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A Valiant Effort: Faisal's Failed Inculcation of National Identity in Iraq

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The lack of attention to any comprehensive scholarly study of King Faisal I of Iraq since his untimely death in 1933 is interesting, considering that the twelve years in which he ruled Iraq witnessed the imposition and evolution of many of the institutions of the twentieth century state along with their concomitant ideologies and justifications. The construction of the modern Iraqi state belonged solely neither to the British nor to the efforts of the Ottoman-educated ex-Sharifian officers who followed Faisal from his aborted kingdom in Syria to the newly established monarchy in 1921. It was more a *mélange* of competing ideas, collaborative efforts, and political realities. In all this, Faisal played no small part as he maneuvered delicately among the strategic concerns of two major European powers, a re-emergent Turkish nation, his family's historical nemesis in the Nejd, relations with Iran following the 1921 coup d'état, and a variety of internal separatist ambitions and parochial interests. This paper seeks to redress this lacuna, concentrating on Faisal's efforts to establish a solid base of support and control while crafting an independent, coherently functioning polity from the patchwork of provinces presented him on his accession to the throne of Iraq.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The nation is not a concept belonging to natural history, to ethnology, or to sociology, but to politics. Simply, as inert bodies, nations are exceedingly ancient, but as conscious, active units they have not existed very long. The science of politics regards nations as organized masses of humanity or, as masses capable of organization, which detach themselves spatially from the whole body of mankind and mark themselves out by a unique history, language, and civilization,...as units that will and act. The common exercise of power is the fundamental and essential object of political activity.

--Karl Renner, *Das Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Nationen in besonderer Anwendung auf Oesterreich* (Leipzig, 1918) p.10.

Shortly after the untimely death of King Faisal I in 1933, a play entitled *The Leap of the Arabs* was staged in Buenos Aires. Set in Damascus in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, it was a typical expression of the pan-Arab nationalist sentiment frequently espoused outside the Arab world. The play portrayed an idealized Faisal during his brief tenure as ruler in Syria, a “champion of Arabism” dauntless in pursuit of an independent nation united without regard to tribe, ethnicity, sect, or religion. The playwright dedicated his work to Faisal’s memory and “to all those who believe in brotherhood as a creed, in equality as a code and in liberty as a religion’.”¹ Faisal’s and T. E. Lawrence’s earlier exploits in the Arab Revolt of 1916 – 1918 were also celebrated during the interwar years in poetry, novels, and film. European and American audiences could indulge in a steady stream of fictionalized portrayals of dashing, mounted desert warriors ranging from the historical to the absurdly romantic; a trend that gradually

¹ As quoted in Ali A. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq* (Yale, 2014) xxix.

diminished in the post-WWII era only to be revived by David Lean's 1962 epic (and epically flawed) *Lawrence of Arabia*.²

Despite the international attention following Feisal's early paramilitary exploits, and later marking his death, his legacy was muted as subsequent events in Iraq and the Middle East overshadowed the travails of early post-imperial and post-colonial governments. Internally, the military coups of 1936 and 1941 along with the growth of the Communist Party and its troubled relations with the government (leading to the *al-Wathbah* uprising of 1948), reflected an underlying structural dissonance that many attributed directly to the period of British control and, by association, to the monarchy.³ So, too, did the emergence of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party and its subsequent split from the Syrian branch, the violent and bloody overthrow of Iraq's monarchy in 1958, and the even more violent coup in 1963 (the Ramadan Revolution). The later revival of Shi'a Islamic ideology in the 1960s and 1970s to counter the Sunni-dominated pan-Arab ideology, which a majority of Shi'a associated with the Iraqi Ba'ath Party, only contributed to the lack of interest, if not hostility, that attempts at a retrospective approach to Faisal's reign and achievements generated.

² One American writer produced a 65-page epic poem *Feisal, The Arabian*. Lowell Thomas single-handedly promoted Lawrence (and himself) in live shows that depicted, among other things, scantily dressed women dancing in front of images of the pyramids. Doubtless, the success of E. M. Hull's romances owed something to the popular fascination with the desert and its inhabitants.

³ The *Wathbah* uprising – 'the most formidable mass insurrection in the history of the monarchy' was sparked by the palace's decision to renew the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930, which many critics felt 'reduced Iraq to an appendage of the British Empire'. Students and workers joined in demonstrations and strikes, which quickly escalated into street violence that left between 300 and 400 dead. Hanna Batatu devotes an entire chapter to the uprising in his magnum opus, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements in Iraq*, (Princeton, 1978), Chapter 22.

There were no comprehensive scholarly studies of Faisal, apart from one or two biographical works in English and Arabic in the 1930s, Zeine N. Zeine's diplomatic study of Faisal's short-lived Syrian tenure in 1960, and Gerald de Gaury's personal account of the monarchy in 1961. It wasn't until the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, when Saddam Hussein felt confident enough to begin resurrecting various historical links and symbols in aid of enhancing his cult of personality, that a renewed interest manifested in examining Faisal's life and the role he played in the creation of modern Iraq.⁴ Various memoirs shedding light on the Mandate and early monarchical period were re-issued, both in Arabic as well as English, and a small number of partial biographies emerged dealing with critical aspects of Faisal's life in the Hejaz, Syria, and Iraq. Yet no comprehensive biography of Faisal's life appeared until 2014.⁵

The lack of attention to studies of Faisal is especially interesting considering that the twelve years in which he ruled Iraq witnessed the imposition and evolution of many of the institutions of the twentieth century state along with their concomitant ideologies and justifications. The construction of the modern Iraqi state belonged solely neither to the British nor to the efforts of the Ottoman-educated ex-Sharifian officers who followed Faisal to the newly established monarchy in 1921. It was more a *mélange* of competing ideas, collaborative efforts, and political realities in which Faisal played no small part,

⁴ Zeine N. Zeine, *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Western Diplomacy and the Rise and Fall of Faisal's Kingdom in Syria*, (Beirut, 1960). Gerald de Gaury, *Three Kings in Baghdad, 1921-1958* (London, 1961 – reissued 2007).

⁵ See for example, Ja'far Al-'Askari, *Mudhakkirat Ja'far Al-'Askari*, (Dar al-Laam, 1988). In English, *A Soldier's Story: From Ottoman Rule to Independent Iraq*, (London, 2003). Tawfiq al-Suwaydi, *Mudhakkirati, nisf qarn min tarikh al-Iraq wa al-qadiyah al-'Arabiyah*, (Beirut, 1969). In English, *My Memoirs: Half a Century of the History of Iraq and the Arab Cause*, (Boulder, 2013). Rustum Haydar, *Mudhakkirat*, (Beirut, 1988).

maneuvering delicately among the strategic concerns of two major European powers, a re-emergent Turkish nation, his family's historical nemesis in the Nejd, relations with Iran following the 1921 coup d'état, and a variety of internal separatist ambitions and parochial interests. This paper will address Faisal's efforts to establish a solid base of support and control while crafting an independent, coherently functioning polity from the patchwork of provinces presented him on his accession to the throne of Iraq.

Chapter II: A National Movement?

Traditionally, the impulse to nationalism in Iraq has been ascribed to a variety of causes and events: the foment of intellectual ideas emanating from the Islamic modernism of late nineteenth and early twentieth century reformers (Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh, Rashid Rida, and ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi), the excitement generated by the Young Turks revolution in Istanbul in 1908, the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911, antagonism to the British presence and administration during and immediately after the First World War, secret societies (*Haras al-Istiqlal* and an Iraqi branch of *al-‘Ahd*), President Woodrow Wilson’s enunciation of the principle of self-determination, and the rebellion of 1920. This last in particular has long been considered the seminal event in the Iraqi nationalist narrative, spawning a surprisingly large number of memoirs and accounts, written and oral, detailing the crucial role various people and groups played in this “first historical act” of the nascent Iraqi state.⁶

The tendency to imbue the 1920 uprising with high revolutionary, nationalist, socialist, and anti-imperialist motivations likely began with T. E. Lawrence and his determination to discredit the India Office colonial administrators tasked with establishing a working government in mandatory Iraq; especially Sir Percy Cox, the Chief Political Officer, and Lt-Col. Sir Arnold Wilson, Cox’s deputy and acting Civil Commissioner from April 1918. Neither man felt any particular admiration for

⁶ Faleh Abdul-Jabar and Hosham Dawod, eds. *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East*, (London, 2003) 284. Allawi, 356-60. Philip Willard Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development* (London, 1937) 143-144.

Lawrence, nor did they approve the opinions advocated by Mark Sykes and the Arab Bureau that

viewed with benevolence the idea of a united or federated Arabia; a Federation in which the Wahhabis of Najd, the Lords of Koweit and Asir, the Sunni Arabs of Syria and the Shi'ahs of Iraq, not to mention the usual minorities, would by some means unite to realize their presumed aspirations to govern each other.⁷

Nevertheless, Lawrence's opinions on the nature and causes of tribal rebellions found a ready audience seeking to couch such uprisings in the increasingly popular language of anti-colonialism and emergent nationalism. One writer even depicted the events of 1920 in terms of blood, race, and that "passionate love of liberty so characteristic of the Bedouins."⁸

Among Iraqi writers even greater effort was expended to confer sweeping moral and ideological nationalist aspirations upon the uprising. A number of accounts emphasized deep-rooted political and ideological involvement, a revisionist exercise that only intensified after the inception of the Iraqi state as competition grew for high political and sinecure administrative positions.⁹ Later such claims were used to provide additional luster to one's antecedents, much in the manner of Saddam Hussein's "historical deeds."

⁷ As quoted in, Judith Share Yaphe, "The Arab Revolt in Iraq of 1920" (Phd Diss., 1972) 78. Lt-Col. Sir Arnold Talbot Wilson, (1884-1940) who spent his early military and political career in India, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf, dismissed Lawrence for "his beardlessness, his love of dressing and being photographed in long clothes." As quoted in, Allawi, 459. Sir Percy Cox (1864-1937), an extremely able political officer with lengthy experience in India, the Persian Gulf and Africa, didn't fully trust Mark Sykes or the Arab Bureau's indistinct plans for an 'Arab government' and worked to establish a status for Iraq separate from the other Middle East territories of the Ottoman Empire. Col. Sir Mark Sykes (1879-1919) served first as Lord Kitchener's representative on the de Bunsen committee, advising on Middle East affairs, before joining the Arab Bureau.

⁸ Ireland, 144. For more strictly historical accounts, see Sir James Aylmer Lowthorpe Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia, 1920* (Edinburgh, 1922). Charles Townshend, *Desert Hell: The British Invasion of Mesopotamia* (Cambridge, 2011) 463-478. Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyah min Tarikh al Iraq al Hadith* (Beirut, 2005) v.6, pt.1.

⁹ Jabar and Dawod, 284-285.

Saddam even commissioned a film in 1983 starring Oliver Reed, “*al-Mas’ala al-Kubra*”. Not surprisingly, the film showed Sunni rather than Shi’a tribes playing the leading role in the rebellion, which was also initiated, naturally, by Saddam’s hometown of Tikrit (historically, it took no part in the uprising).¹⁰ One writer emphasized the distinct, leading role played by chieftains of his own tribe (although there is no record of the tribe participating in the uprising), portraying them as ‘sole heroes of the independence revolution’, while another cited the Baghdad elite (who remained quiet throughout the uprising though they had organized political rallies and speeches during the previous Ramadan) as ‘the thinking powerhouse’ and ‘masterminds’ of the ‘revolution’. Other writers stressed the role of *al-‘Ahd* and the *Haras al-Istiqlal* parties (both of which contained significant numbers of Shia) which set up printing presses in Najaf and Karbala to distribute leaflets (without discernible effect) urging the tribes to unite and revolt, while still others attempted to underline the ‘patriotic exploits’ on behalf of Iraq’s ‘independence’ conducted by the (primarily Sunni) Mosul branch of *al-‘Ahd* (Mosul remained quiet throughout the uprising).¹¹

Above all, the tribes were concerned with maintaining and potentially increasing their power and material welfare. During the war the tribal leaders carefully weighed the competing merits of remaining loyal to the Ottomans or throwing in with the British and thought nothing of changing allegiances as the battle seemed to favor one side or the other. Equally, during the uprising, ‘revolutionary’ actions were neither premeditated nor

¹⁰ Townshend, 472.

¹¹ Jabar and Dawod, 284-286. Ghassan ‘Atiyah, *Iraq, 1908-1921: A Socio-Political Study* (Beirut, 1973) 51-58. Al-Wardi commented that *al-‘Ahd* and *Haras al-Istiqlal* were at each other’s throats almost as soon as they’d been established. Al-Wardi, op. cit., v.5, 92-94.

coordinated but rather purely local responses to specific economic or political issues as they occurred. In the case of the 1920 uprising, the initial spark was provided by the arrest of Sha'lan Abu al-Jon, sheikh of the Dhawalim clan of the Bani Hajim tribe, who refused to pay taxes to the British administrator in charge of revenues collection.¹² His tribesmen loyally stormed the police station where he was being held, killed a number of policemen, and set him free. At no point during this affair or after did the sheikh exhibit or incite any political activism, though this failed to prevent nationalist writers from dismissing evidence of a parochial economic driver in favor of a grander catalyst. According to al-Wardi, it was Sheikh Ali al-Sharqi alone, a contemporary of many of those involved in the uprising, who emphasized the true local nature of the event.¹³

Despite the fact that the majority of the skirmishing that ensued in the late summer and early fall involved tribal forces only in and around the mid-Euphrates area, with a scattered number of isolated incidents popping up at greater distance (and disappearing almost as quickly), “no episode in the history of this country has been as revered as the 1920 rebellion.”¹⁴ Ali al-Wardi, commenting later on the sheer number and variety of memoirs and accounts reflected that the writers had “done well in the arena of teaching nationalism to the new generations but interpretations such as these will not work in the field of scientific research.”¹⁵

¹² The Ottoman record of revenue collection in these frontier vilayets was sketchy at best. The authority later imposed by the British proved a double-edged sword. While their administration may have been more efficient, it also likely marked the first time the sheikhs couldn't evade payment. Jabar and Dawod, 292. 'Atiyah, 53.

