

The Middle East Online, Series 2: Iraq, 1914-1974

General Introduction

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When the Anglo-Indian expeditionary force landed on the al-Faw peninsula in October 1914, there was little idea that this would be the first step in the foundation of an independent new state in the region, stretching from the waters of the Persian Gulf in the south to the Kurdish mountains in the north. Yet this was to be the outcome – an outcome made possible by the subsequent British conquest of the three Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul.

Military occupation resulting from the strategic demands of the First World War and the dismembering of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the war obliged the British to think about the political shape of the territories they occupied. Despite some misgivings about the project in British official circles, the decision was taken to accept the League of Nations mandate for the territories, committing the British government to the establishment of a state which would eventually be granted independence. This was the founding of the state of Iraq – a state which owed its existence to the ambiguous legacy of old-fashioned imperialism on one hand, and of the recognition of the principle of self-determination on the other. For much of Iraq's modern history the tension between these two forces have been distinctive and troubling features.

Great Britain's intimate involvement with the foundation of the state of Iraq and with the early direction of its government makes the National Archives at Kew the major single source for understanding the processes which formed the modern state and its politics. It is through the documents filed here that the reader can form an accurate impression of the British administrators, their concerns, their views of Iraq and the Iraqis and their reasons for devising policies that were to have a marked effect on the course of Iraqi political history long after British influence had come to an end.

The files reproduced in this collection have been selected on the basis of the light they can throw on routine policy-making, as well as on key episodes and developments in the political history of Iraq and its relationship with Great Britain. The editorial role has been confined to the selection of subject files which together form a comprehensive and multi-faceted picture of Iraq's political history. The files themselves are reproduced in their entirety, including all the comments, annotations and revisions made by the officials through whose hands they passed, giving the reader the opportunity to assess how British policy was made and often revised to deal with changing circumstances.

From mandate to independent monarchy: 1920-1958

The mandate itself was something of an innovation, very much a product of changes in international politics following the First World War. The old imperial powers retained a tenacious hold on much of the world, but a new spirit was emerging, finding voice in nationalist movements across Europe, Asia and Africa, echoed by President Wilson of the United States of America. In Iraq, uncertainty about the true nature of the mandate was felt both by the Iraqis and by the British. Resentment of imperial rule led to the Iraqi Revolt of 1920, but this in turn caused the British to establish a limited form of self-government, installing Prince Feisal of the Hijaz as constitutional monarch, following the Cairo Conference of 1921.

Thereafter, despite frequent disputes, the king and those around him shared with Great Britain a common interest in making the new state work. This meant tackling those who rejected the very idea of the state, or of one dominated by the British and their Hashemite allies, both among the Kurds in the north and among the equally independent minded Shia clerics and tribal leaders of the south. Increasingly, and fatefully for the future of Iraq, the Iraqi security forces were deployed to overcome this resistance and land grants were used to co-opt provincial leaders. So successful were these measures in the short term that Iraq

became the first of the League of Nations mandates to be granted independence, in October 1932.

British influence did not end with the proclamation of Iraq's independence. On the contrary, it remained as pervasive as ever, visible in the British military mission to the Iraqi armed forces, the mainly British ownership of the Iraq Petroleum Company which had begun to exploit the vast oil reserves of Iraq from the late 1920s, the two major British military bases at Habbaniyah and Shuaiba, and the large numbers of British advisers working in Iraq's ministries. It was also a contentious issue in the increasingly nationalist and militarised politics of Iraq, where a series of six military coups d'état signalled changes in government between 1936 and 1941. The final coup brought to power a government headed by Rashid Ali al Gailani, regarded by the British as hostile to the British war effort and likely to seek an alliance with the Axis powers. This provoked a British invasion and a brief war in May 1941, resulting in the restoration of the Regent and the installation of a government more friendly to Great Britain.

In the aftermath of this intervention British influence seemed to continue much as before. With British support, Iraqi politics was dominated by the conservative figures of Nuri al Said and the Regent. However, things were changing inside Iraq, as well as outside. A mobilised political public in Iraq and new social forces, particularly in the growing cities, were making themselves felt as radical new parties questioned not simply the continued British presence, but also the legitimacy of the Hashemite monarchy and an order dominated by the old social classes. Brief periods of liberalisation were punctuated by riots, demonstrations and government repression. Meanwhile, Kurdish nationalism was becoming increasingly popular as the Kurds too began to question a system which seemed to exclude them from most of the benefits of a modern state. Growing oil revenues were used chiefly to benefit those who were politically close to the government, fuelling the sense of social injustice and the need for revolutionary change.

