

Imperialism and Iraq: Lessons from the past

Part One

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29 May 2003

Anyone looking at the events today in Iraq cannot but be struck at the obvious parallels with what happened there in the first half of the twentieth century.

The roll call of imperialist powers with an interest in the region was similar, but the dominant imperialist power at that time was Britain not the United States. British armed forces invaded Mesopotamia, as Iraq was then known, in 1914 with promises of freedom—from the Turks. But the promises were just for public consumption. Behind the rhetoric lay, as ever, material interests—oil. Like the US today, the British vigorously denied any such motive.

The military odds enjoyed by the British army were also just as favourable. And after a war to “liberate the Arabs” from Turkish control, came not freedom, but a British occupation.

Then too, horrific aerial bombing marked the occupation. Then too, there was a series of sordid deals between the imperial powers—the US, Britain, France and Italy—over how the spoils of war should be divided up as Britain sought to steal a march on its so-called allies, with the League of Nations (forerunner of the United Nations) shamelessly endorsing the carve up.

More importantly, defence of its oil interests meant British rule over Iraq in all but name—under a League of Nations Mandate until 1932, and later as the power behind the throne, with the Iraqi people bearing the financial burden of Britain’s war, occupation and rule.

British rule finally ended in 1958, when massive street demonstrations threatened to get out of control, and the army stepped in, overthrew the monarchy, seized power and took action to gain control of Iraq’s oil.

It is instructive to examine this earlier period and the role the imperialist powers played in shaping the political, economic and social conditions in Iraq. While all the powers sought to control the oil resources of the Middle East, it was only after the deaths of millions of workers in the first imperialist world war and countless acts of skullduggery that the British were able to establish their hegemony.

Such an analysis confirms that far from liberation and any progressive future, the US occupation of Iraq in the aftermath of the most recent Gulf war bodes only the return to direct rule and control of country’s oil resources by imperialism—this time by the US with Britain as its junior partner.

The first imperialist power to establish itself in the Middle East was Britain. Its initial connection with the region was the result of its interest in protecting the route to India and Indian trade. To this end, British naval forces mounted repeated attacks on the Arabian coast and by the 1840s established colonial possessions in the Persian Gulf and Aden. Britain’s domination of the coast opened up the hinterland to Western imperialism.

Mesopotamia, as the three vilayets or provinces of Basra, Baghdad and the predominantly Kurdish Mosul that make up modern day Iraq were then known, had been the easternmost part of the Ottoman Empire for several centuries. A backward rural economy, many of its peoples were semi-nomadic. By the end of the nineteenth century, the opening of the

Suez Canal and the development of river transport by the British had led to Mesopotamia’s increasing integration into the wider capitalist economy. The Basra province became ever more important for the export of cereals and cotton to Manchester and Bombay.

At the same time, there was an increasing interest in the region’s oil resources. While it had been known for thousands of years that certain areas in Mesopotamia and Persia, as Iran was then known, contained oil springs and seepages, apart from primitive local uses there was no developed industry.

European interest in exploiting Mesopotamian and Persian oil commercially began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when capital began to flow into the region. Permission for numerous explorations was sought from Constantinople, often under cover of archaeological excavations. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company discovered the first commercially exploitable oil in southern Persia in 1908.

While British and Indian trade dominated the region, accounting for 75 percent of the total, German capital began to pour into Mesopotamia—particularly after Germany won the concession to build the railway from Turkey to Baghdad in 1903. Since the intention was to carry it on to Basra and Kuwait, this would have created a direct link between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf and posed a strategic threat to Britain’s position in India.

The railway took on an additional significance after the discovery of commercially exploitable oil in Persia, since the concession included exclusive rights over minerals in the 20 kilometres on either side of the track.

With the start in 1904 of the British Royal Navy’s conversion from coal to oil, which made transport both cheaper and faster, the government sought supplies that were nearer than the Gulf of Mexico and had a more long-term future. The British government’s advisors believed that since the exports from the main oil producers were set to decline, the oil majors would be in a position to dictate terms to the Royal Navy upon which the Empire depended. Over the next 20 years, government policy increasingly focused on the need to control both the sources and suppliers of Britain’s oil. The government therefore provided full diplomatic support to British nationals in their bids to secure oil concessions in Mesopotamia.