¹³ Al-Wardi, v.6, 233-234.

¹⁴ Jabar and Dawod, 283.

¹⁵ al-Wardi, v6. 334.

The uprising finally petered out in the autumn of 1920, having cost the British Treasury over £40 million, almost double the £25 million incurred by the Mesopotamia garrison as its annual expense, along with 900 British and Indian soldiers killed, wounded, or missing. Tribal losses were more than five times that number.¹⁶ General Haldane criticized the period following the end of the war as “wildly extravagant” financially, though he also railed against politicians and members of the press in England who failed to grasp the logistics of undertaking operations in a country so lacking in resources necessary to sustain an army in the field.¹⁷ In London, the traditional idea that imperial holdings should be self-sustaining had re-emerged shortly after the Armistice and Winston Churchill, as Minister of War, faced significant pressures to reduce the garrison and its expense. The fact that the India Secretary had finally produced a written statement of “our objective” in Iraq in February 1919 was of little use as its wording and timetable were too vague, calling for “a flexible constitution, giving full play to the different elements of the population, and recognizing and incorporating local peculiarities and distinctions” that was intended to provide for “Arab participation as time goes on in the actual government and administration of the country.”¹⁸

In the end events outside Iraq shaped, to a certain degree, the measures enacted within the country. The entry of the United States into the war and, following the Armistice, President Woodrow Wilson’s dominance of the Paris Peace Conference presaged inexorable changes in the practices of territorial annexation and political

¹⁶ Haldane, 331.

¹⁷ Ibid, 65.

¹⁸ Townshend, 441.

tutelage based upon outmoded notions of cultural and racial superiority. His demands at the Peace Conference for “open seas, open markets and self-determination,” raised the possibility of a new international order that rested on the “universal unit of the sovereign state, fostering comparatively open world markets and independent governments.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York, 2003) 4.

Chapter III: Constructing a Country

The British army occupied Baghdad in March 1917, and by November 1918 they held Mosul. Earlier fears of Russian rivalry and encroachment on British interests in Iran or Britain's control of India had receded and the British could turn their attention to the political future of Mesopotamia.²⁰ Most immediately, "the necessity of replacing the vacuum left by the departure of the Turks" rendered imperative some form of basic administration.²¹ In September 1918, the *vilayets* of Basra and Baghdad were combined under the aegis of Sir Percy Cox as Civil Commissioner, with Lt-Col. Arnold Wilson acting as his deputy. Several political officers, the mainstay of British imperial governance, were quickly assigned to various districts, responsible for administering justice, maintaining law and order, settling disputes between town and tribe, collecting revenue, and pacifying restless tribesmen.²² In the absence of any clear communication between London and Baghdad, those on the ground, drawn from the ranks of the Indian Army and Civil Service, set about establishing and maintaining the kind of administrative machine with which they were familiar.

Within a week of the occupation of Basra in 1914, a Civil Police service modeled on Indian lines replaced the Military Police under the supervision of an Anglo-Indian police officer with long experience on the North West Frontier.²³ For the administration of civil and criminal justice within the towns and cities a penal code was developed, also

²⁰ Ireland, 38.

²¹ Ireland, 74.

²² Reeva S. Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian, eds., *The Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921* (New York, 2004) 24.

²³ Ireland, 81.

based on Indian models. As for the tribes, the British determined that the previous Ottoman policy of tribal settlement had failed due to the ineffectualness of the “feeble Turkish tax gatherers” who brought with them the contaminating effects of modernity. The results were “endless bickering” amongst the tribes and “...the tendency towards leveling, division, and disunity.”²⁴ Instead of utilizing the power of the sheikhs, the Ottomans “pursued their classic policy of attempting to improve their own position by the destruction of such native elements of order as were in existence. To recognize local dominion and yoke it to his service was beyond the conception of the Turk,” whereas the British were convinced of their own innate ability to understand an appropriate delegation of power through local structures.²⁵

In order to counteract the “still sullen and unruly tribes,” the British set about rebuilding a tribal organization and restoring the authority of paramount tribal sheiks, which had organically dissolved some time prior to the war, on the understanding that “both the attitudes and action of a tribe depend almost entirely on its most influential chiefs.”²⁶ Of course, once the “natural importance” of the sheiks was reconstituted it was much easier to implement the Sandeman System, created for use among the tribes in the NWFP and dependent on the existence (or creation) of paramount chiefs working under the supervision and control of political officers, to deal with tribal disputes as and when

²⁴ Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900-1950: A Political, Social, and Economic History* (London, 1953), 25.

²⁵ Bell, *Cmd. 1061*, 94.

²⁶ Ireland, 94. Also, see Townshend, 407-408. The British appointed cooperative sheikhs to fill these roles, inflicting punishment on the other sheikhs until they agreed to recognize them.

they arose in Iraq.²⁷ All this, despite Major-General Sir Stanley Maude, C-in-C of the British forces in Iraq, having issued a florid proclamation to the inhabitants of Baghdad after the army entered the city in March 1917 promising that Britain had “no wish to impose alien institutions on the people of Baghdad” and that they would be allowed to “enjoy their wealth and substance under institutions which are fully in consonance with their sacred laws and their racial ideals.”²⁸ The notion of establishing an Arab administration to govern the Baghdad vilayet while Basra remained under ‘Indian’ derived control was quickly discarded. Increasingly, however, external pressures became more acute and previously unchallenged assumptions of British imperial policy had to be reconciled to the changing political currents.²⁹

Imperial policy had already begun to oscillate in the first decade of the twentieth century as Viceroy responded to Indian nationalist agitation with various measures of political reform on the subcontinent. These changes, in turn, made the continued application of colonial Indian methods in Iraq untenable, as it was hardly appropriate to saddle one territory with a system that would apparently be dismantled in another. Indeed, much of the confusion over implementation of a coherent policy following the Armistice, although deriving partly from London’s inability to present a clear line of action, sprang also from the difficulty of convincing civil servants, both in Baghdad and

²⁷ Ireland, 85.

²⁸ Simon and Tejrjian, 23. The proclamation, full of ‘oriental and flowery language’ was written by Sir Mark Sykes and Maude had no desire to make it, feeling it was ill-timed and unduly ambitious as it invited self-governance when the British had already established India Office control in Basra.

²⁹ Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country, 1914-1932* (New York, 2007) 13.

in the India Office itself, that Indian administrative methods and machinery could no longer be used in whatever future scheme was devised for Iraq.³⁰

President Wilson's determination to institute a global order of states that would act collectively in mutually supportive ways (a sort of revised Westphalian system) resulted in the delivery of his fourteen points speech to Congress on 8 January 1918. This speech, combined with one given by Lloyd George three days earlier calling for Mesopotamia, along with other non-Turkish areas of the Ottoman Empire, to be recognized as having "their separate national conditions," marked the beginning of Britain's slow retreat from Empire.³¹ The impact of these speeches on the political elite in London were aptly recorded by Sir Mark Sykes:

If America had not come into the war, if the Russian revolution had not taken place, if the idea of no annexation had not taken root, if the world spirit of this time was the world spirit of 1887, there would be no reason why we should take any steps to consolidate our position against a peace conference, it would be good enough....[But now]...imperialism, annexation, military triumph, prestige, White man's burdens, have been expunged from the popular political vocabulary, consequently Protectorates, spheres of interest or influence, annexations, bases, etc., have to be consigned to the Diplomatic lumber-room.³²

In the scramble to adapt to the changing political environment, the British, like the Ottomans before them, sought to understand and, consequently, to manage Iraq through the creation of a social base with which they were familiar, or could accommodate to their own interests in the region. The Ottoman administrators had urged education to mold the inhabitants of the three vilayets comprising the Mesopotamian

³⁰ Ibid, 20-22.

³¹ Ibid, 24.

³² Dodge, 13.

frontier into a more cohesive, orthodox entity through the inculcation of uniform religious values that would also serve to propound the legitimating ideology of the state.³³ In similar vein, the British looked to the minorities, mostly Sunni, with leavenings of Christian and Jewish appointees, to mold an administration that would most likely fit the prevailing international attitudes regarding nationalism and self-determination while remaining susceptible to Imperial interests.

What we want to have in existence, what we ought to have been creating in this time is some administration with Arab institutions which we can safely leave while pulling the strings ourselves; something that won't cost very much, but under which our economic and political interests will be secure.³⁴

British dependence on minorities to assist in the new administration overlooked the majority Shi'a inhabitants of the Basra and Baghdad vilayets while adhering neatly to their rigid understanding of Iraqi society and the urban-rural divide. Colonial administrators persisted in believing the 'urban-based effendi' were 'parasites on society,' utterly lacking the virile qualities of the tribesmen who remained untouched by 'the emasculating effects of modernity and the city'.³⁵ Yet it was preferable to incorporate educated Sunnis, Christians, and Jews into the structure of administration, as their minority status would render them dependent, in turn, on the British for their preservation.

³³ Selim Derengil, "The Struggle Against Shi'ism in Hamidian Iraq: A Study in Ottoman Counter-Propaganda," *Die Welt des Islams* 30 (1990) 61.

³⁴ As quoted in Sluglett, 31. Private correspondence between Sir Arthur Hirtzel (1870-1937) of the India Office and Lt-Col. Wilson.

³⁵ As quoted in Jabar and Dawod, 260.

Little or no effort was made to incorporate *mujtahids* or other educated members of the ‘ulama in cities such as Najaf and Karbala as they were considered even worse by virtue of being ‘Persian’ in addition to ‘town-dwelling’.³⁶ One British magistrate in Baghdad, who described the Shi‘a as a “childlike, primitive, and uneducated folk” remarked that the atmospheres of Najaf and Karbala were particularly depressing, as “money for the sake of power, and power for the sake of money actuate every moment of the lives of ninety per cent of the inhabitants. The jealousy and rivalry among the religious leaders never cease.”³⁷ The British persisted in regarding the Shi’a with the same degree of prejudice with which they accused the Shi’a themselves of generally harboring. “The population south of Baghdad were an almost solid Shi‘ah bloc, nearly wholly illiterate...the mental horizons of the people coincided with their physical horizons.”³⁸

Despite her exhaustive catalogue of tribal genealogy, Gertrude Bell also persisted in treating the population south of Baghdad as full of “Shiah obscurantists” and described Najaf as “mysterious, malign, (and) fanatical.”³⁹ When Wilson was instructed by the British Government to poll the population on whether they were in favor of a single Arab

³⁶ Longrigg, 10.

³⁷ Thomas Lyell, *The Ins and Outs of Mesopotamia* (London, 1923) 75 and 43.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 68.

³⁹ Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell (1868-1926) In her role as political officer, Bell exerted a great deal of influence with the British in London and in the Arab Bureau. Yet for all the qualities attributed to her by many of her contemporaries and later biographers, her influence over Faisal was considerably less than is popularly accepted. Faisal’s refusal to remain fixed in the cutout role of noble-yet-malleable Arab king to which Bell’s imagination had consigned him proved a steady source of frustration to her. For his part, once he ascended the throne Faisal sought out Bell primarily for the occasional afternoon tea in her garden. When asked after her death about the accuracy of many of her reminiscences, Faisal is said to have replied simply, ‘Miss Bell was true in what she wrote but did great harm in what she did, may God rest her soul.’ As quoted in Allawi, 375. Also, Lady Bell, ed. *The Letters of Gertrude Bell* (London, 1927) v. I, 473.

State with an Arab Amir under British tutelage, Bell recorded that “it was clearly impracticable to pursue the enquiry among the rank and file of the tribesmen, shepherds, marsh dwellers, rice, barley, and date cultivators of the Euphrates and Tigris, whose experience of statecraft was confined to speculations as to the performances of their next door neighbours.”⁴⁰ Continued emphasis was placed on the differences and lack of understanding between urban and rural classes of the population, which belied the frequent socioeconomic and cultural interactions among them. British notions of the ‘martial races’ in India and the ‘noble Bedouin’ in Africa and Arabia remained fixed on the putative virile qualities of hill dwellers and tribesmen, as opposed to town dwellers who had succumbed to the temptations of modernism, despite the fact that in Iraq ‘many townsmen were of relatively recent tribal origin.’⁴¹

The mujtahids themselves were frequently dismissed as though they were little more than a small, entrenched clique that had no real interactions or support base that extended beyond the confines of the shrine cities, other than to “loose and bind” the tribesmen with *fatwahs* and calls for Jihad. “The Shia’ in particular, and Islam in general, are cut off from the world. They have built themselves in with impassable walls of prejudice and bigotry.”⁴² So prevalent was the theme of Shi‘a backwardness that a special correspondent, sent to Baghdad by the *Daily Mail* newspaper in 1922 to study the proposed cost to the taxpayer of Britain’s continuing support for the new monarchy, felt

⁴⁰ Gertrude Bell, *A Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*. Cmd. 1061, 1920, 127.

⁴¹ Jabar and Dawod, 260-261.

