

Strategic Insight

Odium of the Mesopotamia Entanglement

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During the Cairo Conference in March 1921, Winston Churchill, then Colonial Secretary, said "I feel some misgivings about the political consequences to myself of taking on my shoulders the burden and odium of the Mesopotamia entanglement."^[1] Eighty-odd years later, the United States is committed to regime change in Baghdad and is now looking into same the Pandora's Box of Iraq that Churchill once saw. As the United States starts to think about the challenges of rebuilding a post-Saddam Iraq, it is worth reconsidering Churchill's insight and the circumstances of his analysis.

History

The Cairo Conference took place amidst a crisis atmosphere. Britain had forcibly put down an Arab revolt in Iraq at a cost of an estimated 40 million pounds and over 2200 British casualties. It had been a nasty encounter for both sides, with British colonial administrators and soldiers involved in the occupation singled out by the Arabs for particularly savage treatment. An estimated 10,000 Arabs were killed or wounded by the British in the revolt in circumstances that must have been equally unpleasant. The revolt had come at a bad time for all parties. The British had been left mentally exhausted and financially strapped at the end of World War I and the public clamored for the return of soldiers still stationed overseas. For their part, the Arabs had heard the great words of Woodrow Wilson calling for self-determination and found themselves betrayed as Britain and France carved up the region in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Churchill convened the conference at the Semiramus Hotel in Cairo to reconcile the incongruent objectives of: (1) saving money and reducing Britain's overseas military presence; (2) finding a way to maintain political control over Britain's mandate areas as identified in the Sykes-Picot Agreement; (3) protecting what was then suspected to be substantial oil reserves in Iraq; and, (4) preserving an open trade route to India—Crown Jewel of the empire.



On the left is Yousif Al-Suwaidi, one of the leaders of the Iraqi revolt of 1920, in which Shia and Sunni clerics joined together to orchestrate opposition to the British occupation.

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Al-Suwaidi later became a speaker in the Iraqi Senate. The British suppressed the revolt with their own forces and troops brought in from India. Some have alleged that Britain used poison gas in the campaign. Pictured at right is Sheikh Dhari, who is said to have assassinated a British colonel in Rumaitha, which sparked the revolt.

Churchill's solution to the "Mesopotamia entanglement" drew upon Britain's colonial experience around the world. The Mogul city-state principalities in India provided the model. The idea was to create and prop up some form of local administration (in the Mogul case, a royal one), bankroll the government with a stipend and hope that the administrator could ensure internal security and stability. The British military presence would be concentrated at few selected bases and capable of rapid deployment and reinforcement of local constabulary if necessary. In applying this model to Iraq, Churchill, Gertrude Bell and T.E. Lawrence selected Faisal, son of the Sharif of Mecca, to lead Iraq. The Hashemite dynasty was subsequently proclaimed and installed in Baghdad on August 23, 1921 and lasted until July 1958 when it was deposed by a coup lead by General Abdul-Karim Qassim. In some respects it is remarkable that the Hashemites survived as long as they did. The monarchy exercised ineffectual and titular control, with administrative power wielded by a caste of Sunni bureaucrats that had risen to the fore during the years of the Ottoman administration. In a depressing statement of the monarchy's failure, the most coherent and effective "national" institution created by the monarchy during its 50-year reign proved to be the Iraqi Army.



Gertrude Bell Photographic Archive,
Department of Archaeology, University of Newcastle upon Tyne

The architects of the modern Middle East gathered at Cairo in March 1921 and made decisions that affected the course of history in the region. The impact of the decisions made at the Cairo Conference are still being felt today. Gertrude Bell (third from left), Winston Churchill (second from left) and T.E. Lawrence are all pictured here in what must have been an "outing" at the time of the conference. Bell and Lawrence are generally credited with the idea of installing the Hashemite dynasty in Baghdad and got Churchill's buy-in at the conference.

