

Iraq's Unruly Century

Ever since Britain carved the nation out of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the land long known as Mesopotamia has been wracked by instability

- By Jonathan Kandell
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As summer temperatures headed toward 105 degrees on the morning of August 23, 1921, some 1,500 dignitaries assembled in the courtyard of a government building on the banks of the Tigris River for a coronation. British Army officers and colonial administrators mingled with Shiite Arabs from Basra near the Persian Gulf, Kurds from Mosul near Turkey, and Sunni Arabs from Baghdad to witness the installation of a foreign prince, Faisal, as the first king of the newly created nation. “It was an amazing thing to see all Iraq, from North to South, gathered together,” wrote Gertrude Bell, a British colonial official who had recommended Faisal to her government and would be his staunchest supporter. “It is the first time it has happened in history.”

Faisal’s subjects had no anthem, so a band struck up “God Save the King.” The selection aptly symbolized Britain’s role not only in inventing the Iraqi government—complete with a figurehead king and soon a new parliament and constitution—but also in orchestrating it for years to come.

On a July morning in Baghdad in 1958, Iraq’s constitutional monarchy came to a brutal end when an army faction led by Iraqi Gen. Abdul Karim Qassem stormed the royal palace. In the courtyard, rebel troops killed King Faisal II, the 23-year-old grandson of the first monarch, and a score of men, women and children. Faisal’s body was removed to a secret burial place. But no such respect was accorded his uncle and former regent, Abdul Ilah, whom the plotters blamed for the monarchy’s pro-British slant; his corpse was thrown to a mob outside the palace gates, dragged around the city and displayed for two days in a public square.

The 1958 coup d’état was not the first upheaval in Iraq’s modern political history, which has been marked by nationalist fervor, ethnic uprisings, tribal conflicts, palace treacheries, warfare and deadly oppression. In the monarchy’s 37 years, the government cabinet was shuffled more than 50 times. Scholars have offered a catalog of reasons why antiquity’s “cradle of civilization” has been so unstable. Some blame geography, pointing out that Iraq, which covers some 168,000 square miles, has a mere 12 miles of shoreline, on the Persian Gulf, making it the most

landlocked—and culturally isolated—nation in the Middle East. Others tie Iraq's "bloody history," as many have described it, to the preponderance of groups vying for power. The rivalry goes deeper than Arab versus British, however, or Sunni versus Shiite versus Kurd. As the Kurdish analyst Siyamend Othman said this past November, the "history of Iraq has been conditioned, if not determined, by the conflict between city and countryside," meaning the conflict between an emerging educated class around major urban areas and the old semiliterate rural sheikhdoms.

Britain's experiment in nation-building failed partly because it did not unify the disparate factions, says Charles Tripp, a British citizen and author of the 2000 book, *A History of Iraq*. Instead, Britain seeded unrest by relying on the Sunni minority to run the military and civil service and also by subordinating the northern, Kurdish territory. In addition, he says, Britain's decision to allow tribal sheikhs to maintain order in rural areas heightened tensions by "treating Iraqi society as a collection of groups rather than individuals." But Adeed Dawisha, an Iraq-born historian and author of *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, suggests that Britain failed mainly because it granted Iraq too little autonomy. "From the establishment of the constitutional monarchy in 1921 all the way to its fall in 1958," Dawisha says, "it was very clear that none of the Iraqi governments could carry out any policy against British opposition. And I would put oil [policies] at the top of the list. Oil sales served the interests of Britain, not Iraq."

It was at the start of World War I that Britain first occupied Mesopotamia, then part of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans had allied with Germany, and Britain justified its 1914 invasion as a move to protect its oil fields in neighboring Iran and its access to Persian Gulf shipping lanes to India. Many Iraqis welcomed the British troops with open arms. The 1916-1918 Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Turks, encouraged by the British military liaison officer T. E. Lawrence (better known as Lawrence of Arabia), raised nationalist Arab expectations in the region. And to court Arabs throughout the Middle East, the British vowed to end three centuries of Ottoman rule, which had grown corrupt, repressive and economically stifling. "Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies but as liberators," proclaimed Gen. Stanley Maude, commander of the British forces, as his troops marched into Baghdad in 1917.