This was intensified by the regional upheavals of the 1950s, following the failures of the Arab governments in the war of 1948 against Israel. In Egypt, radical young army officers came to power and, in the Suez Crisis of 1956, faced down the attempt by Britain and France to unseat President Nasser. In Syria, a succession of military coups d'état shook the old order. In Iran, a nationalist government under Mossadegh forced the Shah into exile before being ousted in a military coup organised by the American and British governments. In Jordan, King Hussein narrowly avoided being overthrown by an alliance of nationalist politicians and army officers. In this atmosphere, it was not surprising that similar republican and nationalist sentiments should have affected a younger generation of politicians and military officers in Iraq.

However, the government of Nuri al Said held firmly to the alliance with Great Britain and with the United States in the developing Cold War between the USSR and the Western powers. Believing that he could keep control of politics in Iraq and indeed that a Western alliance would help him to do so, in 1955 he took his country into the Middle Eastern alliance known as the Baghdad Pact. For his political opponents at home and in the Arab world, this was further evidence of the link between a reactionary government and western interests. This appeared to be cemented in the Arab Union of 1958 – a hastily constructed pact between Jordan and Iraq in response to the establishment of the United Arab Republic of Egypt and Syria. In some respects it was this which precipitated the Iraqi military coup d'état of July 1958. Led by Brigadier Abdel Karim Qasim and Colonel Abd-al-Salam Arif, military units seized the capital, and shot the king and most of royal family, as well as Nuri al Said himself.

The Republic of Iraq: 1958-1974

The 1958 revolution and the establishment of the Iraqi republic signalled the end of the intimate relationship between Great Britain and Iraq. A turbulent period in Iraqi politics followed, marked by infighting between those who had made the revolution, with Qasim temporarily triumphant. In addition, a series of crises erupted in Iraqi-British relations as the Iraqi government disputed aspects of the imperial legacy, whether in the Iraqi claims to Kuwait upon its independence in 1961, or in the first move against the British-owned IPC in Law 80 of 1961. Nevertheless, despite perennial British fears about the alignment of Iraq in

the Cold War, relations between the two countries were very similar to those between Great Britain and a number of Arab nationalist and socialist regimes across the Middle East at the time.

The instability and sometimes the violence of Iraqi politics in the 1960s were of some concern to the British government, but as long as Iraq did not pose a threat to British interests or allies in the Middle East, it was seen as a useful market for British exports of civilian and military goods. However, the story that emerges within these files of developments in Iraqi politics itself is more troubling: military conspiracies, Kurdish armed rebellion, regional conflicts, political purges and the rise and fall and rise again of the ruthless Baath Party feature prominently in the story.

With the return of the Baath to power in 1968, it was clear that something had changed. Presided over by Hassan al Bakr, with the initially shadowy figure of his young relative Saddam Hussain becoming ever more prominent, this was a regime that intended to stay in power, whatever the cost. The often bloody implications of this were soon felt throughout Iraq. Former intimates of the regime, as well as members of Iraq's small remaining Jewish community, a substantial number of Iraqis of Iranian origin and nationalists amongst the Kurds paid with their lives for the determination of the Baathist government to pursue disputes with its regional enemies through their alleged 'agents' within Iraq.

The British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971 had repercussions on its relations with Iraq. In a gesture of Arab nationalist solidarity, the Baathist government broke off diplomatic relations with Great Britain because of the deal struck by the British government with the Shah of Iran, allowing Iran to occupy some small islands in the Gulf claimed by newly independent United Arab Emirates. Equally important, with the visible decline of British power in the region, was the Iraqi government's decision to nationalise the IPC in the summer of 1972. This placed the Iraqi government in an ideal position to benefit from the massive oil price rises of 1973/4 which were to follow the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 – and bestowed unimaginably large resources on the Baathist government, making it the wealthiest and the most powerful in Iraqi history.

Iraq was on the brink of this breakthrough, and Saddam Hussain was about to emerge as the undisputed 'strong man' of Iraqi politics when the story contained in this run of files comes to an end. 1974 was the year when Iraqi-British diplomatic relations were restored, but because of the 30-year rule, this is when the public access to the files must cease for the moment. Nevertheless, the files that are available give some indication of the basis of the regime that was to dominate Iraq for the next thirty years. More importantly for the historian, but also of significance for the student of politics in the twenty first century, the files in their entirety provide an unparalleled insight into the processes of 'nation-building'. Something that began as a state-building project began to form its own political field, creating the basis for a feeling of Iraqi nationalism where none had existed before. However, it also contributed, through its exclusions and preferences, through the hierarchies of power and through repression, to the precarious hold of that sense of nationhood amongst significant sections of the Iraqi population.

Citation:

Charles Tripp, 'Introduction', *The Middle East Online Series 2: Iraq 1914-1974*, Thomson Learning EMEA Ltd, Reading, 2006