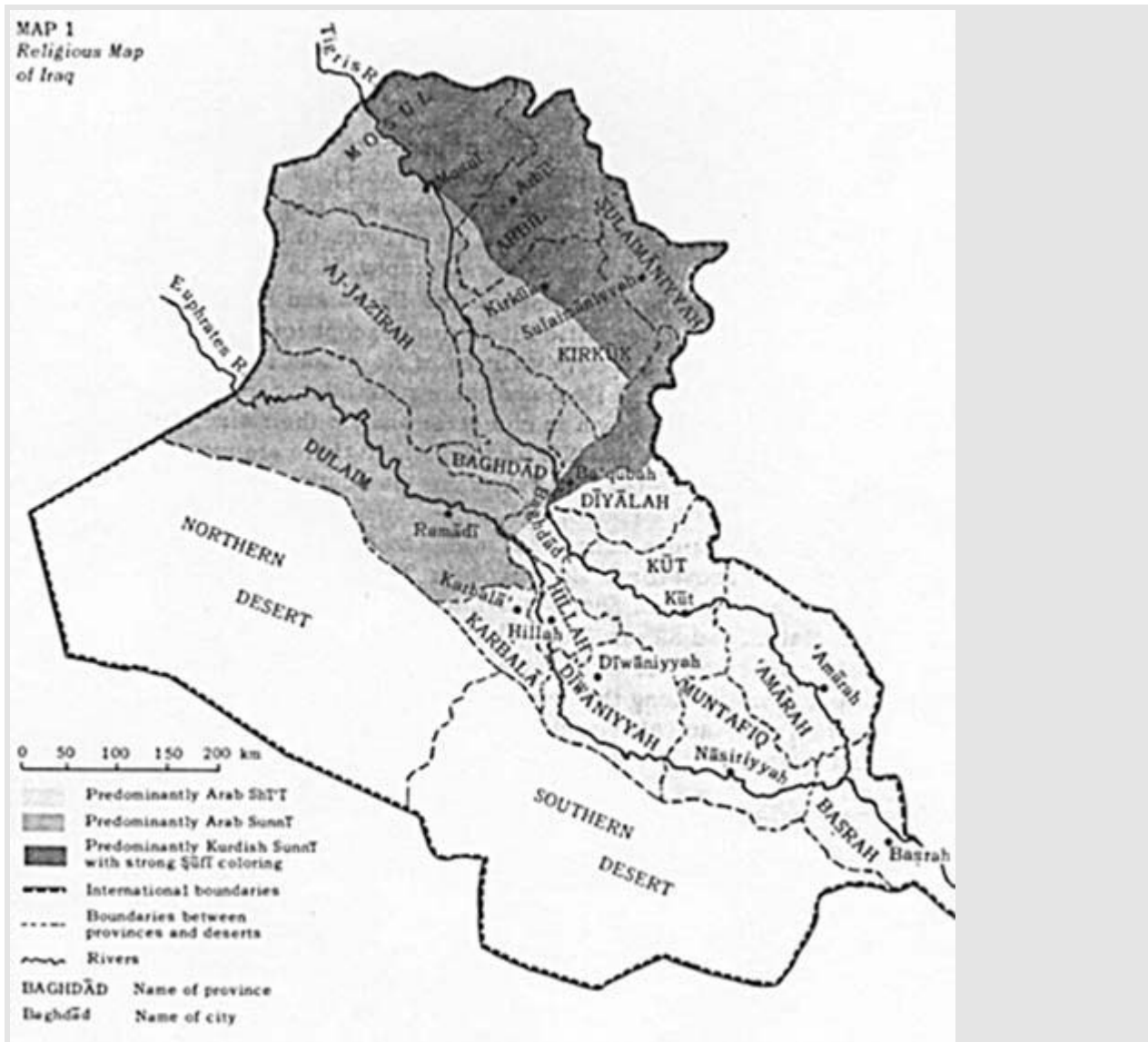
Then and Now

Churchill's odium of the Mesopotamian entanglement is as powerful a metaphor today as it was when he uttered it. Churchill saw an ungovernable morass before him in Iraq and correctly foresaw that Britain simply could not afford to occupy and govern the entity it had created out of the former Ottoman principalities of Basra, Baghdad, and, later, Mosul. He feared financial and political disaster and, in retrospect, came up with an innovative solution that satisfied Britain's immediate objectives and kicked the problem far enough down the road so that "Iraq" was no longer Britain's problem.

The odium of the Mesopotamia entanglement now sits squarely in the Bush Administration's lap, and the alligator-infested swamp awaits the United States just as it awaited Churchill 80 years ago. Many of the sources of Churchill's fear in 1922 remain with us today, and may in fact be more serious now than they were then. Fissures present in the artificially created state have never been healed. The three major ethnic groups, Sunnis, Shias and Kurds, may be united in their desire to see Saddam gone, but they must each overcome the fear, hatred and mistrust borne of decades of brutality and betrayal if they are to accomplish that which has so far not been achieved—the creation of an Iraqi national identity. The legacy

of the Sunni-led police state that has engaged in brutal repression on a scale that is difficult to imagine and even genocide (in the case of the Kurds) may make reconciliation or even confederation impossible for any national government.