In 1920, the newly formed League of Nations granted Britain a "mandate" over Iraq—a kind of pre-independence trusteeship. It gave Britain the right to raise and spend revenues, to appoint officials and to make and enforce laws. (Britain was also mandated to govern Palestine. Another mandate put Syria and Lebanon under French jurisdiction.) Though the mandate approach was flawed, says historian David Fromkin, it appealed to League members because it gave the Allied powers control over territories without endorsing imperialism outright. "The mandate system responded to people who were idealistic and anti-imperialistic and others who felt it was a useful disguise to maintain the old colonial system in place," says Fromkin, author of *A Peace to End All Peace*.

In the end, the boundaries of the new Iraq—a seventh century name meaning “well-rooted country”—largely mirrored the boundaries of three Ottoman provinces, though that was not the original plan. In 1915 the British had wanted the northernmost province around Mosul to go to France, to serve as a buffer between British holdings and possible Russian expansion. But Britain changed its stance in 1918 in part because of growing appreciation for the importance of oil, believed to be abundant in the Mosul area. (So it is. A well first struck oil in Kirkuk in 1927.) As for Kuwait, it had been virtually a separate British protectorate since 1899 and by World War I was already splitting from the Ottoman province of Basra that would become part of Iraq.

By the time of the 1920 mandate, Iraqi nationalism outweighed pro-British feeling. British officials differed over how to deal with the threat. “There were people like Gertrude Bell,” says Phebe Marr, a Washington, D.C.-based historian, “who came to believe in the need for some sort of self-government as soon as possible, and conservatives like Arnold Wilson [Bell’s chief], who thought that the local folk weren’t capable of running their own show and had to be tutored for a long time.”

For a while, Wilson’s arguments held sway—to the frustration of Bell and most Iraqis. When an Iraqi delegation met with Wilson, a forceful imperialist then in his 30s, he brushed them off as “ungrateful politicians.” He proceeded to turn Iraq into a virtual appendage of Britain’s colonial rule in India, bringing troops and administrators over from the subcontinent. Nationalist protests increased, and in the summer of 1920, one leader, Imam Shirazi of Karbala, issued a fatwa, or religious decree, that British rule violated Islamic law. He called for a jihad, or holy war, against the British—and for once Sunnis, Shiites and rival sheikhdoms united in a common cause. The armed rebellion spread from Karbala and Najaf, in the center, to the south of the country, with uprisings by Kurds in the north as well.

Wilson came down hard, ordering aerial bombardments, the machine-gunning of rebels and the destruction of whole towns. “The British overreaction made things much worse,” says Janet Wallach, author of a biography of Bell, *Desert Queen*. An aghast Bell wrote to her mother, “We have underestimated the fact that this country is really an inchoate mass of tribes which can’t as yet be reduced to any system. The Turks didn’t govern and we have tried to govern—and failed.” Some 6,000 Iraqis and 500 British and Indian soldiers perished before the revolt was finally put down in October. By then, the British press and public had turned against Colonial Office plans to run Iraq. As *The Times* of London had put it three months earlier, “How much longer are valuable lives to be sacrificed in the vain endeavour to impose upon the Arab population an elaborate and expensive administration which they never asked for and do not want?”

The following year, a conference in Cairo presided over by Winston Churchill, then colonial secretary for Iraq affairs, determined that a constitutional monarchy was the surest path toward a stable, prosperous Iraq. At first glance, Faisal seemed an unlikely choice as ruler. The 35-year-old prince, son of the Sharif Hussein of Mecca (now part of Saudi Arabia), had never set foot in Iraq and spoke an Arabic dialect that was barely intelligible to many of his future subjects. “He had no knowledge of the Iraqi tribes, no friendships with their sheikhs, no familiarity with the terrain—the marshes in the south, the mountains in the north, the grain fields, the river life—and no sense of connection with its ancient past,” Wallach writes.