⁴² Thomas Lyell, *The Ins and Outs of Mesopotamia* (London, 1923) 108. For some years Lyell served as a civil administrator in Baghdad and was assistant director of the Land Registry (*Tapu*).

compelled to comment that “more than half the population of Mesopotamia are fanatical Shahs (*sic*) who are opposed to all forms of civil power.”⁴³

According to Antonio Gramsci, hegemony may be understood as the attempt by political elites to generalize their interests to the populace at large.⁴⁴ Hegemony not only seeks to incorporate all the component elements within a society, but also encourages the generation of foundational myths (such as the 1920 revolution) that define and legitimize a particularist national identity. Thus, hegemony involves acceptance of a specific political community and state-linked outlook that sustains a moral, philosophical and ethical system and also provides “intellectual and moral leadership.”⁴⁵ Ottoman efforts to achieve a concrete hegemony over the three outlying provinces of Mesopotamia had consistently failed over the centuries, not least because the provinces constituted a disparate and frequently contested march territory between two opposing empires, a cultural-religious contact zone between Sunni and Shi’a powers and their rival claims to the sovereignty of Islam. The Ottomans sought to extend their control beyond Mesopotamia directly into the Persian heartland whereas the Persians, in particular the Qajars, viewed the Euphrates as the rightful boundary of their realm, albeit both empires considered the disputed region “inhospitable and difficult to defend.”⁴⁶ Left to itself, Mosul would likely have been subsumed under Syria following the First World War.⁴⁷

⁴³ Sir Percival Phillips. *Mesopotamia: The “Daily Mail” Inquiry at Baghdad* (London, 1922) 12.

⁴⁴ Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, 2005) 2.

⁴⁵ As quoted in Davis, 2.

⁴⁶ As quoted in Simon and Tejrjian, 5.

⁴⁷ Mosul was initially situated in the northern zone that was to form the French area of influence, according to the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916.

Instead it went to the British, who took the entire province after the Armistice in a bid to offset the large Shi'a population in the two southern provinces and in hopes of obtaining a future oil concession.

The three provinces that ultimately comprised Iraq were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire during the latter half of the seventeenth century but control by Istanbul proved tenuous. Various factors contributed to this condition, including the physical distance of the provinces from the seat of Imperial administration and the rapacious attitude of the *mamluk* pashas, who were more concerned with extracting revenues and defending their personal privileges than serving the interests of the central government.⁴⁸ Despite geographic proximity, trade connections, and travel, on a regional scale Mosul tended to identify with Aleppo and Anatolian interests, Baghdad, with Beirut and Damascus (though it was also a centre of the Persian transit trade), while Basra had long established trading connections with India and the Persian Gulf.⁴⁹ Whether as a result of distance or absorption in pecuniary interests, the Ottomans failed to notice until late in the nineteenth century the degree to which the inhabitants of the southern region had developed a culturally (and politically) cohesive religious identity distinct from the Imperial mainstream.

The transformation of southern Iraq into a Shi'a preserve was not only the result of gradual tribal settlement. Ibn Sa'ud's conquest of Hasa in 1795 allowed him to expand his influence beyond the territory surrounding Najd. Wahhabi raids pushed some tribes

⁴⁸ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge, 2000) 9.

⁴⁹ Simon and Tejirian, eds., 4. For those who lived on the Arabian Peninsula, Basra was considered a northern extension of their business interests and an overland link connecting the Gulf to the Mediterranean. Ibid, 6. Also, Sluglett, 5.

into Iraq and the Ottomans encouraged them to settle in the hopes they would form a confederation strong enough to then defeat the Wahhabis, who were growing mettlesome. Though the tribes settled, they were unable to prevent raids against the desert market towns of Najaf and Karbala and the surrounding countryside. Najaf suffered two sieges and Karbala was rather brutally sacked in 1801. For the Shi'a 'ulama in the southern provinces, these invasions served as a catalyst. Beyond the immediate danger represented by the force of the Wahhabis, the power of the nomadic tribes, in general, was considered a threat to their livelihood and income. In 1814, emboldened by the weak Mamluk control south of Baghdad, a number of these tribes rebelled against the government. This action coincided with one of the major annual pilgrimages to the shrine cities and some 40,000 pilgrims were marooned in Najaf and Karbala pending the suppression of the tribes.⁵⁰

Raids, rebellions, and political instability alarmed those 'ulama who had migrated from Persia in the middle of the eighteenth century. They considered the only means to securing their socioeconomic safety was to convert the tribes and establish as large a network of unified support as possible throughout the southern vilayets in hopes of creating a force powerful enough to withstand external political and religious pressures, whether from the Wahhabis or from Baghdad itself. Religious traffic, in the form of pilgrimage, corpse traffic from Persia, and charitable contributions, provided the economic mainstay of the shrine cities. In general, certain religious conventions sat rather lightly on the shoulders of the nomadic tribes, especially those that ranged further

⁵⁰ Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, 1994), 29.

afield from the cities. They neither visited them on pilgrimage nor exhibited any particular attachment to their sanctity.⁵¹ Likely, the ‘ulama were aware of this and in the conversion of the tribes, saw not only the chance of a more permanent safety for themselves and the cities but also the opportunity to increase the potential income that would flow into those cities through previously untapped local contributors.

Interestingly, despite the undoubted fervor of the ‘ulama, Shi‘a propagation only proved truly effective following the enlargement of the areas under cultivation around Najaf and Karbala, which resulted from the operation of the Hindiyya canal and the increased sedentarization of the tribes.⁵² The construction of three smaller canals late in the nineteenth century further improved the flow of water to Najaf and increased the fertile area between Najaf and Karbala, attracting more settlement and confirming the position of those two cities as the “nerve centers” of an increasingly vast territory.⁵³

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, officials noted with alarm the large numbers of converts to Shi’a Islam in the region. They considered the root of the problem lay not only in a lack of Sunni ‘ulama to keep pace with proselytizing ‘ulama from Iran and the shrine cities but also “in the ignorance of the local population of nomads and Bedouins, who too easily fell under the influence of the Iranian ‘ulama.”⁵⁴

In a report on the situation sent by an Ottoman consul to Istanbul, the consul suggested that, as over forty percent of the Iraq population was now Shi’a (the actual figure was

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid. 30.

⁵³ Ibid, 32.

⁵⁴ Derengil, 49.

higher), it would be impossible to use force to sway such numbers. Therefore, the only feasible ‘cure’ was education that would instill the virtues of Sunni Islam in primary schools combined with “the appointment of official ‘ulama to counter Shi’a propaganda by inculcating Sunnism and obedience to the Caliph.”⁵⁵ In fact, a number of suggestions were forwarded by Ottoman officials over the next few years, all stressing education and the imposition of religious uniformity and orthodoxy as a means of countering the insidious spread of Shi’ism and effectively incorporating the recalcitrant population within the Ottoman fold.

The spread of education will instill the love of religion (*din*), country (*vatan*), and nationality (*milliyet*), as well as strengthening the salutary allegiance of the people to our Master the Caliph of all Muslims. While the persistence of ignorance will only increase and intensify disunity and disintegration.⁵⁶

This emphasis on ‘proper’ education and the ‘ignorance’ of tribesmen and others who converted to Shi‘ism were recurring themes with the Ottomans just as they were later with the British. Mujtahids were active among the ranks both of the police force as well as the Ottoman Sixth Army, which faced the British Expeditionary Force during the war, and many members of these units had converted to Shi‘ism rendering them unreliable in the eyes of the Ottoman government. The mujtahids worked “to further the darkest ignorance of the population in order to rob and milk them as is their custom, because (they know) that for the population to be enlightened means that they will obey no other than their rightful ruler...”⁵⁷ Similar sentiments dismissing the Shi’a as ignorant

⁵⁵ Ibid, 50-51.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Deringil, 53.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Deringil, 54.

and the mujtahids as disingenuous would color a majority of opinions among the British military and administrative officials in Iraq during and after the First World War, as well as the small coterie of Sunni ex-Sharifian officers subsequently responsible for ensuring the development of the country.

Ultimately the Ottomans failed to curtail or counteract the conversion rates to Shi'ism in Iraq because they had neither the inclination nor the ability to match the financial support received by the mujtahids from a combination of Persian and foreign contributions as well as the incomes derived from the traffic to the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala. The sheer magnitude and speed of the conversion process were underestimated, as were the implications of the transition by the tribes from their traditional nomadism to the practice of sedentary agriculture which the Ottomans had long encouraged. The fragmentation of the greater tribal confederations generated an identity crisis among those tribesmen who settled, driving them to “relocate themselves on the social map of their surrounding environment.”⁵⁸ Conversion compensated for the fracturing of former political and group solidarities, creating new identities and loyalties as the tribesmen came in increasing contact with other settled inhabitants of the region around them and, notably, with the cities of Najaf and Karbala.

Yet despite the ease with which Shi'ism was accepted among the tribes, it failed to supplant the primordial Arab moral and social values. The role of genealogy, for instance, became even more important to the establishment of an individual's identity following the erosion of previous tribal cohesiveness (which would later act somewhat in

⁵⁸ Nakash, 45.

Faisal's favor as a Hashemite even though he was neither Iraqi nor Shi'i).⁵⁹ The Shi'a emissaries incorporated familiar tribal ideals of manhood, heroic deeds, celebration, horsemanship, and epic oral poetry into their Islamic teachings to facilitate conversion, which became a process of acculturation for the tribesmen as the new rituals of worship helped define and enrich their new identities. Continued interactions among these newly sedentary groups with their (still Sunni) nomadic brethren reinforced their Arab heritage and identity and, despite the proximity to Iran, a distinct Arab Shi'a polity began to emerge in southern Iraq that only intensified with events leading up to the outbreak of the First World War.

The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the restoration of the Turkish Constitution marked the beginnings of Shi'a secular education in Iraq. The first public primary school for boys was opened in Baghdad in 1909, followed by schools in Kazimayn, Najaf, and Hilla. The modern curriculum was designed to train the students in French, English, and mathematics in order to enable them to compete for governmental administrative positions that had always been filled by educated Jews and, to a lesser extent, Sunni Muslims.⁶⁰ The 1908 Revolution also stimulated the literary life of Iraq. Publishing houses for magazines and books appeared in Najaf and, by 1911, "it was estimated that fifty to one hundred newspapers and journals arrived in Najaf every week"

⁵⁹ Ibid, 46.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 52.

for distribution to the city's libraries, and the inhabitants both in Najaf and Karbala were introduced to the product of literary efforts from Turkey, India, Egypt, and Iran.⁶¹

The content of these publications was varied but among the topics presented were debates regarding the consistency of Islamic law with modern science and education, calls for Islamic renewal and purification from extremism, the defense of Islam as addressed by the Islamic reformist thought of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad 'Abduh, and Muhammad Rashid Rida, and the need for integration and unity among Muslims.⁶² Newspapers such as *al-Manar* (produced by Rashid Rida) were particularly influential among Iraqis. Rashid Rida glorified historic Arab achievements, simultaneously exposing Ottoman deficiencies and the despotism of Ottoman rule. By the same token, he called for a preservation of the Empire in the face of Western incursions and condemned both Arab nationalists in Egypt and Turkish nationalists for endangering Islamic unity and, in this, he was not alone among Muslim intellectuals and proponents of an Arab nationalism.⁶³ This dichotomy between Arabism and Islamism (as represented by the Ottoman Empire) may, in part, have explained the failure of any coherent call to unified political action on the part of Arab intellectuals when the First

⁶¹ Ibid, 53. Among the newspapers and magazines that circulated were *al-Manar*, *al-Muqattam*, *al-Hilal*, *al-Habl al-Matin*, and *al-Irfan*.

⁶² Wamidh Nadhmi. "The Political, Intellectual and Social Roots of the Iraqi Independence Movement, 1920" (PhD Diss., 1974), 51-58.

⁶³ Ibid. 43-44.

World War was declared in 1914.⁶⁴ It may also explain why the Arab Revolt had so little resonance in Iraq, save among those few Iraqi officers who actually took part.⁶⁵

The British, like the Ottomans before them, also underestimated or overlooked the significant Shi'a nationalist identity emerging in the South. They would insist that Basra, whose prominence as a trading entrepôt had been steadily increasing, surrender its traditional autonomy in favor of establishing a minority nationalist project centered on Baghdad under the auspices of a pliable monarch and a primarily non-local sectarian government. One possibility for this refusal to recognize developments in the southern region was that a conscious acknowledgement would have belied any justification by the British for acquiring the northern province of Mosul. Indeed, following the British troops entry into Baghdad, Lt-Col. Wilson disparaged the attempt of Shi'a leaders from the shrine cities to "establish their position as the heads of a theocratic *imperium in imperio* by exchanging telegrams of congratulations with King George," while Sir Percy Cox treated their subsequent visit to Baghdad to pay their respects as a notice of formal submission to British authority.⁶⁶ Another possibility is that the emergent language of national identity following the First World War dealt in vocabulary that registered secular nationalism rather than a theocratic-based nationalism. If the British didn't exactly fear a

⁶⁴ Ibid. Also, Eliezer Tauber, *The Formation of Modern Syria and Iraq* (London, 1995) 9.

⁶⁵ Al-Wardi, op. cit., v. 4, 298-299. The British released more than 700 Iraqi officers and soldiers from a single POW camp on the understanding that they would join the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans. William Facey and Najdat Fathi Safwat, eds., *A Soldier's Story: From Ottoman Rule to Independent Iraq: The Memoirs of Jafar Pasha Al-Askari* (London, 2003) 103-112.

⁶⁶ Sir Arnold Talbot Wilson, *Mesopotamia, 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties; a Personal and Historical Record* (London, 1931), 243. Bell, Cmd. 1061, 32-33.

theocratic identity, they certainly considered it out of place in the establishment of a modern state system.

Not only did the two southern provinces contain a majority of Shi'a, but the task of defending Baghdad (one of the arguments for advancing to Mosul) required little more than a 50 mile advance up the two rivers.⁶⁷ In fact, British forces took Mosul (some 200+ miles from Baghdad) three days *after* the Armistice of Mudros that ended the war on 31 October 1918. General Marshall, the British commander tasked with occupying the city, was politely informed by Ali Ihsan Bey, the commander of the Ottoman 5th Division sitting in Mosul, that Mosul was not in Mesopotamia and therefore did not need to be surrendered according to the terms of the armistice.⁶⁸ Additionally, the Sykes-Picot agreement placed the city in the French sphere and the political officers, at least, were aware the vilayet was primarily Kurdish. Nevertheless Marshall advanced and Ali Ihsan withdrew, leaving Mosul a de facto addition to the British sphere. France was left to negotiate the final boundary lines with the British in a separate convention, after Mesopotamia and Syria were established as mandates during the San Remo conference in April 1920.

