a French sphere, each of which would be split into two areas: one of direct control by the respective imperial power; and another for indirect influence. The agreement divides these areas into the French areas “A” and blue, and British areas “B” and red:

*That in area (a) France, and in area (b) Great Britain, shall alone supply advisers or foreign functionaries at the request of the Arab state or confederation of Arab states. That in the blue area France, and in the red area Great Britain, shall be allowed to establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire and as they may think fit to arrange with the Arab state or confederation of Arab states.*<sup>45</sup>

Britain would have Basra and Baghdad, as well as the ports of Acre and Haifa within Palestine, while France would rule Greater Lebanon and have exclusive influence over Syria and Palestine.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps the biggest difference from the majority of the proposals given by the Bunsen committee was that Mosul would fall under French rather than British influence.<sup>47</sup> This difference is yet another example of Britain having to weigh the views of another power while making decisions about the Middle East.

Two different representatives of Britain had now made two different promises, each of which could not be kept without violating the other. McMahon had allowed Hussein to believe Syria would be completely independent, while Sykes had agreed with George-Picot that Syria would be in France’s zone of influence, meaning France would enjoy significant supervisory powers, including the ability to send French advisers and government employees.<sup>48</sup> To make the situation worse, Sykes and George-Picot certainly knew about McMahon’s correspondence with

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>45</sup> “The Sykes-Picot Agreement,” The Avalon Project, Yale University.

<sup>46</sup> Fromkin, “Britain, France, and the Diplomatic Agreements,” 144.

<sup>47</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 49.

<sup>48</sup> Monroe, *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East*, 33.

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Hussein, and McMahon likewise knew what the Sykes-Picot Agreement said because prior to its official acceptance a draft had been sent to him in Cairo in April 1916.<sup>49</sup>



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It is true that McMahon had not completely committed to Hussein, and it is even possible that the Sharif knew McMahon was not being completely forthwith, but none of that changes the fact that McMahon had implied to him that Britain would honor his wishes.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>50</sup> Sykes-Picot Agreement map, National Archives, United Kingdom, MPK1/426.

Two years after the start of World War I, Britain's leaders had failed to come to a consensus on what they wanted for the Middle East. Further, though neither agreement became a reality after the war (giving way to yet further international politicking), the respective exchanges between British officials with Hussein and George-Picot demonstrate Britain's limitations in the face of other political interests. The events discussed thus far alone amply demonstrate Britain did not enjoy free reign in making decisions in the Middle East, let alone in forming the future nation of Iraq. As it became evident that the Ottoman Empire would fall, however, Britain managed to make a plan based on what would best serve it within the bounds of external and international pressures, even if this was done in a somewhat duplicitous manner.

### **Russia, American President Wilson and the End of the War**

The year 1917 brought yet more influential factors that helped create modern Iraq. Lloyd George had to replace Asquith as Prime Minister, a change that Monroe credits with bringing "the necessary vigour [sic]" to make a breakthrough in the Middle East.<sup>51</sup> Whether credited to his zeal or not, Britain did in fact make great strides in the Middle East that year. Bouncing back from its losses of men and territory, British troops retook Kut and then continued onward to take Baghdad in March and Jerusalem in December.<sup>52</sup> 1917 also saw the United States' entry and Russia's withdrawal from the war, as well as continued casualties. All of these factors played parts in forming the League Nation's sanctioned mandate for Iraq that Britain received at the 1920 San Remo Conference.

Lloyd George oversaw two significant changes to British territorial goals in the Middle East, both of which conflicted with the newly christened Sykes-Picot Agreement: acquiring Palestine, and acquiring Mosul. As "a man of religious upbringing, a romantic and a citizen of the British Empire," Lloyd George was very excited at the idea of British control in the Holy Land.<sup>53</sup> Palestine is a story in and of itself that is outside the scope of this essay except to note that Lloyd George's interest in a British Palestine is a key part of why Britain "issued the Balfour Declaration [and], began to set aside the Sykes-Picot Agreement."<sup>54</sup> As the government under Lloyd George already wanted to break from the

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<sup>51</sup> Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East*, 37.

<sup>52</sup> Simon, and Tejjirian, "The Creation of Iraq: The Frontier as State," 13; Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East*, 37.

<sup>53</sup> Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East*, 38.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

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agreement for this purpose, it became much easier to later on justify moving territorial boundaries to gain Mosul. Unlike before the war when oil was not a factor, Britain had now developed an interest in Mosul because of the potential for oil, and wanted it enough to use underhanded means in order to improve any future claim.<sup>55</sup> British troops only occupied Mosul after hostilities had already ceased, and Ottoman troops had pulled out with the signing of the Armistice of Mudros in November 1918. Naturally, this greatly upset the Ottomans, as Ismet İnönü, an Ottoman general and later President of Turkey later recounted, “the British commanders behaved as if they had not been informed [of the armistice] and, with a number of excuses, created a *fait accompli*.”<sup>56</sup> Despite the armistice, Britain had occupied Mosul.