But Bell and other Arabists in the Colonial Office believed that Faisal, who had fought with Lawrence against the Turks, had the charisma to hold the new country together. Also, he traced his lineage to Muhammad, and to emphasize that claim he set out for his new kingdom from Mecca, birthplace of the Prophet. Along his route, chieftains tried to rally crowds—“For the sake of Allah, cheer!”—but most spectators remained unmoved. In a national referendum on his monarchy, Faisal was officially declared to have won 96 percent of the vote, prompting charges that the election was rigged. Still, a relieved Bell wrote in another letter: “We’ve got our King crowned.”

The Oxford-educated Bell served as Faisal’s adviser and confidante. During afternoon teas at the palace, she reeled out her vision of a progressive Iraq that could become a beacon for the Middle East. “When we have made Mesopotamia a model state, there is not an Arab of Syria and Palestine who wouldn’t want to be part of it,” she told the king, adding that she hoped to see Faisal “ruling from the Persian frontier to the Mediterranean.”

But Faisal wasn’t looking beyond his borders. Ruling his subjects—divided by ethnicity, religion and geography—was trouble enough. Like the Ottomans before them, the British and Faisal, himself a Sunni, found it expedient to favor the more pro-Western Sunni Arabs of Baghdad and the central region, though they accounted for barely 20 percent of the population. More than half of Iraqis were Shiite Arabs, concentrated in the south. Close to 20 percent were Kurds, living mostly in the north. The remainder included Jews, Assyrians and other minorities. “The British turned to the same educated elite—mostly Sunni—who had been trained and used by the Ottomans,” says historian Marr. “But a number of them soon proved to be ornery and nationalistic.”

It was left to Faisal to deal with the Iraqi nationalists. The British-designed constitution gave him the power to select the prime minister, dissolve parliament and issue decrees when parliament wasn’t in session. And no law could be passed without his assent. But Faisal struggled to balance British and Iraqi demands. One moment, he was beseeching British officials not to withdraw from Iraq. Days later, he was refusing to suppress anti-British demonstrations in

Baghdad and Basra. “There’s always this problem of needing the support of the West and at the same time bowing to the will of the people for independence,” says Wallach.

The most insistent issue that the king faced was a new Anglo-Iraq treaty, which would provide for the maintenance of British military bases, give British officials a veto over legislation and perpetuate British influence over financial and international matters for 20 years. Faisal equivocated. In private, he assured Bell that he favored the treaty. But in public speeches, he criticized it for stopping short of removing the mandate. “Gertrude was livid at his double-dealing,” Wallach writes. A special Iraqi assembly ratified the treaty in 1924, with Faisal’s tacit support. But he had demonstrated that the British could not take him for granted.

Faisal ruled long enough to see the mandate end, in 1932, when Iraq was admitted to the League of Nations as an independent state. (Though Britain’s direct participation in local government ended in 1930, pro-British elements would exercise influence until 1958.) Faisal died of a heart attack at age 48 in 1933 while seeing physicians in Switzerland. “He made himself a buffer between Iraqi nationalists and the British,” says Tripp, the British historian. “Before he died, he reached out beyond that small Sunni circle he had inherited from the Ottomans and built ties with the Shiites and Kurds.”\

Today, scholars debate the extent of British influence on Iraq after the mandate. “If Faisal had lived ten more years, the history of Iraq would have been very different,” says Edmund Ghareeb, an Iraq-born historian at Georgetown University. “After his death, the British were able to undermine the government and the monarchy by constantly putting pressure on them to serve Britain’s interests—involving oil, foreign affairs in the gulf region and other issues.”

But Reeva S. Simon, a Columbia University historian, says Iraq achieved a measure of independence: “It joined the League of Nations. It had a press that was open and critical of the British. In foreign policy, it did not simply follow the British lead but showed itself to be increasingly pro-German during the 1930s, and invited to Baghdad people who opposed British rule in the Middle East.”

In any event, Marr says, Britain’s imprint was profound. “Even after the mandate ended, the British presence focused Iraqis constantly on independence. Not on developing the country, not on how to make the constitutional system work better, not on how to integrate Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis. Instead, the question that was always asked was, how can we get rid of the British? As a result, there is even to this day an obsession that there be no foreign control.” As Fromkin says, “We tend to overlook a basic rule: that people prefer bad rule by their own kind to good rule by somebody else.”