⁶⁷ Baghdad was militarily indefensible, as both sides knew. All a military force had to do was cut the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates before the flood season for the city to become 'an island surrounded by a vast lake'. To secure the city required a further 50-mile advance on the part of the defenders. Townshend, 387-388.

⁶⁸ Townshend, 434.

Chapter IV: ‘What is wanted is a king who will be content to reign but not govern’⁶⁹

Although the 1920 uprising might be more significant for purposes of Nationalist historiography than as an actual historical event, it did serve to convince Whitehall that turning Iraq into a protectorate ruled directly by Britain was no longer feasible in terms either of expenditure or commitment of manpower. The international political climate was also no longer amenable to direct rule and it was determined that power would have to be exercised indirectly; through influence, allusion, and the oversight of a British high commissioner.

Wilson was removed and Cox, who had left for Tehran to negotiate the Anglo-Persian Treaty of 1919, returned to Baghdad and his previous post as civil commissioner, with a remit to supervise construction of an Arab government. In the face of continued criticism in the press and parliament regarding the cost to the taxpayer, there was still considerable doubt at this stage whether Britain would even remain in Mesopotamia. As neither the Foreign Office nor the India Office were really structured to manage the newly mandated territories, Lloyd George and his cabinet responded by creating a new department for Middle Eastern policy within the Colonial Office. Churchill, who had made the establishment of the new department a condition of his acceptance of the post of Colonial Secretary, immediately organized the Cairo Conference in March 1921 to discuss the future of the mandated territories.

The main object, in Churchill’s estimation, was “to maintain firm British control as cheaply as possible.”⁷⁰ For Mesopotamia this meant the implementation of air power,

⁶⁹ As quoted in Sluglett, 26.

in the form of eight squadrons of aircraft matched with six armored car companies, to provide essential security from a few strategically located bases. Tribal uprisings, the largest source of instability, could be subdued with aerial bombings and the R.A.F. could effectively maintain the lines of communication and supply without the need for large numbers of ground troops. Britain was to control the country's foreign relations and maintain the right of veto in all military and financial matters. All that remained was to determine the ruler most likely to support British policy.

Churchill had already met with Faisal in London and favored him for the throne, following Lawrence's advice on the matter despite increasing concern shown in some quarters that Lawrence was neither stable nor fit for an administrative post.⁷¹ For his part, Lawrence argued that Faisal would have to 'counteract the claims of rival candidates, and pull together the scattered elements of a backward and half civilized country', a feat that required an 'active and inspiring personality' as opposed to his brother Abdallah, also in contention for the position, whom Lawrence dismissed as 'lazy and by no means dominating'.⁷² Cox, though initially agnostic about Faisal (as well as Abdallah), felt that at least Faisal's military experience would put him 'in the best position for raising an army quickly'.⁷³

⁷⁰ Ibid, 40.

⁷¹ Churchill appointed Lawrence to the department on a one-year contract as the adviser on Arab affairs. Allawi, 325.

⁷² As quoted in Townshend, 483.

⁷³ Ibid.

Churchill remained adamant that the overriding concern was economy. British troops were 'extremely costly' and should not be wasted on 'menial duties'.⁷⁴ Arab levies were required and Faisal, in effect, was to be hired to raise them for the Empire. On the first day of the conference a range of possible candidates was discussed, from the Naqib of Baghdad to ibn Saud to the Agha Khan. For the local candidates, the Naqib of Baghdad was deemed too old, while Sheikh Kaza'al of Mohammerah (a long-time ally of Britain's interests in the Gulf) was Shi'i and thus advised by Cox that he would not even be considered. Sayyid Talib, Naqib of Basra and erstwhile minister of interior in the interim government, whose unsavory reputation and secessionist tendencies rendered him dangerous in British eyes, was also the strongest contender. Not surprisingly, he was expediently arrested while returning from a tea party at Lady Cox's residence and deported to Ceylon.⁷⁵ By comparison, Faisal seemed the most moderate and it was determined that if he 'was favored by the people of Irak, His Majesty's Government would offer no obstacles to his selection'.⁷⁶ The arrest of Sayyid Talib proved influential and a moderately pro-Faisal party emerged due, in no small part, to the active efforts of political officers canvassing on his behalf.

Faisal arrived in Basra on 23 June 1921 uncertain of his reception by a population with which he'd had little prior contact. It was none too soon as only the week before a petition carrying 4,500 signatures was presented to Cox by a Basra delegation. Consisting primarily of merchants and landowners, the delegation demanded wide

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Allawi, 362.

⁷⁶ As quoted in Allawi, 327.

autonomy, if not outright independence, for the entire province based on loyalty and firm ties to the British. Basra's port city had done very well during the war and sought to maintain the prosperity that the merchants equated directly with distance from Baghdad.⁷⁷ Descriptions of Faisal's arrival, reception, and journey north via special train range from lackluster and wary, particularly in the southern part of the country and the shrine cities, to enthusiastic the closer he drew to Baghdad. Whatever misgivings Faisal may have had about his reception among the Shi'a, there was no doubt that he benefited from his lineage and reputation for sectarian tolerance. On 11 July the interim Iraqi cabinet convened and unanimously passed a resolution to nominate Faisal King of Iraq. He worked assiduously to build relationships (and support) within the minority communities and among the Shi'a, travelling throughout the towns and countryside in south and central Iraq in the weeks prior to the referendum that would establish his legitimate claim to the throne.

The referendum returned a 96% majority in favor of Faisal, but it is virtually impossible to determine with any real accuracy the degree of acceptance, especially as the British stage-managed both his selection and election.⁷⁸ Cox exercised considerable authority in Iraq and many among the political and social elites were in awe of 'Kawkus's' pro-consular presence and of British power, and Cox had already seen to it that there was no real alternative to Faisal's election. 'What helps everything is that

⁷⁷ Ibid, 363. The petition sought a separate legislative assembly for Basra, a separate army and police force, and the power to levy its own taxes. But it also indicated willingness to accept Faisal as king. Cox declined to support the petition.

⁷⁸ Sluglett, 44. Allawi, 378.

Faisal's personality goes three quarters of the way,' wrote Bell.⁷⁹ Gifted with impeccable manners and a careful diplomacy, Faisal was maneuvered to the throne on 23 August 1921. It seemed the British had achieved a masterstroke but Faisal's support base was relatively shallow, albeit broad, and he had his own ideas regarding the monarchy.

The word the British first used to describe the mandate was وصاية but this was considered too demeaning so the word انتداب was adopted instead, implying choice or selection.⁸⁰ By mid-1921, Cox was aware that the mandate in its original form was unlikely to prove acceptable or effective and suggested negotiating a treaty with Iraq once the state was formally created.⁸¹ However the Foreign Office worried that the French would see any British move to set aside or supersede the mandate as a deliberate attempt to undermine their position as mandatary in Syria. This led the British representative to the League of Nations to stress, at the end of 1921, that the proposed treaty was 'not intended as a substitute for the mandate, which will remain the operative document' defining relations between Britain and Iraq.⁸² News of the announcement incensed Faisal, who needed the treaty not only to bolster his position within Iraq but to show that he was actively taking steps to draw from the British the powers they attributed to themselves as controllers of Iraq. Though aware that he owed his election to British manipulation, Faisal felt that substitution of a treaty for the mandate constituted a change in relationship, rather than simply a change in vocabulary, and he expected to govern. He

⁷⁹ As quoted in Allawi, 376.

⁸⁰ Townshend, 460.

⁸¹ Sluglett, 44.

⁸² As quoted in Townshend, 487. Also, Sluglett, 48.

didn't share the political vision of his father or brother, for whom Arab nationalism was molded within traditional Islamic forms of the state. Faisal had a more secular approach. He understood that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire shifted the foundations of rule in Arab lands away from the narrow dynastic principle and purely traditional and religious formulations, and his own inclinations tended toward a more moderate and pragmatic nationalism.⁸³

Faisal very nearly refused the throne because Churchill wanted public confirmation that he accepted the mandate and considered his position subordinate to that of the civil commissioner. Faisal pointed out that no king could earn the respect of his people if he started by declaring his dependence on his allies. 'Having chosen me you must treat me as one of yourselves and if you wish me and your policy to succeed it is folly to damn me permanently in the public eye by making me an obvious puppet.'⁸⁴ Fortunately for Faisal, Cox was supportive and prevailed upon Churchill to withdraw his stipulation, allowing the coronation to proceed. At 38 years of age, Faisal became king of a newly created country that was still not quite a nation.

The political system proposed for Iraq was based on secular western models of representative government, popular elections, a parliament, and a constitution. Unlike Iran, which had managed its own political transition during the 1905-1911 Constitutional Revolution, Iraq's transition was being imposed upon it by a series of external factors. Its boundaries had been arbitrarily determined and its borders remained unsettled.

⁸³ Allawi, 162-163.

⁸⁴ As quoted in Allawi, 379.

Outraged by the harsh terms of the Treaty of Sèvres, Turkey was no longer moribund and became, once again, a viable force able and willing to fight for territory, and it wanted Mosul. Ibn Saud, who destroyed Hussein's kingdom in the Hejaz, felt his borders should extend to the banks of the Euphrates and allowed raiding parties of the *Ikhwan* to attack Shi'a tribesmen in central Iraq.⁸⁵ Eastward, disputes over demarcation of the frontier, particularly along the Shatt al-Arab waterway, and Iran's refusal to recognize the sovereignty of Iraq until eight years following Faisal's coronation proved a constant concern. The French objected strenuously to British support of Faisal for the throne of Iraq and accused Great Britain of conspiring with Faisal against France. In 1922, the mandate authorities in Syria instigated a vicious newspaper campaign against Faisal, and were actively supplying arms to Iran in the hopes of instigating border attacks.⁸⁶

Faisal, already uneasy following the announcement at the League of Nations, became convinced that the military threats from Turkey and Najd were "part of an Allied master-plan to terrify him into submission," the more so after the signing of the Ankara Agreement between France and Turkey in 1921, which he considered a blatant invitation to Turkey to attack northern Kurdistan.⁸⁷ Despite Cox suggesting to the Colonial Office that it might secure greater goodwill from the Iraqis if they gave them what they wanted as far as the language of the mandate was concerned, Churchill held that Faisal was

⁸⁵ 11 March 1922, a raiding party killed nearly 700 people and drove off large numbers of livestock, recalling brutal raids on Najaf and Karbala in the early 19th century. Allawi, 388.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 461.

⁸⁷ Sluglett, 47.

‘rather too prone to raise difficult constitutional and foreign questions’ and should never be allowed to forget the ‘enormous cost and burden Iraq has been and still is to us.’⁸⁸

For his part, Faisal was even more determined to raise an army suitable for defense of the new country. A strong national army meant greater independence from British control as well as greater internal security and support for his position. Neither Faisal nor the majority of his sharifian officers could claim roots amongst the tribal, mercantile, or religious families of Iraq. As such, his power base was simply too narrow, drawn as it was either from proximity to the Palace or to the British Residency. By reason of its newness, non-Iraqi origin, and its condition of dependence on the British, Faisal’s monarchy inspired neither awe nor affection. Indeed, throughout the twenties and thirties, the monarch and the tribal sheikhs were essentially rivals.⁸⁹ The growth of Faisal’s power would necessitate the weakening of the sheikhs and Faisal’s position could only be strengthened by control over the machinery of government and the military. Yet most of the British officials opposed increasing the army or its functions, partly because they felt it would give too much power to the ‘court party’, and partly because the government’s revenues were too small to permit an expansion.⁹⁰

As Faisal’s minister of defence, Ja’far al-‘Askari drew up a report arguing in favor of an army of 15,000 (on the basis of the former Ottoman military establishment in Mesopotamia).⁹¹ Al-Askari, Yasin al-Hashimi, Nuri al-Said, and Bakr Sidqi all adhered

⁸⁸ Townshend, 488.

⁸⁹ Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements in Iraq*, (Princeton, 1978), 99.

⁹⁰ Sluglett, 183.

⁹¹ Ja’far Pasha al-‘Askari (1885-1936) was one of the few Iraqis on Faisal’s staff. Born in Baghdad, he attended military college there before enrolling in the Ottoman military college in Istanbul. After

to the idea of a ‘nation in arms’, which flourished in Europe following the French Revolution. The army was one of the twin engines of the modern state – the other being education. Al-Askari insisted on the need for a ‘good class of recruit who has a certain stake in the country and may be relied upon not to desert.’⁹² He believed this could be managed by ballot rather than conscription and British military experts endorsed this total, noting that the Ottomans, who ‘never wasted troops’, had maintained a regular garrison of nearly 10,000 before the war, ‘even at their low establishments’.⁹³ Cox flatly refused to countenance the proposal, arguing it was too expensive. ‘Defence can be purchased at too dear a price, and it would be better for Iraq to be inadequately garrisoned than to fall into bankruptcy’.⁹⁴

Having established the cheapest possible internal-security system by the summer of 1920 (R.A.F. supported by Assyrian Christian levies with strong ties to the British and considered a better prospect than raising and training Iraqi levies), Britain was determined to maintain this line, transforming the levies into the nucleus of a new Army that would consist of only 4,500 men.⁹⁵ Al-Askari was appalled but the Chief of the Air Staff, Hugh Trenchard, felt they could even ‘let the Arab Army remain purely as eyewash’ and rely solely on the levies.⁹⁶ This was politically impossible but the army’s development remained little more than a bargaining tool until the end of the mandate.

graduation he campaigned against tribes along the Euphrates before being sent to Germany for further training. Captured in WWI, the British released him to join Faisal’s Arab Army in 1917.