Britain was now prepared to renegotiate the Sykes-Picot Agreement. In December 1918, the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau and Ferdinand Foch went to London so that he and Lloyd George could work out any difficulties between themselves before dealing with the other nations’ interests at the upcoming Paris Peace Conference. There was little, if any, haggling over Palestine and Mosul. While there was some concern about securing oil in the Middle East, Clemenceau’s focus remained more in Europe.<sup>57</sup> So long as Britain would support France receiving Alsace-Lorraine from Germany, Clemenceau would let both go.<sup>58</sup> No record of the actual conversation exists, but Lloyd George recounted that, “after we reached the [French] Embassy he asked me what it was I especially wanted from the French. I instantly replied that I wanted Mosul attached to Irak [sic] and Palestine from Dan to Beersheba under British control. Without any hesitation he agreed.”<sup>59</sup> This certainly was not the end of any further French and British negotiations on the Middle East, but Clemenceau honored what Lloyd George reported that he said.

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<sup>55</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 91; Sarah Shields “Mosul Questions: Economy, Identity and Annexation.” In *The Creation of Iraq 1914-1921*, edited by Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian, 50-60. (New York: Columbia Press, 2004), 54.

<sup>56</sup> David Cuthell. “A Kemalist Gambit: A View of the Political Negotiations in the Determination of the Turkish-Iraqi border.” In *The Creation of Iraq 1914-1921*, edited by Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian, 80-94. (New York: Columbia Press, 2004), 83.

<sup>57</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 90; Fromkin, “Britain, France, and the Diplomatic Agreements,” 145.

<sup>58</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 89-91.

<sup>59</sup> Lloyd George, *Peace Treaties*, ii, 1038 quoted in Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920* 91.

Now having seen how Britain acquired more Middle Eastern territory from the Ottomans and then negotiated with the French between 1917 and 1918, it is equally important to explain the role of both Russia and the United States during this period. In 1917, the make-up of the alliance that had originated from the Entente Powers changed as Russia fell into revolution and withdrew. In doing so, Russia helped Britain's Middle Eastern endeavors to some degree. As mentioned above, in all of the Bunsen Committee's original four proposals, Mosul went to Britain, either as an annexed territory or (in the fourth option) as a sphere of influence. Sykes changed this, and opted to let the French have it because they requested it and because this let France serve as a buffer between Britain and Russia.<sup>60</sup> As Russia was no longer an ally and therefore would not receive the territory allotted to it in the Northern Middle East, Britain no longer needed a buffer.<sup>61</sup> Further, Russia no longer had a role in wartime secrets at all. If anything, Russia had become a liability, as the Bolsheviks revolutionaries had shared the Sykes-Picot Agreement with the international community by informing the press. To Britain, this allowed for the argument that the agreement then was out of date.<sup>62</sup> Thus, while Russia did not dissolve the Sykes-Picot Agreement, it had destabilized it, making further negotiations more plausible.

While Russia unwittingly assisted Britain in gaining territory, President Wilson's views on self-determination damaged the process by curtailing Britain's ability to use direct rule. The United States entered the war in 1917, and in January of the following year came the publication of President Wilson's Fourteen Points.<sup>63</sup> The twelfth of his idealistic points called for all nationalities within the Ottoman Empire to develop unmolested and autonomously, which of course included those who lived in Mesopotamia.<sup>64</sup> This meant, "long established and hitherto almost unchallenged assumptions of British imperial policy had to be reconciled with a whole set of new requirements."<sup>65</sup> Thus, Britain could not continue to use the same colonial bureaucratic methods it had used in India, and to this point in time, had adapted for use in Iraq. In fact, the question of whether or not Britain could continue using direct rule was one of the

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<sup>60</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 34.

<sup>61</sup> Russia's withdraw also helped reopen negotiations for Palestine. For more on this, Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 35.

<sup>62</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 49.

<sup>63</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 13.

<sup>64</sup> Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East*, 46.

<sup>65</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 13.

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reasons that Cox was summoned to London in the spring of 1918.<sup>66</sup> It seemed that President Wilson's views had gained traction and the world's acceptance of imperialism—at least in overt terms—was starting to decrease.

Most in the British government could understand that this meant any attempt at annexation in the Middle East would not be acceptable, and so began to assess how to meet Britain's interests within these limitations. Unfortunately for Britain, Colonel Arnold Wilson, then serving as the Acting Civil Commissioner in Iraq, failed to understand this new reality.<sup>67</sup> As such, he continued to push his outdated colonial views, which ultimately contributed to the causes of a revolt in 1920 and Cox coming to Iraq in an effort to fix the political damage. Yet, Colonel Wilson was the outlier. Others were seeing to the creation of the mandate for Iraq through the League of Nations and sorting out which Arab leader could be accepted by the now Iraqi people yet still pliable enough to let Britain pull the strings from behind the curtain.

### Making the Mandate and Making it Profitable

While the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres ended the war between the Allies and the soon-to-be-dismantled Ottoman Empire, the Treaty of Versailles played a more important role in forming Iraq. Signed in 1919, this document is better known for its harsh treatment of Germany, but it also established the League of Nations with its mandates. As the text of Part I, Article 22 demonstrates, this amounted to disguised colonialism:

*To those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation [sic] and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant. The best method of giving practical effect to this principle is that the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility, and who are*

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>67</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 32.