An unusual and perceptive Western chronicler of Iraq in that critical era was Freya Stark, 36, an English adventuress and journalist, who arrived in Baghdad in the fall of 1929 with ten pounds in her pocket and a conviction that “the most interesting things in the world were likely to happen in the neighborhood of oil.” She was excited by Iraq’s ancient glories, writes her biographer, Jane Fletcher Geniesse. Those included Babylon, 50 miles south of Baghdad; the ruins of Ur, where Abraham was born, and of Uruk, not far from the banks of the Euphrates; and the Assyrian cities of Khorsabad and Nineveh.

In Baghdad itself, Stark sought out traces of the eighth century caliphate that had turned the city into an extraordinary intellectual and artistic center—at a time when Europe plunged into its dark ages. “What you first see of the Caliph’s city is a most sordid aspect,” she wrote in a dispatch to the *Baghdad Times*. “The crowd looks unhealthy and sallow, the children are pitiful, the shops are ineffective compromises with Europe; and the dust is wicked.” But Stark wasn’t put off. At dawn, she walked the narrow, winding alleys under latticed balconies. She strolled through the bazaars where Muslims, Indians, Jews and Armenians hawked silks, velvets, indigo and spices.

Fluent in Arabic, she interviewed the women of the harems. She studied the Koran and, veiled from head to foot, slipped into a Muslim shrine. Shunning the suburban bungalows of the Western community, Stark initially settled across the Tigris in a slum—the prostitutes’ quarter, it turned out, to her amusement. An English acquaintance accused her of “lowering the prestige of British womanhood.”

Most important, Stark witnessed Iraq’s mounting rebellion. In the 1930s, the Baghdad press railed against overbearing British advisers in government and the Royal Air Force’s control of bases around Baghdad and Basra. The British found few defenders even among the Iraqi elite who owed the British their status and prosperity. “To be anti-British made you successful either as a lawyer, a politician or a journalist,” wrote Stark.

It also boosted the king, Ghazi, Faisal’s son, who assumed the throne in 1933 at age 21. Ghazi had neither his father’s diplomatic skills nor his work ethic. He liked party-going more than governing. Still, his ability to rally subjects with incendiary speeches broadcast over the palace radio station troubled British functionaries. They worried about his repeated denunciations of British control over Kuwait—which Ghazi claimed was a province of Iraq—and his attacks on the Kuwaiti ruling family. But the rhetoric thrilled young Iraqis.

Six years after becoming king, Ghazi crashed his sports car into a utility pole in Baghdad after an evening of drinking. His two British physicians summoned an Iraqi colleague to the scene of the mortally wounded king. “I was fearful lest, if no Iraqi doctor was in attendance, Anglophobic mischief-makers might originate canards to the effect that [we] were responsible for the king’s demise,” Dr. Harry C. Sinderson, the monarch’s chief physician, wrote in his memoirs. Even

so, violent street demonstrations erupted in Baghdad the next day. In Mosul, a mob killed the British consul. For years, many Iraqis insisted that Ghazi was killed by the British and their allies. He was succeeded by his son Faisal II.

The conspiracy theories also stirred foment in the Iraqi Army, though the British largely missed the warning signs. “For all their many advisers in the Iraqi government, the British didn’t show much interest in military affairs,” says Simon. “Certainly, they didn’t imagine that army officers would interfere directly in politics.”

Britain’s presence in Iraq was not the only thing that aroused Iraqi anger. By the 1930s, Arab leaders were also angered by the growing numbers of European Jews migrating to Palestine, a British mandate until 1948. When the British suppressed a revolt by Palestinian Arabs in 1939, Iraqi Army officers invited the defeated leader, the Mufti of Jerusalem, to live in Baghdad. Then, as World War II began, Iraqi antipathy to Britain turned into support for Hitler. “It was widely acknowledged that most of the junior officers in the Iraqi army are pro-German and anti-British,” Paul Knabenshue, a U.S. diplomat in Baghdad, wrote in May 1940. Iraq attempted to ally itself with Germany and in 1941 threatened to fire on British planes at an airfield near Baghdad.