⁹² As quoted in Townshend, 489.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 490.

⁹⁵ Ibid. In 1921 the force stood at 3,500. It expanded to 7,500 in 1925, after which it was kept at roughly that level until 1933. Batatu, 90.

⁹⁶ Townshend, 491.

The idea was to allow the king to be militarily stronger than any single tribal sheikh but weaker than some or all of the tribal sheikhs together.⁹⁷ Thus the question of conscription continued unresolved, though it was raised twice in debates in 1924 and 1926. Britain remained steadfastly opposed to the idea on the grounds that it was ‘against all our traditions’, and because it would provoke memories of ‘the arbitrary and brutal’ Ottoman system.⁹⁸

Faisal was gravely concerned with the imbalance of force between his minority Sunni government and the population. He complained that ‘there are more than 100,000 rifles in private hands, whereas the government has only 15,000’.⁹⁹ He believed the army should possess the capability of facing “two simultaneous insurgencies in the country.”¹⁰⁰ This was an interesting variant (one made, arguably, with greater merit) to the more traditional justification for military spending, of being able ‘to fight a war on two fronts’. Once proved capable in this regard, Faisal proposed a general conscription to build the army’s strength to meet foreign challenges. He also recognized the need to leaven the overwhelming Sunni component of the officer class that the British were slowly training with sons of Shi’a tribal leaders. Of the 61 field officers that the Iraq Royal Military College, modeled on Sandhurst, had turned out by 1936, 58 were Sunni, 2 were Christian, and just 1 was Shi’i.¹⁰¹ Following the Ottoman pattern of creating special schools for the sons of tribal leaders, Faisal sought to found a school in Iraq that would prepare them for

⁹⁷ Batatu, 90.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 525.

⁹⁹ Batatu, 90. Al-Askari estimated the number of rifles as high as 150,000. Facey and Safwat, 241.

¹⁰⁰ Allawi, 539.

¹⁰¹ Townshend, 524.

entry into the military academy but abandoned the idea in the face of opposition from Sati' al-Husri, Director-General for Education, who favored a completely uniform and centralized education policy for the country.¹⁰²

Internally, a number of problems continued to militate against political cohesion. The formative experience of Iraqis was Ottoman administration, autocratic and distant. Local authority rested more on traditional patterns of duties or obligations to tribal sheikhs, landowners, notables, and religious figures. Although much of the old order had crumbled or been misappropriated by the British, deep rituals of obligation still governed a large portion of the population. Faisal had to create the framework of a modern state while operating under the handicaps of being neither Iraqi nor Shi'i and with the shadow of the British always looming. He could not afford to do away entirely with the old order (like Attaturk) and needed the legitimacy of his Sharifian lineage to navigate among the traditional groups and communities in the country. In this he was not initially successful.

As king, his first task was the appointment of a new prime minister and cabinet. Following three weeks of conflict with Cox (as neither would approve the other's appointments) Faisal finally agreed to keep the interim prime minister originally selected by Cox, Naqib Abd al-Rahman al-Kaylani, and filled the other posts with those men who'd accompanied him from the Hejaz to Syria and then to Iraq. Apart from Ja'far al-Askari, who maintained his position as defense minister, there were few among Faisal's coterie of Ottoman officers and functionaries who were Iraqi and almost none who were

¹⁰² Abu Khaldun Sati' al-Husri, *Mudhakkirati fi al-Iraq, 1921-1941*, 2 vols. (Beirut, 1967), v. I, 147.

Shi'a.¹⁰³ In addition to filling posts with men less supportive of the British, Faisal also sought to strengthen his support among the Shi'a by including them in the government but ultimately only one was chosen. Hibbat-ullah al-Sharistani from Karbala became minister of education, establishing a pattern of holding that portfolio for a Shi'i minister that would continue throughout the 1920s in a token effort to provide some semblance of confessional representation in the government, a representation that was ultimately unsuccessful as Sati' al-Husri controlled the state educational curriculum with an iron hand.¹⁰⁴

Faisal's determination to increase the presence of the Shi'a in his administration was part of his desire to make his state system the primary agency for social and economic mobility in the country. In this, he was undermined both by the general lack of qualifications among the Shi'a and by the prejudice of most of the officers and functionaries surrounding him, who held to the old Ottoman (and British) prejudices that the "groups composing the Iraqi population were ignorant and irrational" and thus ill-equipped to participate in a constitutional government.¹⁰⁵ At Rustum Haidar's urging, Faisal requested that Tawfiq al-Suwaydi, the head of the Baghdad Law College since November 1921 (it seems to have been the sole preserve of the al-Suwaydi family), accept a number of students into the Law College who held certificates from the Ja'fariyya high school. Al-Suwaydi stated he knew that "the school did not reach the

¹⁰³ Rustum Haidar, Faisal's private secretary, was an exception but he was the son of an Ottoman provincial administrator, from a well-established Lebanese Shi'a family.

¹⁰⁴ Allawi, 385.

¹⁰⁵ Orit Bashkin, "Intellectuals in Monarchic Iraq: Representations of Iraqi Intellectuals, 1921-1941" (PhD Diss, 2005),10.

(level of) high school either in the era of the Ottomans or in the British Occupation” and he refused to accept them unless they had “their certificates approved by the Ministry of Education or they sat for the entrance exam.”¹⁰⁶ He then received a visit from Haidar who informed him “the king wanted to help these (students) and admit them into the College.”¹⁰⁷ Al-Suwaydi explained why he refused and, when Haidar insisted, he responded that this might have been a practice during the time of Sultan Abd al-Hamid but such behavior ceased following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908.¹⁰⁸

Al-Suwaydi later learned that al-Husri, as Director-General of Education, was subsequently approached and asked to treat the certificates as high school certificates and also refused, only to learn he had no choice in the matter – a rare instance of his will being overridden. The certificates were approved and al-Suwaydi had to accept them.¹⁰⁹ While this anecdote illustrates the difficulty Faisal faced in finding qualified Shi’a to join the government, it also illustrates a disturbing attitude on the part of the Ottoman educated elite as al-Suwaydi proceeded to list in his memoirs the full names of all the students he was required to admit under these special circumstances.¹¹⁰ Al-Husri, who never set foot in Iraq before 1921, remained intolerant of all his Shi’a ministers and criticized their performances as “ignorant and backward.”¹¹¹ He maligned one of the country’s leading literary figures as “incapable of understanding the new directions in

¹⁰⁶ Tawfiq al-Suwaydi, *Mudhakkirati, nisf qarn min tarikh al-Iraq wa al-qadiyah al-‘Arabiyah*, (Beirut, 1969) 76.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 77.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 76. Basic literacy remained a problem for decades. Hanna Batatu noted that in 1958 more than six-sevenths of the population was still illiterate. Batatu, 34.

¹¹¹ Nakash, 111.

education” that he was imposing on the country’s curriculum and dismissed one of the Ministers of Education (‘Abd al-Husayn al-Chalabi, who served in this capacity eight times between 1922 and 1935) as the “joker of Iraqi governments.”¹¹²

The only outlet for secular education in Iraq that was exclusively Shi’a was, in fact, the *Madrassa al-Ja’fariyya* (the same as featured above), which opened in Baghdad in 1908. But only a small number of students had received an education there by 1921. The mujtahids, as part of their opposition to the British and also to Faisal, issued a ban on Shi’a accepting office in a government they considered illegitimate. Any who ignored this ban risked excommunication, but Faisal managed to find a common cause in their enmity towards the *Ikhwan* of Ibn Saud.¹¹³ Cox’s hesitancy in sending the RAF after the raiders who attacked the villages in central Iraq in March 1922 was seen both as targeting the mujtahids and as part of a deliberate plan to keep Iraq weak and off-balance, thus affirming the need for the mandate. After all, it was common knowledge that the British favoured the Nejd ruler over the Hashemites in Arabia so the raid could never have occurred without British acquiescence.¹¹⁴ The leading mujtahids of Najaf, Grand Ayatollahs Abul Hassan al-Isfahani and Mirza Hussein al-Na’ini, decided to convene a conference in Karbala to consider the response to this latest incursion. Ayatollah Mahdi

¹¹² Al-Husri, v. I, 277. See pgs. 272-273 for an example (according to al-Husri) of al-Chalabi’s inadequacy.

¹¹³ Nakash, 111.

¹¹⁴ In fact, a plane had already been lost while studying the area where the raid had taken place and Cox was hesitant to risk a further depletion of the force relied on for deterrence. Allawi, 388.

al-Khalisi was also called on to attend and set out with over 20,000 followers from Khadimain.¹¹⁵

In all, over 200,000 people descended on Karbala for the conference. The Ayatollahs extended an invitation to Faisal but the Residency (i.e. Cox) placed considerable pressure on him not to attend and he sent Tawfiq al-Khalidi, his minister of interior, and Nuri al-Sa'id in his stead. Cox called the conference 'ill-advised and dangerous' and believed that Bolsheviks and Kemalists were secretly behind it, in some form of collusion with Faisal.¹¹⁶ The mujtahids issued a fatwa authorizing a war against the Ikhwan and, by association, Ibn Saud, and also circulated a petition declaring their support of Faisal and 'our King's army', tacitly encouraging him to continue in his demands for strengthening Iraq's native defense capabilities.¹¹⁷ British intelligence noted at this time that a secret unit was formed to assassinate pro-British sheikhs and British officers.¹¹⁸ While the conference was underway, a deputation of more than forty tribal sheikhs called on Faisal at the palace to remind him that their oath of loyalty to him 'was conditional upon Faisal accepting the advice of the Residency.'¹¹⁹

In fact, the conference underscored the degree to which Faisal was forced to steer between several internal interests: the anti-mandate, Shi'a mujtahids concerned that Iraq was going to become another Sunni-dominated establishment, the pro-British tribesmen concerned for loss of power and status under an Iraq without the British, the determinedly

¹¹⁵ Al-Wardi, v. 6, 143.

¹¹⁶ Townshend, 488, Allawi, 391.

¹¹⁷ Al-Wardi, v. 6, 144-145.

¹¹⁸ Allawi, 391.

¹¹⁹ Al-Wardi, v. 6, 151.

secular Arab nationalism of his government, and Faisal's own realization that he was ill-equipped to embark on independence without the continued support of British finances and power. Faisal admitted to Cox that he had 'underestimated the extent and range of moderate opinion' and that he should be counted 'amongst those who were firm proponents of the British role in Iraq.'¹²⁰ On hearing the news of the conference and Faisal's likely behind-the-scenes maneuvering, Churchill reiterated that 'all the time he (Faisal) takes our money, he will have to take our directions' concluding that Britain could still abandon the king. 'Faisal should be under no delusions in this matter. He will be a long time looking for a third throne.'¹²¹

The one-year anniversary of Faisal's coronation was drawing close while Britain and Iraq had yet to sign the treaty that would define the precise nature of their relationship. The British understanding of the treaty was simply as a camouflage for mandate, whereas Faisal's refusal to publicly acknowledge his submission to Cox was indicative of his desire to see the treaty as a mark of mutual respect and assistance between two sovereign nations; a clear signpost pointing to Iraq's independence in a not-too-distant future. Negotiations between the Residency and the Palace stalemated as Faisal continued his efforts to drum up opposition to the draft treaty which, in its initial form, did little more than lay out Britain's pre-eminence in Iraq in nearly all fields of

¹²⁰ Ibid, 394.

¹²¹ As quoted in Townshend, 488. Also Sluglett, 51.

state and government, including a special article inserted that would obligate the king to be guided in all decisions by the high commissioner.¹²²

Matters came to a head when Churchill issued a statement to the House of Commons claiming that Faisal and his government had ‘never informed Britain that the Iraqi people rejected the idea of a mandate.’¹²³ The Baghdad press reported this statement and the uproar was immediate. Another, even larger mass conference ensued, this time in Najaf, and Faisal sent his closest aides to support the gathering. Churchill began to consider forcing Faisal’s abdication and handing the throne to his brother Abdallah or even to the prime minister, Naqib al-Kaylani.¹²⁴ On the morning of the anniversary, Cox and Bell headed over to the palace to pay their respects and were treated to chants of ‘Down with Britain; Down with the Mandate!’ by the large crowd in front of the palace.¹²⁵ Cox was furious and convinced that members of the king’s entourage had orchestrated the chants. The following day, before any final decision could be made concerning Faisal’s political future, the king came down with acute appendicitis (the operation was performed the very next day). Cox was able to seize the moment, assuming full interim powers, suppressing the main opposition newspapers and radical parties that had just formed, and exiling the seven most prominent opposition leaders.

During Faisal’s month-long convalescence, cables crossed back and forth between Churchill and Cox. Neither was disposed to force Faisal from the throne. Cox felt that

¹²² Allawi, 395.

¹²³ Ibid, 398.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 403.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 404, Townshend, 488.

Faisal was too ‘morally weak and unstable’ to make a good king; ‘a subtle and accomplished schemer and a very bad judge of men’ who aspired, with the help of his court, to become ‘an irresistible autocrat’.¹²⁶ The solution was simply to reduce the influence of the court, limit Faisal’s powers, and mold him into a docile supporter of British power. Churchill ultimately approved this plan, as any retreat from Britain’s Iraq policy at this stage could prove publicly humiliating. He advised Cox to impress on Faisal that ‘he was brought to Iraq not to play the autocrat but to settle down into a sober and constitutional monarch friendly to us.’¹²⁷ With London’s full support, Cox persuaded the Naqib to sign the draft treaty. He then visited Faisal and told him that Britain would brook no more delays and expected Faisal to cease flirting with opposition forces. Faisal conceded, realizing he still lacked a strong support base, and the draft treaty was published in Baghdad in early October. The next step was to organize elections for the constituent assembly so the treaty could actually be ratified and Iraq’s constitution, the Organic Law, approved. This, too, was destined not to go smoothly as Cox’s draconian measures against the opposition failed in their intent. Overall leadership of the anti-mandate/anti-treaty opposition simply shifted to the mujtahids of Kadhimain and Najaf.

