

British Mandate of Mesopotamia

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| نيرهنلا ني ب ام دال ب يل ع ين اطي ربل ا بادتنالا British Mandate of Mesopotamia | |
| Mandate of the United Kingdom | |
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| <p>Flag</p> | |
| | |
| Capital | Baghdad |
| Language(s) | Arabic, Kurdish, Aramaic |
| Religion | Islam, Christianity, Judaism |
| Political structure | League of Nations Mandate |
| High Commissioner | Sir Percy Cox |
| National leader | King Faisal I |
| Historical era | Interwar period |
| - San Remo conference | April 26, 1920 |
| - Treaty of Sèvres | August 10, 1920 |
| - Anglo-Iraqi Treaty | 1930 |
| - Independence | October 3, 1932 |

The **British Mandate of Mesopotamia** (Arabic: **فَارَعِلا يِلَع يِنَاطِي رْبَلَا بَادَتْنَالَا**) was a League of Nations Class A mandate under Article 22 and entrusted to Britain when the Ottoman Empire was divided in August 1920 by the Treaty of Sèvres following World War I. This award was prepared on April 25, 1920, at the San Remo conference in Italy. France controlled the Mandates of Lebanon and Syria. Faisal ibn Husayn, who had been proclaimed King of Syria by a Syrian National Congress in Damascus in March 1920, was ejected by the French in July of the same year.

The civil government of postwar Iraq was headed originally by the High Commissioner, Sir Percy Cox, and his deputy, Colonel Arnold Wilson. British reprisals after the murder of a British officer in Najaf failed to restore order. British administration had yet to be established in the mountains of north Iraq. The most striking problem facing the British was the growing anger of the nationalists, who felt betrayed at being accorded mandate status.

Early unrest

Three important anticolonial secret societies had been formed in Iraq during 1918 and 1919. The League of the Islamic Awakening (*Jamiyat an Nahda al Islamiya*) was organized at Najaf. The Muslim National League (*Al Jamiya al Wataniya al Islamiya*) was formed with the object of organizing and mobilizing the population for major resistance. In February 1919, in Baghdad, a coalition of Shia merchants, Sunni teachers, and civil servants, Sunni and Shia ulama, and Iraqi officers formed the Guardians of Independence (*Haras al Istiqlal*). The Istiqlal had member groups in Karbala, Najaf, Kut, and Hillah.

The Grand Mujtahid of Karbala, Imam Shirazi, and his son, Mirza Muhammad Riza, began to organize the insurgent effort. Shirazi then issued a fatwa (religious ruling), pointing out that it was against Islamic law for Muslims to countenance being ruled by non-Muslims, and he called for a jihad against the British. By July 1920, Mosul was in rebellion against British rule, and the insurrection moved south down the Euphrates River valley. The southern tribes, who cherished their long-held political autonomy, needed little inducement to join in the fray. They did not cooperate in an organized effort against the British, however, which limited the effect of the revolt. The country was in a state of anarchy for three months; the British restored order only with reinforcements from India. British future Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1921, briefly considered using chemical weapons dropped from Royal Air Force bombers.^[1]

Ath Thawra al Iraqiyya al Kubra, or the Great Iraqi Revolution of 1920, was a watershed event in contemporary Iraqi history. For the first time, Sunnis and Shias, tribes and cities, were brought together in a common effort. In the opinion of Hanna Batatu, author of a seminal work on Iraq, the building of a nation-state in Iraq depended upon two major factors: the integration of Shias and Sunnis into the new body politic and the successful resolution of the age-old conflicts between the tribes and the riverine cities and among the tribes themselves over the food-producing flatlands of the Tigris and the Euphrates. The 1920 rebellion brought these groups together, if only briefly; this constituted an important first step in the long and arduous process of forging a nation-state out of Iraq's conflict-ridden social structure.

Establishment of the Kingdom

At the Cairo Conference of March 1921, the British set the parameters for Iraqi political life that were to continue until the 1958 revolution; they chose a Hashemite, Faisal ibn Husayn, son of Sherif Hussein ibn Ali former Sharif of Mecca as Iraq's first King; they established an Iraqi army (but kept Assyrian Levies under direct British command); and they proposed a new treaty. To confirm Faisal as Iraq's first monarch, a one-question plebiscite was carefully arranged that had a return of 96 percent in his favor. The British saw in Faisal a leader who possessed sufficient nationalist and Islamic credentials to have broad appeal, but who also was vulnerable enough to remain dependent on their support. Faisal traced his descent from the family of the Prophet Muhammad. His ancestors held political authority in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina since the tenth century. The British believed these credentials would satisfy traditional Arab standards of political legitimacy; moreover, the British thought Faisal would be accepted by the growing Iraqi nationalist movement because of his role in the 1916 Arab Revolt against the Turks, his achievements as a leader of the Arab emancipation movement, and his general leadership qualities. Faisal was instated as the Monarch of Iraq after the Naqib of Baghdad was disqualified as being too old (80 yrs) and Sayid Talib (a prominent Iraqi from the province of Basra) was deported on trumped up charges by the British. The voting was far from a reflection of the true feelings of the Iraqi people. Nevertheless, Faisal was considered the most effective choice for the throne by the British government.

