How the British bombed Iraq in the 1920s

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The US and British governments, and most Western media pundits, have tried to explain the determined resistance of the Iraqi people to the US-led assault by referring to the first Bush administration's 1991 betrayal of the Kurds in the north and Shiites in the south. Once Iraqis are confident that the Allies are serious about occupying the country, the argument goes, they will rise up and welcome them as liberators.

These assertions ignore the deeply-felt hostility to decades of colonial and semi-colonial rule by the Western powers, who long plundered Iraq's oil reserves. During World War I, Mesopotamia was occupied by British forces, and it became a British mandated territory in 1920. In 1921, a kingdom was established under Faisal I, son of King Hussein of Hejaz and leader of the Arab Army in World War I. Britain withdrew from Iraq in 1932, but British and American oil companies retained their grip over the country.

One of the most bitter chapters in this history, one with direct parallels to the current military campaign, occurred during the 1920s. In many respects, the air war now being employed in Iraq is an offshoot of a military policy developed by Britain as it clung to its Iraqi colony 80 years ago.

Confronting a financial crisis after World War I, in mid-February 1920 Minister of War and Air Winston Churchill asked Chief of the Air Staff Hugh Trenchard to draw up a plan whereby Mesopotamia could be cheaply policed by aircraft armed with gas bombs, supported by as few as 4,000 British and 10,000 Indian troops.

Several months later, a widespread uprising broke out, which was only put down through months of heavy aerial bombardment, including the use of mustard gas. At the height of the suppression, both Churchill and Trenchard tried to put the most flattering light upon actions of the Royal Air Force.

British historian David Omissi, author of *Air and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919-1939*, records: "During the first week of July there was fierce fighting around Samawa and Rumaitha on the Euphrates but, Churchill told the Cabinet on 7 July, 'our attack was successful.... The enemy were bombed and machine-gunned with effect by aeroplanes which cooperated with the troops'."

The order issued by one RAF wing commander, J.A. Chamier, specified: "The attack with bombs and machine guns must be relentless and unremitting and carried on continuously by day and night, on houses, inhabitants, crops and cattle."

Arthur "Bomber" Harris, a young RAF squadron commander, reported after a mission in 1924: "The Arab and Kurd now know what real bombing means, in casualties and damage: They know that within 45 minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured."

The RAF sent a report to the British Parliament outlining the steps that its pilots had taken to avoid civilian casualties. The air war was less brutal than other forms of military control, it stated, concluding that "the main purpose is to bring about submission with the minimum of destruction and loss of life."

Knowing the truth, at least one military officer resigned. Air Commander Lionel Charlton sent a letter of protest and resigned in 1923 over what he considered the "policy of intimidation by bomb" after visiting a local hospital full of injured civilians.

The methods pioneered in Iraq were applied throughout the Middle East. Omissi writes: "The policing role of most political moment carried out by the Royal Air Force during the 1920s was to maintain the power of the Arab kingdoms in Transjordan and Iraq; but aeroplanes also helped to dominate other populations under British sway.

"Schemes of air control similar to that practiced in

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Mesopotamia were set up in the Palestine Mandate in 1922 and in the Aden Protectorate six years later. Bombers were active at various times against rioters in Egypt, tribesmen on the Frontier, pastoralists in the Southern Sudan and nomads in the Somali hinterland."

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