Fatwas were widely circulated banning any and all participation in elections to a constituent assembly. Grand Ayatollah al-Isfahani even declared that those who did participate were apostates whose wives must desert them forthwith.¹²⁸ Ayatollah al-Khalisi not only attacked the religious legality of the elections but also launched attacks

¹²⁶ Allawi, 407.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 408.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 412.

against the British, the Naqib, and Faisal, accusing the latter of betraying the commitments he had made when he first arrived in Iraq. Even in Baghdad, where the population consisted primarily of Jews, Christians, and Sunnis, the process stalled and collapsed. Christian leaders in Mosul also urged their followers to boycott the elections.¹²⁹ The Residency decided a stronger personality was needed as prime minister and removed its support from the Naqib, who subsequently resigned and was replaced in November 1922 by ‘Abd al-Muhsin al-Sa’adoun.¹³⁰

At the same time, events outside Iraq provided additional cause for concern. Mustafa Kemal’s rejuvenated Turkish Army routed the Greeks and turned to confront the Anglo-French troops holding the Dardanelles Straits. The British public was adamantly opposed to another conflict and the way was paved for a new treaty with Turkey, replacing the unsigned Treaty of Sèvres. The Chanak Crisis, as it was called, precipitated the downfall of Lloyd George’s government and Bonar Law stepped in, delaying any ratification of the treaty on the British end while the new government dealt with a loud press campaign along with political grumbling, both questioning the continued military presence and expenditure in Iraq and calling for immediate withdrawal.¹³¹ Cox returned to London for consultations with the new colonial secretary (the Duke of Devonshire

¹²⁹ Ibid, 414.

¹³⁰ ‘Abd al-Muhsin al-Sa’adoun (1879-1929) was the scion of a powerful family of Sunni sheikhs that ruled the Shi’a Muntafiq tribes of southern Iraq. Al-Sa’adoun was born in Nasiriya and educated at the Ottoman school for tribal leaders’ sons, later attending the military college in Istanbul. He served in the Ottoman Army and was twice elected to the Ottoman parliament, only returning to Iraq in 1921. He was four times prime minister of Iraq. By all accounts he was indifferent to Arab nationalist movements and devoid of sectarian interests.

¹³¹ Ireland, 377. The *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail* demanded that Britain remove from Iraq ‘bag and baggage’ and H. H. Asquith declared in Parliament that Britain had no vital interests in Iraq and should withdraw immediately.

replaced Winston Churchill) and Sir Henry Dobbs took his place in Baghdad as Acting High Commissioner. Turkish forces were massed along the borders of Mosul and by January 1923 invasion appeared immanent, with no guarantee that the Turks would stop at Mosul and not march on Baghdad itself. The Iraqi army was in no position to repulse an invasion and Faisal, concerned the British would not defend Iraq as there was discussion in Britain of ceding Mosul to Turkey, changed tactics, passing along to the Residency a list of known sympathizers with the Turkish cause for possible deportation.¹³²

Turkish propaganda was active in Iraq, calling on fellow Muslims to support Turkey rather than the British ‘infidel’; nicely ironic given Mustafa Kemal’s determined secularism. Yet it resonated among the religious groups in Iraq who still did not think in terms of nationalist categories or willingly accept the idea of an inclusive, nonsectarian nation-state. The mujtahids in Khadimain issued another fatwa, this one forbidding the defense of the country in case of a Turkish invasion, a direct challenge to the Palace, the Residency, and the struggling government.¹³³ The British advisor to the minister of interior wanted immediate arrests and deportations of the offending mujtahids, as did al-Sa’adoun, on the grounds that they were Persian subjects, but Faisal was still unwilling to set himself so openly against the mujtahids.

A crisis was averted when Bonar Law’s government determined in special committee that it would be too dangerous to withdraw from Iraq as the likely result

¹³² Allawi, 416.

¹³³ Ibid, 417. See also Al-Wardi, v. 6, 214-215.

would be the absorption of the entire country by Turkey which, in turn, would threaten Britain's lines of communication with India and contribute to Muslim unrest on the Subcontinent. Eventually the threat subsided and the Treaty of Lausanne was signed in July, with the final determination of Mosul province turned over to the League of Nations.¹³⁴ More to placate the press and Parliament than anything else, it was determined that the treaty with Iraq would last for four years rather than twenty, paving the way for Iraq to enter the League of Nations much earlier. Faisal immediately hailed this as a major step towards reducing British influence and pushed to restart the stalled elections. He set out on a full tour of the country, meeting with sheikhs, merchants, and mujtahids to convince them of the latest progress and ensure that they participated in the elections but al-Khalisi and the other Ayatollahs only reaffirmed their earlier fatwas.

Al-Sa'adoun, the cabinet, and the Residency had had enough. While Faisal was still touring the south amendments were made to the criminal code that gave the government power to deport foreign criminals. Although a number of the Ayatollahs, such as al-Khalisi, were Arabs who had only added Persian nationality during the later Ottoman period to avoid conscription, they were all treated as foreign subjects and arrested.¹³⁵ Despite Faisal's last-minute cable to al-Sa'adoun requesting that he leave al-Khalisi alone, and Sir Henry Dobbs' belated concern regarding the political ramifications of his exile, al-Sa'adoun was determined, stressing that al-Khalisi's activities, and those

¹³⁴ The League of Nations granted Mosul to Iraq in 1926 and the Turks agreed to abide by the decision. The Anglo-Turkish-Iraqi Treaty was signed in June of that year, settling the borders between Turkey and Iraq once and for all.

¹³⁵ Ireland, 392.

of his supporters, threatened the credibility of the state.¹³⁶ Al-Khalisi was arrested at his home and placed in a first-class carriage of a special train that took him to Basra where he was then placed in a first-class cabin on a steamer to Aden.¹³⁷ He eventually went to Iran. Other ayatollahs and mujtahids (led by al-Isfahani and al-Na'ini) went very publicly into self-imposed exile in Iran, in protest at the treatment of al-Khalisi. Dobbs' forecast of 'a fearsome squeal from Tehran' failed to materialize, likely because of the distraction surrounding Reza Khan's rise to power, which occurred simultaneously with these events.¹³⁸

Al-Sa'adoun's decision (with the backing of the cabinet and the Residency) solved the immediate crisis but it widened the sectarian fissures in Iraq. Once settled in Iran, the Ayatollahs began a campaign against Faisal and the Iraqi government, stating they would not return to Iraq unless Faisal abdicated and appealing to the now-impotent Ottoman caliph "for the deliverance of Iraq from the foreigners...and from Faisal and his father who came to dominate over the Moslems by fighting in the ranks of the Allies and by disuniting the Moslems under the cloak of Arab nationalism in disobedience of the order of God."¹³⁹ Simultaneously a press campaign was launched in Baghdad, condemning the Ayatollahs and their challenge to the government and raising the specter

¹³⁶ Allawi, 422.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Sluglett, 57.

¹³⁹ As quoted in Batatu, 323.

of fifth columnists and evil religious elements conspiring against the national interests of Iraq and the Arabs.¹⁴⁰

The British ambassador in Iran, Sir Percy Lorraine, traveled to Baghdad to convince the Iraqi government to allow the Ayatollahs to return before they stirred up anti-British trouble in Iran but Al-Sa'adoun remained firm. Faisal, on the other hand, believed the Ayatollahs' bluster would wane once they realized that prolonged absence from the shrine cities would lessen their influence (and income). He also felt that the Iranian Ayatollahs would soon tire of having their rivals for supporters and influence so close to their own bases. Additionally, he guessed they would grow uncomfortable with the modernizing policies of Reza Khan, which were closer in spirit to Mustafa Kemal's approach than Faisal's own more cautious, traditionalist tendencies. Finally, Faisal still sought to build a support base among the Shi'a and knew he needed the backing of the mujtahids if he expected to succeed. He began secret negotiations for their return following the elections (in letters later intercepted by the R.A.F.) on the understanding that they would abstain from political involvement in future.¹⁴¹ Needless to say, this maneuvering, when disclosed, heightened tensions between the Residency and Faisal and between Faisal and al-Sa'adoun.

The final hurdle to restarting the elections was Kurdish unrest in northeastern Iraq, centering in the town of Suleimaniya. The uprising was quickly put down by an intensive R.A.F. bombing campaign but the status of the region remained uncertain.

¹⁴⁰ Allawi, 424.

¹⁴¹ Allawi, 426.

British policy aimed to keep the Kurdish districts loosely tied to the government in Baghdad, in keeping with Mosul's traditional semi-independent status under the Ottoman Empire and because the British wanted to maintain a weak centralized government. Faisal and his cabinet, however, wanted to bind the northern region to the central government and create a strong, centralized state. Faisal worried that other nationalist insurrections might erupt, endangering the future status of the entire Mosul province and encouraging the League of Nations to hand it off to Turkey.¹⁴² As a result he persuaded the cabinet to pass a resolution confirming the central government would leave the Kurds to appoint their own officials and would not force the region to adopt Arabic in its official correspondence. Al-Askari later suggested a policy of exchanges of officials between north and south and even of removing the seat of government from Baghdad to Rawanduz during the summer months, to accelerate assimilation and unification.¹⁴³ These measures met with approval and the path was clear to calling the elections that marked the first step to ratifying the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty.

Behind this superficial unanimity lay another power struggle, between Faisal and al-Sa'adoun. Just as the Naqib had proved (until they dropped him) a strong supporter of the British, al-Sa'adoun also supported the British, feeling that the lack of domestic resources and the number of opponents to a nationally united, independent Iraq left the government with no choice but to cooperate fully with the Residency.¹⁴⁴ Dobbs, in particular, favoured al-Sa'adoun and, as he was now High Commissioner (Cox having

¹⁴² Ibid, 427.

¹⁴³ Facey and Safwat, 238.

¹⁴⁴ Batatu, 190.

finally stepped down) Faisal saw his prime minister as a potential rival to his own slowly increasing stature and was determined to remove him from the cabinet. In this he succeeded and was finally able to get his own man, Ja'far al-'Askari, into the post.

Faisal would execute this sort of maneuver a number of times over the next decade as he sought to break up alliances among his coterie of officers and remove any members of cabinet who appeared poised to grab more power or influence than he himself held. Dobbs, like Cox before him, saw through these efforts and grew increasingly frustrated, the more so as Faisal also countenanced land grabs (illicit transfers of titles on state agricultural lands) by his officers and administrators in a ploy to create a new landed class that could effectively challenge the power of the established landed classes who tended to support the British.¹⁴⁵ Dobbs cabled the Colonial Office that 'we cannot expect a second providential attack of appendicitis' and warned that it might be necessary to force Faisal to abdicate if he would not behave.¹⁴⁶

Faisal may not have been as authoritarian in nature as Mustafa Kemal, Reza Shah, or Amanullah Khan but he was no less determined to achieve independence, stability, and control. The difficulty lay chiefly in transcending community loyalties and identities by forging a national consciousness that emphasized the bonds of territory (though a large part of that territory remained in question until 1926) and a common nationhood while still paying respect, as Faisal did, to the diverse sects, religions, and ethnicities contained within the territory. In this he was almost continuously at odds with his Sunni Arab

¹⁴⁵ The Land Tenure Law of 1932, intended to safeguard the rights and functions of landowners and farmers, was greatly abused.

¹⁴⁶ As quoted in Allawi, 476.

officers who, acutely aware of their numerical disadvantage and overtly impatient with those they considered less educated or less modern, were equally determined to strong-arm the country into a modern nation-state by means of a strident Arab nationalist rhetoric. Such tactics led to a series of crises in 1927, over al-Askari's introduction of a conscription bill and al-Husri's rigid administrative control of the school system.

As mentioned earlier, a number of Faisal's officers had pushed for conscription from the inception of the monarchy, with the approval of Faisal (who considered the army 'the spinal column for nation-forming') and a number of the British military members stationed in Iraq.¹⁴⁷ The Residency and Colonial Office, however, remained firmly opposed to the idea. Dobbs, in particular, was convinced it was little more than a ruse on the part of Faisal's Sunni supporters to create the means to install an autocracy in Iraq. When the bill was introduced the minister of education at that time, a prominent Shi'i, resigned in protest. Reaction in the south was fierce and it was clear that many of the Shi'a were of the same opinion as Dobbs, that the army would prove little more than an instrument of the ruling clique in Baghdad.¹⁴⁸ Faisal sought to defuse the mounting tension by giving the existing army units names that would resonate among the Shi'a but with the officer corps composed entirely of Sunnis, this had little effect.¹⁴⁹ When several tribes along the Tigris and in the countryside surrounding Basra threatened to "leave Iraq or take on Persian or Nejdî nationality to avoid being conscripted," much as they had

¹⁴⁷ Batatu, 26.

¹⁴⁸ Allawi, 477-478.

¹⁴⁹ Batatu, 26.

done during Ottoman times, Faisal realized his government had overreached and the conscription bill was postponed.¹⁵⁰

Faisal championed greater inclusion and employment of Shi'a in government, often against the wishes of his ministers, and worked assiduously to ameliorate the sense of grievance towards the monarchy that simmered in the wake of the events surrounding the arrest and deportation of al-Khalisi. Unfortunately his desire to construct a sense of community based on military service and education were viewed with suspicion by many of the Shi'a throughout the 1920s, as seen in the resistance to the conscription bill and also to government sponsored education. However, in the latter case it may have been as much resistance to Sati' al-Husri's capacity for tactlessness as to his promotion of a secular Arab nationalism.¹⁵¹

To assist his friend and patron, the former Ottoman bureaucrat was determined to play his part in uniting Iraq under Faisal's rule by inculcating an awareness and enthusiasm for a national community, one with a shared historical, cultural, and linguistic memory. He argued that 'a single language and a single history' were the building blocks of the nation.¹⁵²

The unity in these two fields leads to a unity of feelings and desires, a unity of sufferings and hopes, a unity of culture...and in this fashion the people

¹⁵⁰ Allawi, 478.

