
Iraqi revolt against the British

The **Iraqi Revolt against the British (1920)**, or the **Great Iraqi Revolution of 1920**, started in Baghdad in the summer of 1920 with mass demonstrations of both Sunni and Shia, including protests by embittered officers from the old Ottoman army, against the policies of British Acting Civil Commissioner Sir Arnold Wilson. The revolt gained momentum when it spread to the largely Shia regions of the middle and lower Euphrates. Sheikh Mehdi Al-Khalissi was a prominent Shia leader of the revolt. Although the revolt was largely over by the end of 1920, elements of it dragged on until 1922. The revolt began in May 1920 as peaceful demonstrations against the British conquest of Iraq. Sunni and Shi'a religious communities cooperated during the revolution as well as tribal communities, the urban masses, and many Iraqi officers in Syria.^[1] The revolution turned bloody after the tribes began using violence to achieve their goals. The objectives of the revolution were independence from British rule and creation of an Arab government.^[2] Although the revolt achieved some initial success, by the end of October 1920 the British had crushed the revolt. There has been some debate among historians over whether the participants in the revolt were inspired by Iraqi nationalism or by other motives.

A great deal of anti-British rebellion occurred in the north by the Kurds, who were trying to gain independence. One of the major Kurdish leaders was Sheik Mahmoud Barzinji. During the revolt, Britain used white phosphorus bombs against Kurdish villagers. These weapons were also used in Al-Habbniyah in Al-Anbar province, and the British continued to use these tactics throughout the 1920s in Iraq.

Background

After World War I the idea of the League of Nations creating Mandates for the territories of the defeated Central Powers began to take shape after the Peace Treaty of Versailles in 1919.^[3] The idea was based on the principle that the territories would eventually become independent but under the tutelage of one of the victorious Entente countries.^[4] People in Ottoman provinces began to fear the Mandate concept since "it seemed to suggest European imperial rule by another name."^[5] At the San Remo Conference in April 1920, Great Britain was awarded the Mandate for Iraq, (called Mesopotamia at the time) as well as the Mandate for Palestine. In Iraq the British got rid of most of the former Ottoman officials and the new administration was composed of mainly British officials. Many people in Iraq began to fear becoming part of the British Empire. It was at this point that one of the most eminent Shi'a mujtahid, Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Shirazi, issued a fatwa "declaring that service in the British administration was unlawful."^[6] There was growing resentment to new British policies such as new land ownership laws, which upset tribal leaders, and especially for the new tax which people had to pay to be buried in Najaf, where Shi'a from all over the world came to be buried.^[7] Meetings between Shi'a ulema and tribal leaders discussed strategies for peaceful protests but they did consider violent action if the peaceful demonstrations failed to get results.^[8] Discontent with British rule materialized in May 1920 with the outbreak of mass meetings and demonstrations in Baghdad.

The Revolution

The start of the revolution in May 1920 was centered on peaceful protests against British rule. There were large gatherings at Sunni and Shi'a mosques which gave proof of co-operation between the two main sects of Iraqi society.^[9] At one of the larger meetings fifteen representatives were nominated to present the case for Iraqi independence to the British officials. Acting Civil Commissioner, Sir Arnold Wilson, dismissed their demands as unpractical.^[10] Armed revolt broke out in late June 1920. Ayatollah al-Shirazi issued another fatwa that seemed to encourage armed revolt. The British authorities hoped to avoid this and they arrested a sheikh of the Zawalim tribe.^[11] Later an armed band of loyal tribal warriors stormed the prison and set him free. The revolt soon gained momentum as the British garrisons in the mid-Euphrates region were weak and the armed tribes much stronger. By

late July, the armed tribal rebels controlled most of the mid-Euphrates region.^[12] The success of the tribes caused the revolt to spread to the lower Euphrates and all around Baghdad too.^[13] British War Minister, Winston Churchill, authorized immediate reinforcements from Iran that included two squadrons of the Royal Air Force. The use of aircraft shifted the advantage to the British and played a huge role in ending the revolt.^[14] There were also tribes that worked against the revolt since they were recognized by the British authorities and profited from this acknowledgement. Eventually the rebels began to run low on supplies and funding and could not support the revolt for much longer while British forces were becoming more effective. The revolt ended in October 1920 when the rebels surrendered Najaf and Karbala to the British authorities.^[15]

Aftermath

Around 6,000 Iraqis and around 500 British and Indian soldiers died in the revolt.^[16] The revolt caused British officials to drastically reconsider their strategy in Iraq. The revolt cost the British government 40,000,000 pounds which twice the amount of the annual budget allotted for Iraq and a huge factor in reconsidering their strategy in Iraq.^[17] The new Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill, decided a new colonial administration was need in Iraq as well as the British colonies in the Middle East so he called for a large conference in Cairo. In March 1921 at the Cairo Conference, British officials discussed the future of Iraq. The British now wanted to control Iraq through more indirect means, mainly by installing former officials friendly to the British government. They eventually decided to install Faysal ibn Husayn as King of Iraq.^[18] Faysal had worked with the British before in the Arab Revolt during World War I and he enjoyed good relations with certain important officials.^[19] British officials also thought installing Faysal as king would prevent Faysal from fighting the French in Syria and damaging British-French relations.^[20] For Iraqis the revolt served as part of the founding of Iraqi nationalism although this conclusion is debated by scholars. It also showed unprecedented co-operation between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims although this co-operation did not last much longer than the end of the revolt.^[21]

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