It also is unclear, just as it was in 1922, how an externally imposed governing elite is to be accepted by the country's ethnic triad, which is itself further divided by sectarian, religious and tribal schisms. Some figures in the so-called Iraqi opposition have never wielded political authority inside the country and, like the Hashemites before them, will be seen as dependent on and craven to an imperial power for their position. While the 1920 rebellion was orchestrated by an established and relatively coherent tribal structure, tribal leadership in Iraq today wields no such authority, having been bought off and compromised, or, alternatively, brutalized by the regime. Shia clerics in the south, a potential source of authority in a ruling structure, have been systematically hounded, killed and deported by Saddam's ever-efficient Mukhabarrat over the last 30 years. In the north, the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan remain in an uneasy co-existence that could break apart at any time. The Sunnis in the country's center remain terrified of being overwhelmed by the more numerous Shias in the south and being set upon by vengeful Kurds from the north.



Shown above is a map depicting the geographic domains of the Iraq's respective religious groups. Each

of these general territorial divisions also contains many more schisms along tribal lines. During the late 1990s, Saddam embarked upon a campaign to emphasize the tribal nature of the country and has sought to co-opt many of the tribal leaders with bribes and other favors. Saddam's tribe from Tikrit, about 50 miles north of Baghdad on the banks of the Tigris River, is heavily enmeshed in the state security apparatus.

Opening Pandora's Box: 21st Century Iraq

But if there are certain interesting parallels with the Iraq that faced Churchill in 1922, the entanglements of the 2002 version of the country provide new and potentially more difficult challenges to the United States. All of the region's negative macroeconomic, demographic and political trends over the last several decades are further exacerbated in Iraq. The Iraq of 2002 is a country that has been effectively at war for the last 20 years, starting with the Iran-Iraq War during the 1980s, through Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and a United Nations-imposed trade embargo in the war's aftermath. The country's infrastructure is in shambles; the economy is but a shadow of what was once the envy of the Arab world; and there is a huge wave of a youthful population suffering from staggering unemployment. Nearly half of the country's population of 22 million is estimated to be under the age of 20. Iraqis born since 1980 have never known anything but Saddam, war, repression, corruption and hardship.

What little statistical information exists suggests an internal situation inside Iraq that is characterized by human deprivation, poverty and suffering. The United Nations Arab Human Development Report 2002 places Iraq near the bottom of all Middle Eastern countries in its Human Development Indicator, or HDI, index. This is an indicator based on four variables: life expectancy, adult literacy, education enrollment ratios and per capital gross domestic product. The report further refines this indicator (the Alternative HDI) by adding variables to measure civil and political liberties, women's rights, access to the internet, and carbon dioxide emissions per capita. As measured and ranked using the AHDI, Iraq ranks among the worst countries in the world.[\[2\]](#)

The impact of this environment on Iraqi public attitudes and perceptions is unknown, but the implications are ominous. It is alternatively asserted, on the one hand, that Iraqis will welcome the U.S. invading and occupying force with open arms after decades of living in a police state; and on the other, that the wellsprings of public opinion that have fueled the dramatic rise in anti-U.S. sentiment throughout the region are at their strongest inside Iraq. Saddam has certainly publicly fanned the flames raging in the aftermath of the Al Aqsa intifada, but it is unclear to what extent the Iraqi people share his views. It is these unknown public perceptions that present the greatest challenge to the United States in its attempts to rebuild the country. An Iraqi public that opens its arms and its hearts to the "liberating" force augurs well for the future of the country. A hostile public that proves to be a breeding ground for Islamic extremism and terrorism leads the United States down into the morass that was feared by Churchill, in which U.S. soldiers and aid workers are subjected to the same fate as the British administrators and soldiers that were brutally killed during the Arab revolt of 1920.

Conclusion

Securing the "hearts and minds" of the Iraqi people will be the central concern in the wake of a forcible removal of Saddam Hussein, as the United States seeks to restore order and set Iraq on the path of readmittance to the international community of nations. In trying to set this course, we must remember that the Iraqi people have existed in a time-warp lasting 20 years, if not longer. While most of the world was logging onto the internet or experiencing in some way the apparently inexorable force called "globalization," 20 million-odd Iraqis were hunkered down, fighting for their lives. The United States and the international community must not underestimate the challenge this environment poses to rebuilding the country called Iraq. It promises to be a long-term process, requiring money, commitment and international cooperation.

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References

1. As quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Vol. 4: 1916-1922, The Stricken World*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975, p. 509.
2. [Arab Human Development Report 2002](#), United Nations Development Programme, Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development.