¹⁵¹ Abu Khaldun Sati' al-Husri (1880-1968), the son of an Ottoman civil servant, was born in Sana'a. He entered the Civil Service Academy in Istanbul in 1893 and was both a teacher and Ottoman provincial administrator in the Balkans before returning to Istanbul, where he remained throughout the First World War. Increasing 'Turkification' following the war forced him, like so many other Ottoman-educated Arabs, to leave Istanbul. He met Faisal in Syria in 1919 and, later, served as Director-General of Education in Iraq from 1922-1927.

¹⁵² Abu Khaldun Sati' al-Husri, *Ma hiya al-Qawmiyah? Abhath wa Dirasat 'ala daw' al-Ahdath wa al-Nazariyat* (Beirut, 1963), 259-260.

believe they are members of one nation, distinguished from other nations. However, neither religion nor the state, nor the economic life entered into, are the basic elements of a nation. And neither is geographic territory...the language forms the nation's soul and its life, the history forms the nation's memory and its consciousness."¹⁵³

The school, rather than the home, the family, the tribe, or even the territory, would function as the inculcator of a distinct Iraqi nationalist culture. Properly trained teachers would instruct students in the superiority of order, discipline, co-operation, and the role of the individual in service to the nation, emphasizing 'the idea of the unity of the Arab nation and the Arabism of Iraq...from the beginning'.¹⁵⁴ They would also instill an appropriate love of the nation through lessons in the common ties of language and history.

To this end, in 1923 al-Husri implemented a nation-wide curriculum for primary schools. Introduction of the English language was postponed to the second year of schooling in favor of instruction in the 'history of the fatherland and the nation's past', designed to serve the more immediate purpose of 'strengthening the patriotic and national sentiments in the hearts of the students'.¹⁵⁵ Although al-Husri recognized that tailoring historical instruction to suit national political aims could be dangerous, he maintained that it was appropriate "to proceed in the light of the demands of 'patriotic education' in the matter of the events and facts which we can put before the gaze of our students in the time fixed for the study of history'."¹⁵⁶ So it was hardly surprising that a student reported

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Al-Husri, *Mudhakkirati*, v. I, 216.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 215. A copy of this curriculum was reproduced on p. 212.

¹⁵⁶ As quoted in L.M. Kenny, "Sati' al-Husri's Views on Arab Nationalism" *The Middle East Journal*, 17, 3 (1963), 254.

to British administrators in the 1930s that he graduated from secondary school in Baghdad believing any Iraqi “can beat ten Englishmen in any kind of fighting, through his bravery and physical strength, and Iraqis actually proved it in the ‘Revolution’ of 1920 (when) many Arabs captured British cannons and artillery armed only with clubs.”¹⁵⁷

Creating the new Arab nation that al-Husri envisioned required a significant increase in social discipline, which implied the introduction and application of military drill and conscription. Al-Husri was convinced that only by removing the child from his surroundings and subjecting him to a rigorous blend of nationalist and military training, could his education be successful.¹⁵⁸ The dependence of this method on standardized education was apparent and al-Husri refused to allow the opening of either new Shi‘a or Jewish-run secondary schools or training colleges outside Baghdad, particularly in the rural areas of the south where the majority of the students would certainly be Shi‘a, a fact that might encourage a dangerous sectarianism among the teaching staff.¹⁵⁹ Nationalist subjects were introduced that purported to teach Arab history in a secular fashion and attempted to suppress any sense of distinction, historic or religious, between Sunnis and Shi‘a. This naturally caused resentment as the Iraqi Shi‘a felt the propagation of a supranational Arabism was intended primarily for the support of the Sunni minority in Baghdad and neglected their tribal origins, placing them in the position of having to prove their ethnic ‘credentials’ to a group of ex-Ottoman officials, some of whom (al-

¹⁵⁷ As quoted in Reeva S. Simon, “The Teaching of History in Iraq Before the Rashid Ali Coup of 1941” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 22, I (1986), 47.

¹⁵⁸ Simon, “The Teaching of History in Iraq...,” 38-39.

¹⁵⁹ al-Husri, *Mudhakkirati*, I. 80.

Husri in particular) could not even claim the country or any of the former vilayets as their places of origin. Indeed, the Sunni administrators in Baghdad, including al-Husri, did not hesitate to question the loyalty as well as the ethnic origins of the Shi'a population, using the term *shu'ubi* to designate them, thereby insinuating their Iranian inclinations.¹⁶⁰ This, coupled with al-Husri's refusal to allow a more decentralized educational system that would address the needs of the considerable rural (and Shi'a) population in the south, proved a constant source of irritation between the Shi'a and successive Sunni governments.¹⁶¹

Al-Husri was determined to instill a national idea that stretched beyond geographical boundaries at a time when Iraq was still struggling simply to delimit its borders let alone define itself as a nation. His efforts exacerbated underlying political and social disparities that would continue to fester for decades, somehow diminishing his boast that he intended to 'strengthen the sentiments of nationalism among the sons of Iraq and spread among them the belief in the unity of the Arab nation'.¹⁶² Both al-Husri and his successor (Muhammad Fadhil al-Jamali) actively recruited teachers from Syria and Palestine, relying on them to minimize local concerns and to emphasize Iraqi nationalism within the greater Arab nation.¹⁶³ However, the events of 1927 proved that local concerns were not easily suppressed.

¹⁶⁰ *Shu'ubiyya* (شعبية – a mediaeval literary movement that favored the Persian influence on Islamic culture. Bashkin. 22. Also, Nakash. 113.

¹⁶¹ Nakash. 113.

¹⁶² al-Husri, *Mudhakkirati*, I, 38.

¹⁶³ Simon, "The Teaching of History in Iraq...", 40.

One of al-Husri's recruits was Anis Zakaria Nsouli, a Lebanese Sunni Arab and a recent graduate of the American University in Beirut. Al-Husri installed him as a history instructor in the Baghdad Central Secondary School. Nsouli wrote a polemical book entitled *The Umayyad State in Syria*, which was printed in 1926 by a local publishing house for general readership, and also earmarked by the government for school-wide distribution.¹⁶⁴ The book glorified the Caliph Muawiya, a detested ruler in the Shi'a litany, and belittled Imam Ali; it also practically dismissed Imam Hussein's martyrdom, calling him a rebel against the legitimate government. Finally, Nsouli dedicated his work to the modern-day heirs to the Umayyad dynasty, i.e. Faisal and his government. The reaction was instantaneous.

The minister of education, Sayyid 'Abd al-Mahdi, ordered Nsouli's immediate dismissal and banned the book from the curriculum. The other teachers that al-Husri had recruited from the Levant protested formally and accused the minister of presiding over an inquisition. There was a large student demonstration in Baghdad (both from the secondary schools as well as the teacher training college) demanding Nsouli's reinstatement. The demonstration turned into a procession, which marched on the Ministry of Education where it clashed with the police prior to dispersing. From the mid-Euphrates region straight through to the south there were demonstrations supporting the minister's decision and protesting the book's publication. A Commission of Inquiry subsequently set up by al-Mahdi upheld his decision and recommended suspension for a

¹⁶⁴ For a detailed account of the event, see al-Husri, *Mudhakkirati*, I, 557-575.

number of the student demonstrators in Baghdad and the dismissal of all the teachers recruited by al-Husri.

The events surrounding the conscription bill and the publication and dissemination of Nsouli's history exposed the sectarian fissures that continued to form within Iraq despite Faisal's efforts. His mild, religiously inclusive, nationalism was entirely at odds with al-Husri's (and the other Sunni officers) more militant, racist, and secular nationalism that simply dismissed local loyalties and traditions, not to mention sectarian distinctions. Faisal had just been given cause to celebrate as the League of Nations finally granted Mosul to Iraq, settling the country's northern borders and allowing him the hope that he could convince the various populations to gradually unify, while his Director-General of Education was simultaneously imposing a curriculum designed to instill the notion that nationalism was secular and supra-territorial.

The raids from Nejd continued apace, even after ibn Saud had signed two border accords with Iraq (they wouldn't cease until 1930 when the two kings met on shipboard in the Shatt al-Arab and finally negotiated a lasting truce). Relations with Iran fared no better as neither the Residency nor the Sunni officers and administrators ever ceased to believe in the "malevolency of the 'Persian divines' and their hold over the 'ignorant masses' and tribal sheikhs of southern Iraq."¹⁶⁵ Despite the fact that Faisal very clearly did not share in the overtly racial nationalism of his coterie (nor did he define Iraqi nationalism or patriotism in terms of hostility to Iran), economic trade and relations

¹⁶⁵ Allawi, 530.

between the two countries limped along until 1932 when Faisal's efforts to strengthen ties bore fruit and he was finally able to pay a state visit to Iran.

As it shared borders with Turkey and Iran, Iraq had two close examples of 'new' countries that had rid themselves, to varying degrees, of control by foreign powers. But neither Turkey nor Iran had to contend with artificially imposed borders or an internationally sanctioned oversight of foreign protection and instruction. Since his arrival in Iraq, Faisal maneuvered constantly against the British for the latitude and control to govern the country he'd been granted. He achieved this through an exhausting combination of politics, negotiation, cajolery, and intrigue that caused the British on several occasions to reconsider their initial choice of Faisal as ruler. 'The opinion is widely expressed in the most unexpected circles that the disappearance of the dangerous neurotic is after all the only solution to the present problems.'¹⁶⁶

British letters, memoirs, and dispatches from the mandate period frequently described Faisal as 'duplicitous', 'childish', 'obstinate', 'secretive', 'deceitful', and any manner of epithets that appeared in direct contrast to the romantic and flowery language used to describe his physical attributes, his 'piercing eyes', 'high, lustrous forehead', 'noble carriage', his ability to speak 'in the great tongue of the desert', 'the finest living representative of his race' and, last but not least, 'he looked like Christ'. Faisal was determined to rule but acknowledged that lack of resources and the gravity of Iraq's financial straits, initially, made complete rupture with the British impossible. The expulsion of the mujtahids and ayatollahs added to the country's financial difficulties as

¹⁶⁶ As quoted in Sluglett, 106.

pilgrimage and corpse traffic declined precipitously. Continual disruptions to harvests due to floods, droughts, disease, and Ikhwan raids also contributed to the country's poor economic state and increased its dependency on the British presence.

Faisal also faced a constant battle for control over the emergent Sunni political class, which, in turn, was riddled with rivalries and conspiracies. He expended considerable energy to maintain their focus on the Palace rather than the Residency. The various alliances he joined and abandoned (though never so completely that he couldn't revisit them) confused the British and led to their frustration with his seeming inconstancy but Faisal's efforts were merely directed at ensuring his position and control over his government. That he achieved his status as Iraq's key political figure within a decade was no small feat considering he began as a complete outsider hampered by foreign control and a fractious following.

Chapter V: Struggling Towards Independence

It is fair to suggest that the R.A.F. was the glue that held the country together for much of its first decade. It is also fair to suggest this might not have been entirely necessary had the Colonial Office been less intransigent in its policy during the mandate. A convoluted system of government had emerged not unlike the dual responsibility exercised in the Indian Army, which largely contributed to the disastrous experiences of the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force in the lead up to the 6th (Poona) Division's surrender under General Townshend at Kut al-Amara in April 1916; except in Iraq it was two ministers for every position rather than two positions under one minister.¹⁶⁷ Iraqi ministers and government officials were constantly watched and frequently contradicted by their British advisors, creating tensions that only increased as Iraqis grew more accustomed to administration and power.

The Iraqi government was responsible for running the ports and railroads, including covering their deficits but it was the British who owned them. According to the military arrangements, Iraq could declare martial law but could not administer it. The army (such as it was) could not be deployed without the assent of the British High Commissioner. Foreign nationals had extraterritorial rights in Iraq, which were not reciprocated for Iraqis. The Iraqi budget had to cover half the costs of the British

¹⁶⁷ As Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army, Lord Kitchener instituted changes in 1905 that left the entire executive and administrative work of two Army departments concentrated in the hands of one man. The new role created a dual responsibility, as the holder of this position was both Military Member of Council and Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army. Unfortunately, the centralization resulting from merging roles at the highest level did not extend to the lower reaches of administration. The two Army Departments remained distinct and, indeed, were separately maintained "to give substance to the fiction that one person is two persons." *Report of the Commission Appointed by Act of Parliament to Enquire into the Operations of War in Mesopotamia* [Command 8610], (London: H.M.S.O., 1917) 98-102.

Residency on an annual basis but the Iraqi government had no control over how the money was spent.¹⁶⁸ To his credit, Dobbs understood how untenable this position was for Faisal and tried to convince the Colonial Office to soften its position much as Cox had done with regard to the language of the mandate, with as little success. According to the Colonial Office, grievances over the structure of dual responsibility were baseless, existing ‘only in the minds of fervid patriots’.¹⁶⁹

As with the earlier Chanak Crisis, matters within Iraq were resolved by external events. Article 3 of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1926 raised the possibility of reviewing Iraq’s progress at four-year intervals.¹⁷⁰ Faisal had insisted on this provision, arguing it would be difficult to pass a treaty prolonging the mandate without some concession to mitigate possible nationalist uproar. He intended to use the stipulated reviews to further his goal of hastening admission to the League of Nations and, consequently, achieving full independence. To this end, Faisal focused his energies following the ratification on widening his authority in Iraq and loosening the British grip over its administration. For the British, however, Article 3 was purely cosmetic. After four months spent in London in late 1927 negotiating directly with the Colonial Office, Faisal failed to secure his primary objective – that Britain would concede independence for Iraq as early as 1928 and allow her to enter the League of Nations. Indeed, at the first meeting in London’s

¹⁶⁸ Ireland, 368-369.