In 1911, an Anglo-German consortium (Royal Dutch Shell, the entrepreneur C. S. Gulbenkian, the (British) National Bank of Turkey and Deutsche Bank) secured an exclusive concession from Turkey to exploit all the oil within the empire’s borders. The Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), as it soon became known, merged with Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) in 1913, with the ownership shared between British, German, Dutch and Gulbenkian interests. In August 1914, after protracted negotiations, the British government took a majority shareholding in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (the forerunner to BP, now Britain’s largest corporation) for £2.2 million, thereby gaining the oil rights to Mesopotamia as well and further strengthening its interests in the region.

At the same time, numerous other international groups had begun to

seek oil concessions around Baghdad and Mosul. These commercial tensions played a crucial role in precipitating World War I at whose heart lay the division of Turkey's eastern lands. As far as Britain was concerned, the fact that new sources of oil, a resource so vital to the Empire, lay outside its boundaries led to the inevitable conclusion that the Empire must be expanded.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, British imperialism's "Eastern Policy" had been based on propping up the bankrupt Ottoman Empire as a bulwark against Tsarist Russian expansionism. But when World War I broke out and Turkey joined the war on the side of Germany and Austria, British policy underwent a complete change.

Fearing that at Germany's behest Turkey would hamper oil supplies and trade, the British authorities in India sent an expeditionary force to Basra to prevent Turkey from interfering with British interests in the Gulf, particularly its interests in the oil fields in southern Persia. This was to turn the Middle East into an important theatre of war. It became explicit policy to break up the Ottoman Empire and bring its Arab territories under British control.

After a series of ignominious defeats, it became clear that taking control of the Turkish territories was not going to be a walk over. So Britain entered into a series of cynical, fraudulent and mutually irreconcilable agreements designed to secure Turkey's defeat and further her own commercial and territorial ambitions in the region.

First, Britain calculated that an Arab uprising would be invaluable in attacking and defeating the Turks from the south, and opening a route into Europe from the east, thereby breaking the bloody stalemate in the trenches in Flanders. Its initial contacts were with the Hashemites, a desert dynasty in Hejaz, now part of Saudi Arabia, which controlled the Muslim holy places of Mecca and Medina and sought to replace Ottoman rule with their own. Britain reasoned that such an alliance would prove useful in securing the loyalty of its Indian Muslim conscripts in the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force whom it was using as cannon fodder in its war against Germany. The disastrous defeats at Gallipoli led the British to accept the conditions spelt out under the Damascus Protocol: British support for the Arabs in overthrowing Turkish rule in return for Arab independence for the territories now known as Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. In 1915, they made an agreement with the Hashemite Sherif Hussein of Mecca, promising independence in return for their support against the Turks.

Secondly, at the same time as Britain was using the Arabs to further its aims, it was facing rival claims from her wartime allies, France and Russia, for control over the Ottoman Empire after the war and was forced to cut a deal with them. In May 1916, Britain signed the Tripartite Agreement, better known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, according to which Russia would get Istanbul, the Bosphorus and parts of Armenia. France would take what is now Syria and Lebanon while Britain would take Baghdad, Basra and Trans-Jordan (Jordan). Britain evidently took her eye off the ball when she ceded part of the potentially oil-rich Mosul province to France, and spent the next period trying to bring Mosul into her own sphere of influence. Palestine would be separated from Syria and placed under an international administration and its ultimate fate would be decided at an international conference at the end of the war. Only in the most backward and impoverished part of the region, the Arab peninsula, would the Arabs be given independence.

Needless to say, the peoples affected by this disposition would have no say in deciding their future and the terms of the treaty were kept secret. After the Russian Revolution, when the Bolsheviks published the secret agreement to expose the imperialists' conspiracies against the oppressed peoples of the region, Sherif Hussein demanded an explanation. But right up to the end of the war, the British and French promised full independence to the Arabs.

"The end that France and Great Britain have in pursuing in the East the

war unloosed by German ambition is the complete and definite freeing of the peoples so long oppressed by the Turks and the establishment of national Governments and Administrations deriving their authority from the initiative and free choice of the indigenous population," stated the joint Anglo-French declaration of November 7, 1918. "France and Great Britain have agreed to encourage and assist the establishment of indigenous Governments and Administrations.... And in the territories whose liberation they seek."