*willing to accept it, and that this tutelage should be exercised by them as Mandatories on behalf of the League.*<sup>68</sup>

The mandate system permitted a great power—like Britain—to appear magnanimous as it ostensibly helped a mandate on the road to eventual self-governance. In reality, however, when the League of Nations entrusted a mandate—like Iraq—to a great power, it also handed over the real control of the mandate’s politics and economy. Thus, the mandate system was a diluted and disguised form of colonization that kept most people of both the political left and right happy. “It was sufficiently elastic to suggest to the British left that here was a fitting job for the new League of Nations, and to the British right that the essentials of imperial defense would remain safely in British hands.”<sup>69</sup>

With the mandates created, the San Remo Conference was held in 1920 to settle how the Middle Eastern mandates would be distributed. Two representatives from four countries attended: Britain, France, Italy and Japan.<sup>70</sup> By now, Britain had the upper hand in terms of Iraq. “The Ottoman and German Empires had disappeared, and the British, as the victor in Mesopotamia, had first say in the disposal of former rights.”<sup>71</sup> This is still not to say though that the British representatives could simply draw a map of what they wanted the Middle East to look like. The Hussein-McMahon correspondence played a role, as did Sykes-Picot. In truth, things changed very little from what Lloyd George and Clemenceau had decided on back in December of 1918.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, by the time Britain acquired its new territory in the Middle East in the form of a mandate, years of negotiations with other states had already defined much of its geographical area. In fact, when the newly appointed Secretary of State for the Colonies, Winston Churchill, met with his advisors at the 1921 Cairo Conference to finish organizing the mandate for Iraq, the real discussion was focused more on how to manage it and make it financially profitable for Britain.<sup>73</sup> Finalizing the map was Churchill’s lowest of five priorities, as his own records show:

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<sup>68</sup> “Treaty of Versailles,” The Avalon Project, Yale University

<sup>69</sup> Monroe, *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East*, 66.

<sup>70</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 241.

<sup>71</sup> Monroe, *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East*, 101.

<sup>72</sup> Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, 93; Monroe, *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East*, 101.

<sup>73</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 40.

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*Main questions to be settled are following: First, the new ruler, Second, future size, character and organization of the garrison, Third, the time-table of reduction from present strength to that garrison. Fourth, total amount of the grant-in-aid. Fifth, arising out of above the extent of territory to be held and administered.*<sup>74</sup>

Only after deciding that the very briefly previous king of Syria, Faysal, would make a good British puppet did Churchill and his advisors discuss territory. At the time, joining Basra and Baghdad did not seem to be an issue. In fact, the famous T.E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell had already considered Basra and Baghdad an “isolated unit” since 1916.<sup>75</sup> Though its importance should not be understated, the only aspect of Iraq’s boundaries really open for discussion was “Kurdistan [sic].”<sup>76</sup> Britain might have wished for a freer hand in designed Iraq, but to the end, it was curtailed by other factors.

### Conclusion

Tracing the history Britain’s departments, decisions, agreements and disagreements with allies, and to some extent, the greater Mesopotamian campaign of World War I has not been an attempt to remove responsibility from Britain for its role in creating Iraq, nor to excuse imperialist actions. Rather, this essay has sought to demonstrate that Britain and its decisions did not exist in a vacuum, as many external factors played significant roles in Iraq’s eventual formation. This of course means, however, that Iraq is not a state that a few British bureaucrats drew on a map entirely at their own pleasure, despite this popular and simplistic vision of Iraq’s origins existing.

As has been shown, Britain was benefiting from Ottoman rule in Mesopotamia, and would have happily let that continue if it were not for World War I. When war broke out, Britain then scrambled to protect its interests in India, which meant sending troops to Basra. These troops advanced through Mesopotamia because their local leaders decided on this, not the government in London. Meanwhile, the Bunsen Committee was still trying to unite the British government’s vision for the Middle East after the war, and even in their proposals, one option still kept the

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<sup>74</sup> Chartwell Papers 17/18, Churchill Archives, University of Cambridge.

<sup>75</sup> Liora Lukitz, *A Quest in the Middle East*, 112.

<sup>76</sup> Christopher Catherwood, *Winston’s Folly*, 115.

Ottoman Empire united. From there, Britain's decisions were curtailed by agreements with the French, the Russians, and to some degree with the Sharif of Mecca, Hussein. These agreements were further changed as Russia left the war, and President Wilson destroyed any chance of direct control, requiring Britain to go through the newly created League of Nations to receive the mandate for Iraq. As the correspondences, agreements and treaties analyzed here have shown, by the time Britain had control of the mandate for Iraq, the only question left was whether or not to include the Kurds in Mosul, or create a small independent state for them. Britain may have been at the heart of Iraq's creation, but omitting the influence of a world war, years of internal confusion within the British government and the influence of negotiations with several other nations would be to grossly simplify reality and overstate the power of postwar Britain and its role in creating modern Iraq.

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