¹⁶⁹ As quoted in Sluglett, 112.

¹⁷⁰ Following the League of Nation’s decision to award Mosul to Iraq a new Anglo-Iraqi Treaty was ratified that replaced the previous one of 1922, which was not ratified until 1924. The 1926 treaty recommended Iraq remain under mandate for 25 years due to its ‘still unstable conditions.’ Faisal understood this as the price he had to pay for Mosul province but insisted on a provision allowing for periodic reviews of Iraq’s progress that would assess its eligibility for admission to the League of Nations.

Hyde Park Hotel, Faisal was handed an *aide-memoire* criticizing his ‘interference in domestic affairs and his role in encouraging anti-British sentiment in Iraq’.¹⁷¹ The note concluded by urging Faisal to accept the role the British intended for him, namely, that of constitutional monarch, and leave the running of the country to his government (i.e., to the British advisors standing behind every Iraqi minister).¹⁷²

Recognizing the futility of gaining British concessions to his demands, Faisal altered course and sought the removal of the High Commissioner’s veto rights, aware that just prior to his arrival in London Britain had negotiated a treaty recognizing Ibn Saud’s full independence. This too was rejected, as the office of High Commissioner was a key prop in Britain’s control of Iraq. The Colonial Office’s view on the matter was strengthened by exaggerated reports from the Residency in Baghdad that ‘the Iraqi public would be alarmed at Britain’s withdrawal and the country would become unstable.’¹⁷³ Ultimately, all the British would agree to was a public acceptance that Iraq was an ‘independent sovereign state’, which counted for little when set against the High Commissioner’s veto powers and the fact that the British still withheld support of Iraq’s application to the League of Nations for full membership.¹⁷⁴ Such a nominal gain elicited little interest in Baghdad and opposition to both the British and Faisal increased.

Worn out by his constant confrontations with Faisal and the Colonial Office, Dobbs retired in March 1929 and was replaced by Sir Gilbert Clayton, an old friend of

¹⁷¹ As quoted in Allawi, 485.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 486.

Faisal's.¹⁷⁵ Clayton's arrival paved the way for an accommodation between London and Baghdad, as did another change in Britain's government. A new colonial secretary was appointed, Sidney James Webb, Lord Passfield, a socialist reformer and co-founder of the London School of Economics and the *New Statesman* magazine. Clayton's suggestion that British interests would be best served if concessions were forthcoming fell on sympathetic ears, as did his insistence that the situation in Iraq was 'gradually deteriorating as a result of doubt and uncertainty as to the HM Government [*sic*] real policy'.¹⁷⁶ For good measure he raised the spectre of another 1920-style uprising and the British government decided it was finally prepared to recommend Iraq's entry into the League of Nations in 1932. Unfortunately, Clayton didn't live to see his suggestions bear fruit. He collapsed and died on the polo grounds at the age of 54, a day after the Colonial Office telegraphed their decision.

Faisal understood that Britain's promise to support Iraq did not spell the end of their influence in the country, nor was he seeking independence on that level. Iraq would be dependent on British support (economic, military, and diplomatic) for a number of years to come but political pre-eminence could not be achieved with the continued intervention of high commissioners in internal affairs that, rightly, should fall under the exclusive purview of the king. The new High Commissioner, Sir Francis Humphreys, was as sympathetic as his predecessor and agreed to work with Faisal and his new

¹⁷⁵ Sir Gilbert Clayton (1875-1929) was a British Army intelligence officer who served as Director of Intelligence in Cairo's Arab Bureau during the First World War and oversaw the British officers (such as Lawrence) who participated in the Arab Revolt. He also served in Palestine, Najd, and Yemen before taking up his last post in Iraq.

¹⁷⁶ As quoted in Allawi, 510.

cabinet. For the first time the entire cabinet, with the exception of the minister of education, had been handpicked by Faisal. He chose Nuri al-Sa'id as his prime minister and filled the other posts with ex-sharifian officers who served with him either during the Arab Revolt or in Syria. Within three months Faisal and Nuri, working closely with Humphreys, crafted a new draft treaty that was sent to London for approval.

The new treaty granted Faisal much of what he wanted for Iraq: Britain's recognition of the country's independence; an Iraqi army responsible for maintaining order and defense; and the withdrawal of British forces with the exception of two air bases. In exchange Iraq agreed to maintain a twenty-five year treaty of alliance with Britain, and the British ambassador to Iraq would receive privileged status over other ambassadors. Iraq would continue to employ British advisors in preference to advisors from other countries and the British would provide the Iraqi army with equipment and training. London agreed to the terms and the text of the new Anglo-Iraqi Treaty was published in London on 18 July 1930 and in the Baghdad press on the following day.

News of the treaty failed to meet with widespread approval. Faisal's lean towards autocracy, though stemming from a desire to control a negotiation process whose outcome he considered to be of fundamental significance to the country's future, had not gone unnoticed.¹⁷⁷ The Kurds worried that independence would presage eventual subservience to a "blatantly centralized and Arab nationalist state."¹⁷⁸ The Shi'a feared ratification would serve as a prelude to mass conscription. The nationalists were opposed

¹⁷⁷ Al-Suwaydi, 192. "I thought it wise to withdraw from politics for a time as King Faisal's belief he would gain full leadership of the country would lead him to undertake policies that would not allow criticism or opposition."

¹⁷⁸ Allawi, 520.

to continuation of British influence in any form, though Faisal felt many of them would change loyalties in an instant at the offer of government positions.¹⁷⁹ Faced with increasing agitation against ratification of the treaty and concern over political enemies even in his handpicked cabinet, Faisal left for an extended rest cure in Europe, instructing his brother Ali, as regent in his absence, to dissolve the Majlis and call for new elections, leaving Nuri as the public face of the Iraqi negotiators for the treaty.¹⁸⁰ Nuri set to work compiling a list of pro-government candidates whose election would ensure an unquestionable majority for ratification. He left little to chance, shutting down nationalist newspapers, harassing opposition leaders, and using the land laws to alternately bribe and threaten rural sheikhs with grants or withdrawals of tracts of state land.¹⁸¹ Elections were held in October, returning a chamber with an overwhelming government majority and on 16 November 1930, the new Anglo-Iraqi Treaty was ratified.

Unfortunately, Faisal won his freedom from British oversight during a period of increasing unrest and economic crisis. Iraq's agricultural output had slumped amid severe local droughts and a collapse of world commodity prices, causing tribal unrest, particularly in the mid-Euphrates region and throughout the south. For the first time Faisal, rather than simply his government, was attacked. Shi'a grievances ran deep and only worsened in the months following Nuri's restrictions and clampdowns on political activity and the press. Despite touring the towns of Hilla, Najaf, and Karbala

¹⁷⁹ Dangling government positions in front of key leaders of the nationalist opposition whenever deemed necessary was one way in which Faisal maintained control over fractious 'political prima donnas'. Batatu, 201.

¹⁸⁰ Allawi, 521.

¹⁸¹ Longrigg, 181-183.

accompanied by the two Shi'a members of government (Sayyid Muhammad al-Sadr, head of the Senate and 'Abd al-Hussein al-Chalabi, once again minister of education), Faisal was unsuccessful in mollifying the feelings of alienation among the Shi'a. His personal prestige had definitely waned. Further harm befell his reputation when four anonymous letters circulated in Baghdad accusing him of conducting secret liaisons with women from prominent families, of exhibiting favoritism in government appointments, and of misusing public funds. The letters demanded the dissolution of the cabinet and the abolition of the monarchy in favor of a republic.¹⁸² The American chargé d'affaires in Baghdad, a witness to the ensuing scandal, commented "although the King has never been popular, he has not been very unpopular until recent months."¹⁸³

In July of 1931, a general strike was called in Baghdad that lasted fourteen days and turned the city into a ghost town, as all the shops and markets remained closed. Instigated by a feared increase to a municipality tax on merchants and crafts, the protests quickly spread throughout the city, becoming violent when demonstrators clashed openly with police. Faisal and Nuri had left the country for a state visit to Turkey the day before the strike, leaving Faisal's brother Ali acting as regent once more. The demonstrators soon merged with the political opposition, which used the strike to flay Faisal and Nuri's government for accepting the unequal treaty of 1930. Ali was incapable of handling the protests and Faisal quickly dispatched Nuri to Baghdad to regain control. The RAF was

¹⁸² Al-Fajr, Fahd Musallam, *Muzahim al-Bachah'chi wa Dawruhu fi al-Siyasah al-Iraqiyah, 1890-1933*, (Beirut, 2004), A full description of this summer scandal is provided on pgs.187-203.

¹⁸³ Allawi, 524.

forced to fly several sorties over the mid-Euphrates region to dissuade the tribesmen from joining in and turning the strike into a full-scale insurrection.¹⁸⁴

Despite the general disapproval of the treaty and the incessant rivalries and power struggles among the cabinet and opposition parties, as well as Faisal's increasing distrust of Nuri's political power, he made no attempt to dislodge Nuri over the next few months or to dismiss the cabinet. His instinct was not to destroy political opponents but rather to bring them into the fold. Faisal understood how thin the political class was in Iraq; maneuvering constantly to redress large imbalances in power that might arise to threaten the status quo.¹⁸⁵ His perseverance paid off when on 3 October 1932, Iraq was informed of its acceptance to the League of Nations. The reaction throughout Iraq was supportive and Faisal's personal popularity "grew accordingly in power and consequence."¹⁸⁶

Although the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty was unequal in terms of the conditions imposed on Iraq by Britain, Faisal had certainly succeeded in freeing Iraq from the burdensome oversight of the British in its domestic affairs. The country remained fragmented and insecure in many respects but he felt that at least now it had the freedom to chart its own political future, without severing ties to a power whose continuing support was essential for cementing Iraq's stability and prosperity.¹⁸⁷ Faisal had also succeeded in achieving dominance over the Sunni Arab, ex-sharifian political class, deftly shifting between alliances and playing rivalries off against one another to keep

¹⁸⁴ Batatu, 200-201 and 295-296.

¹⁸⁵ Allawi, 525.

¹⁸⁶ Batatu, 201.

¹⁸⁷ Allawi, 534-535.

political ambitions in check. Unfortunately, just as he seemed to gain his full measure of political maturity, stress and lifestyle took their toll (he was a habitually heavy smoker) and Faisal died in Berne of heart failure at the age of 48, on 8 September 1933. His plans to inculcate a sense of loyalty and belonging to the nation and to encourage participation in the national effort by improving educational standards within each community according to its needs and using the government to develop the shrine cities and improve their general condition remained unimplemented.¹⁸⁸

Shortly before his death Faisal expressed his concerns for Iraq in an eight-page memorandum he circulated among his administrators for discussion.

In this regard and with sadness, I have to say that it is my belief there is still 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].¹⁸⁹

He argued for greater inclusion of the Shi'a and for building the nation slowly, taking into account the various traditions and needs of each community. This was considerably different from Sati' al-Husri's efforts at nation building through radical, centrally imposed uniformity. Faisal understood the danger that continued Shi'a alienation could pose to the success of the country. Insofar as he succeeded in "placing the country's foreign policy on a path it could follow for a long time" to the same extent he failed "in terms of domestic policy to resolve (the country's) problems and to provide useful

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 539.

¹⁸⁹ Batatu, 25-26.

guidance.”¹⁹⁰ As the Sunni political class grew in strength following his death, they had little desire to make any major concessions to the Shi’a. In this they adhered to the more traditional British practice of excluding the Shi’a from playing a major role in their own country, either individually or collectively. But as Faisal had implied when arguing the need for a standing national army, 150,000 rifles among a group united in purpose would far outclass the British military in Iraq, much less an untried army of 15,000.¹⁹¹

The somewhat ephemeral nature of Faisal’s popularity and subsequent legacy within Iraq may be a reflection of his ultimate inability to bring his national project to fruition. It can also be argued that the concession he really won was one of greater personal freedom for himself and his cabinet rather than freedom for the country. A. J. Balfour wrote in 1919 that ‘no state can be described as really independent (when) supported, if the worst comes to the worst, by troops, aeroplanes and tanks.’¹⁹² Whatever the true nature of British-Iraqi relations following Iraq’s entry to the League, it was widely felt by Iraqis that the British still controlled their country. The continued presence of two RAF bases likely contributed to this sentiment, along with the ‘special relationship’ with the British ambassador.

There were also no close or powerful advisors with the desire or ability to carry on Faisal’s ambitions for national cohesion after his death. Ghazi, his son, “was in no position to fill the void that his (father’s) death caused” as a result of his “youth,

¹⁹⁰ Al-Suwaydi, 269-270.

¹⁹¹ Batatu, 26 and 90.

¹⁹² As quoted in Sluglett, 160.

inexperience, and lack of sufficient intelligence and sophistication.”¹⁹³ Much of Faisal’s own success with the various tribes, minorities, and individuals within the country, as well as without, was due in large part to “his character [which] had surpassed, if not obliterated, all other characters.”¹⁹⁴ He remained a powerful figure to other countries in the region, a man of intelligence and natural authority, who commanded the respect and admiration not only of the general populace, but of the leaders as well, as witnessed by his reception every time he conducted state visits either to Iran, Turkey, or Palestine.¹⁹⁵ Even the public in France and Britain had grown enamored of his presence over time and his visits were celebrated with lavish fêtes. In Iraq, however, personal political rivalries and resentments blossomed after 1933 and the country fell into a cycle of power grabs, demonstrations, and coups that even the violent overthrow of the monarchy in 1958 failed to satisfy. Ultimately, nothing remained of Faisal’s careful regard for traditions and his pragmatically moderate approach to nation building.

¹⁹³ Al-Suwaydi, 270. Faisal, himself, had privately expressed concern over his son’s ability to succeed him well before his death.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Allawi, 552-553. Al-Suwaydi, 225-229.

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