In April 1941, Rashid Ali, a civilian figurehead for an Iraqi Army faction led by four colonels staged a coup d’état. British Royal Air Force troops stationed on the outskirts of Baghdad held the Iraqi Army at bay while British reinforcements from India landed in Basra and marched north.

In Baghdad, some 400 British nationals and their Iraqi sympathizers sought refuge in the British Embassy. The last person admitted into the compound was Freya Stark. Previously disdained by many compatriots, she was now hailed as a savior. “With her fluent local Arabic and her aplomb and bonhomie, she became our most useful contact at our gates with the Iraqi police posted here, and helped us to buy fresh meat and vegetables to leaven our Spartan fare,” one observer recalled. Her good relations with the guards may have saved the embassy from mobs. “We could see the crowds from the upper town, incited by speeches of the Mufti and their own radio, advancing with banners and drums and dancing figures silhouetted against the sky, towards our gates,” Stark wrote.

By early June, British forces had taken control of Baghdad. Rashid Ali’s two-month rule ended when he fled to Berlin. The four Iraqi colonels behind his coup were captured and hanged. In retaliation, outraged Iraqi mobs stormed the Jewish quarter, presumed to be pro-British, and killed 179 men, women and children, injuring hundreds more.

Saddam Hussein, a child at the time, would later say that Rashid Ali’s rise and fall affected him deeply because the uncle who raised him was an army officer whose career ended when the coup was crushed. Anti-British passions were further inflamed by the outbreak, in 1948, of war in Palestine, where Iraqi troops fought on the Arab side against the

Israelis, whose ultimate victory, most Iraqis believed, could not have been achieved without British (and American) assistance. They were inflamed again in 1956 by the British role in wresting the Suez Canal back from Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. Then, the Qassem coup d'état in 1958 destroyed the monarchy once and for all. Ilah, the former regent, and Prime Minister Nuri Said were killed because they were felt to have been too eager to please the British by executing the plotters of Rashid Ali's coup 17 years earlier.

The massacre of the Iraqi royal family left two major legacies of Great Britain's four-decades-long involvement in Iraq: the nation retained essentially the same boundaries that Britain had traced in the early 1920s, and the Sunni minority held on to power.

The monarchy's collapse was followed by a decade of even greater instability, ending with a coup in 1968 by army officers linked to the Baathists, a pan-Arab socialist movement that opponents have described as neo-Fascist. A jubilant Saddam Hussein, 31, rode through Baghdad atop a tank. His kinsman, Gen. Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, had led the coup and became president. Like Bakr, Hussein was from Tikrit, a Sunni town north of Baghdad that historically had fielded a disproportionate share of army officers. But Hussein did not come up through the military ranks in the usual way. After high school in Baghdad, he earned a living as a street tough for politicians, organizing gangs that disrupted opponents' political rallies and beating up shopkeepers whose stores remained open during strikes. Hussein graduated to assassin and spent almost two years in prison and in exile for political murders or attempted killings.

But his ferocity and cunning had impressed General Bakr, who, as president, appointed him to run the national security apparatus. In that capacity he set out to eliminate his main rivals, and he placed relatives and fellow Tikritis in positions of power and influence in the Baath Party, the armed forces and the government. As Bakr's power broker, Hussein nationalized foreign oil holdings in 1972, then accepted acclaim as Iraq's annual oil revenues rose eight-fold, to \$8 million over the next three years, then tripled over the next five. Hussein then oversaw state investments in education, health, transportation, agriculture and industry, drawing praise as a model for the Middle East.

When, in 1979, Hussein became president following Bakr's "resignation"—Hussein almost certainly engineered it—many Iraqis thought he would lead them into prosperity. (Bakr died in 1982.) Instead, Hussein, after having his rivals killed, ruled despotically for nearly a quarter of a century, waging war on Iran (with American backing) and killing many thousands of Iraqis, including thousands of Kurds killed by chemical weapons. Hussein dragged his oil-rich, once-ascendent nation into poverty, and his pursuit of weapons of mass destruction put him on a collision course with the world's lone superpower.