Thirdly, in November 1917, Britain, intent on stealing a march over France and securing her own interests in the region by holding on to Palestine, made yet another commitment under the cynical subterfuge of humanitarian concerns for the Jews. It issued the deliberately vague Balfour Declaration, which "viewed with sympathy the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine".

With the aid of the Arabs, the British were able to reverse their misfortunes and take Baghdad in March 1917, and later Jerusalem and Damascus, from the Turks. The Arab Revolt against the Turks, led by Faisal, the son of Sherif Hussein of Hejaz, was of strategic importance to the British. It tied down some 30,000 Turkish troops along the railway from Amman to Medina and prevented the Turko-German forces in Syria linking up with the Turkish garrison in Yemen.

Perfidious as ever, British military forces in Mesopotamia ignored the Armistice signed with Turkey at Mudros on October 30, 1918, and continued their march north, capturing the predominantly Kurdish province of Mosul a few days later. This was because it made little sense to keep the central and southern provinces of Mesopotamia without the oil rich northern province. Mosul was also important as an intermediate staging post on the route to the Russian controlled oil-rich Caspian and Caucasian states. Britain then expropriated the 25 percent German share in the Turkish Petroleum Company, which was planning to develop the oilfields.

Thus, by the end of 1918, British forces from Cairo had conquered Palestine and Syria and helped to drive the Turks out of the Hejaz. British forces from India had conquered Mesopotamia and brought Persia and Ibn Saud of Nejd in the Arabian Peninsula into Britain's orbit. These forces pushed north through Persia to hold the Caucasus against the Turks, while another force moved north and fought the Red Army in support of "independence" for the White-controlled, oil-rich states Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Daghestan, until forced to withdraw in 1920.

With the victors forming queues to take over the former Ottoman provinces and German and Austrian colonies in Africa and the Far East, the British were determined to hang onto their conquests in the Middle East to defend the trade routes to India and secure the region's oil. They had set their sights firmly on keeping Palestine, the three provinces of Mesopotamia, renamed Iraq, ruling Kuwait from Iraq while maintaining their sphere of influence over Persia and the southern and western coasts of the Arabian peninsula. The Persian Gulf and Red Sea would thus become British lakes.

The central and southern provinces of Mesopotamia came under direct British rule from India and were administered under military law pending a peace settlement. Following the pattern set in India, the British turned to the old tribal leaders, whose influence had declined by the end of the nineteenth century, to collect the taxes and control the predominantly rural population in return for long term security of tenure. This only served to exacerbate landlordism, the impoverishment of the peasantry and the deep-seated hostility to the British occupation. They also cultivated the small but important minorities, particularly the Christians and the Jewish community that played a key financial role and whose relations with the British were to have important repercussions later with the rise of Zionist-Palestinian conflict.

The Kurds in the newly captured Mosul province took the British at their word and immediately set up an independent state that Britain spent

nearly two years brutally suppressing with British and Indian troops. The Royal Air Force was sent in to bombard the guerrillas and Churchill, then Secretary of State for War, approved the use of poison gas.

Mosul was to be incorporated into the Iraqi state, abandoning the idea of Kurdish autonomy included in the Treaty of Sevres. In the words of one British official, “any idea of an Arab state is simply bloodstained fooling at present.”

But Britain’s plans to incorporate the Arab world into the Empire were repeatedly thwarted. Firstly, her wartime Allies, particularly the Americans, were determined to prevent her walking away with the lion’s share of the spoils. President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, issued in 1917 on the eve of the US entry into the war, were the price that Britain and France would have to pay for US support.

They signified a new world order in which America’s political and economic interests would predominate over those of the old imperial powers. There would be no secret diplomacy or annexations by the victors and former colonies must have the right to self-determination. But above all else, there would have to be an Open Door policy with respect to trade. That meant an end to exclusive rights to resources and trade. In the context of the Middle East and Iraq, what was at issue was the future of the oil concessions the British had extracted from the Turks. The British viewed Wilson’s policy as such a threat that they forbade the local publication of the Fourteen Points, which only appeared in Baghdad two years later.

To be continued



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