The final major decision taken at the Cairo Conference related to the new Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1922. Faisal was under pressure from the nationalists and the anti-British mujtahids of Najaf and Karbala to limit both British influence in Iraq and the duration of the treaty. Recognizing that the monarchy depended on British support— and wishing to avoid a repetition of his experience in Syria — Faisal maintained a moderate approach in dealing with Britain. The treaty which had been originally set as a twenty year engagement but later reduced to 4 years, was ratified in June 1924, stated that the king would heed British advice on all matters affecting British interests and on fiscal policy as long as Iraq had a balance of payments deficit with Britain, and that British officials would be appointed to specified posts in eighteen departments to act as advisers and inspectors. A subsequent financial agreement, which significantly increased the financial burden on Iraq, required Iraq to pay half the cost of supporting British resident officials, among other expenses. British obligations under the new treaty included providing various kinds of aid, notably military assistance, and proposing Iraq for membership in the League of Nations at the earliest moment. In effect, the treaty ensured that Iraq would remain politically and economically dependent on Britain. While unable to prevent the treaty, Faisal clearly felt that the British had gone back on their promises to him.

On 1 October 1922 the Royal Air Force in Iraq was reorganized as RAF Iraq Command which was given control of all British forces in the kingdom.[2]

The British decision at the Cairo Conference to establish an indigenous Iraqi army was significant. In Iraq, as in most of the developing world, the military establishment has been the best organized institution in an otherwise weak political system. Thus, while Iraq's body politic crumbled under immense political and economic pressure throughout the monarchic period, the military gained increasing power and influence; moreover, because the officers in the new army were by necessity Sunnis who had served under the Ottomans, while the lower ranks were predominantly filled by Shia tribal elements, Sunni dominance in the military was preserved.

Oil concession

Before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the British-controlled Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC) had held concessionary rights to the Mosul *wilaya* (province). Under the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement — an agreement in 1916 between Britain and France that delineated future control of the Middle East — the area would have fallen under French influence. In 1919, however, the French relinquished their claims to Mosul under the terms of the Long-Berenger Agreement. The 1919 agreement granted the French a 25 percent share in the TPC as compensation.

Beginning in 1923, British and Iraqi negotiators held acrimonious discussions over the new oil concession. The major obstacle was Iraq's insistence on a 20 percent equity participation in the company; this figure had been included in the original TPC concession to the Turks and had been agreed upon at Sanremo for the Iraqis. In the end, despite strong nationalist sentiments against the concession agreement, the Iraqi negotiators acquiesced to it. The League of Nations was soon to vote on the disposition of Mosul, and the Iraqis feared that, without British support, Iraq would lose the area to Turkey. In March 1925, an agreement was concluded that contained none of the Iraqi demands. The TPC, now renamed the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), was granted a full and complete concession for a period of seventy-five years.

Later years of the mandate

With the signing of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty and the settling of the Mosul question, Iraqi politics took on a new dynamic. The emerging class of Sunni and Shia landowning tribal sheikhs vied for positions of power with wealthy and prestigious urban-based Sunni families and with Ottoman-trained army officers and bureaucrats. Because Iraq's newly established political institutions were the creation of a foreign power, and because the concept of democratic government had no precedent in Iraqi history, the politicians in Baghdad lacked legitimacy and never developed deeply rooted constituencies. Thus, despite a constitution and an elected assembly, Iraqi politics was more a shifting alliance of important personalities and cliques than a democracy in the Western sense. The absence of broadly based political institutions inhibited the early nationalist movement's ability to make deep inroads into Iraq's diverse social

structure.

The new Anglo-Iraqi Treaty was signed in June 1930. It provided for a "close alliance," for "full and frank consultations between the two countries in all matters of foreign policy," and for mutual assistance in case of war. Iraq granted the British the use of air bases near Basra and at Al Habbaniyah and the right to move troops across the country. The treaty, of twenty-five years' duration, was to come into force upon Iraq's admission to the League of Nations. This occurred on October 3, 1932.

British High Commissioners to the Kingdom of Iraq

- 1920 - 1923 Sir Percy Zachariah Cox
- 1923 - 1928 Sir Henry Robert Conway Dobbs
- 1928 - 1929 Sir Gilbert Falkingham Clayton
- 1929 - 1932 Sir Francis Henry Humphrys

Further reading

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- [1] R. M. Douglas, "Did Britain Use Chemical Weapons in Mandatory Iraq?" *Journal of Modern History* Dec. 2009, Vol. 81, No. 4: 859-887. online (<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/605488>) concludes "no"--that no chemical weapons or gas was actually used.
- [2] http://www.rafweb.org/Command_O3.htm

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