

Imperialism and Iraq: Lessons from the past

Part Two

Jean Shaoul
30 May 2003

The following is the second in a three-part series. Part One was posted May 29 and the concluding part will be posted May 31.

At America's insistence, the Paris conference in January 1919 took the decision to place all the former Turkish provinces under the supervision of the League of Nations. They would become "A" Mandates that would provide an Open Door for trade. Between 1919 and 1923, the European powers went on to make a series of secret and squalid deals among themselves, reneging on all their promises to the Arabs and imposing their own rule on the indigenous peoples in order to control the region's resources. They carved up the region into 16 small states in their own interests, with no regard for geographic, historical, social or economic factors—thereby dividing the Arab people, laying the basis for dozens of territorial conflicts in the future and creating inherently unviable states.

To cite but one example in the context of Iraq, Britain took a deliberate decision at the Uqair Conference in 1922 to draw up the borders of Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in such a way as to deny Iraq a major outlet to the Persian Gulf, limit its influence in the region and make it dependent upon Britain.

In 1920 at San Remo, the imperial powers dealt out the title deeds to the Middle East among themselves as though they were playing a game of cards. France got the mandates for Syria and Lebanon, while Britain got Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan. They issued new currencies linked to the franc and sterling areas that served to disrupt the trading relations within the newly fragmented region. Britain and France would hold the mandates for a limited duration, not as colonising powers, but as guardians to an underage ward with the League of Nations acting as the board of trustees. As a consolation prize for losing Mosul as had been agreed under the Sykes-Picot agreement, France got a 25 percent share in the TPC, the company set up to exploit Iraq's oil deposits.

The Russian Revolution in October 1917 played a crucial role in undermining British plans for the Middle East. It is impossible to overestimate its impact on the working class and peasantry throughout the world. It provided not only a source of inspiration to the oppressed masses of the East to throw off the yoke of centuries of oppression, but also the backdrop to Wilson's advocacy of "self determination"—which was aimed in part at countering the influence of communism due the Bolsheviks' advocacy of independence from imperialist control while also restraining the European powers in US imperialism's interests.

Bitterly disappointed with the peace settlement and President Wilson's Fourteen Points, however, the Arab nationalists had no more time for the new mandate brand of imperialism than the old. Faisal—the son of Sherif Hussein of the Hejaz who had led the Arab Revolt in return for Syria—went back to Syria and declared independence in 1920. The French army defeated the uprising and drove out Faisal.

This uprising served to spark Arab Revolts in Jerusalem and southern and central Iraq against British military and civil rule. The occupation regime soon disintegrated and Britain only re-established control by means of large troop reinforcements, fierce fighting, brutal suppression

and the use of aerial bombardment. The total cost to the British Treasury was £40 million. According to British estimates, 8,450 Iraqis were killed or wounded while the British suffered more than 2,000 casualties.

A cynical comment by Viscount Peel, under secretary at the War Ministry, gives some indication of the savagery with which the revolt was put down. He said that he was glad that the "sentimentalists" at home had been so distracted by the Black and Tans in Ireland that they had failed to notice what was going on in Iraq. The use of aerial bombardment was to become the preferred means of forcing the population into submission for simple reason that it was much cheaper than maintaining a land-based army.

The Arab revolt showed that direct rule was no longer a financially feasible proposition. Without a government that was sufficiently acceptable to the population, tax collection would be impossible and the state would go bankrupt—jeopardising British investments of £16 million and the oilfields, not yet in production, valued at £50 million. Some form of concession would have to be made if the peoples of the East were not to form an alliance with Bolshevik Russia and put an end to the British Empire.

So Britain began casting around for a formula that would provide the necessary fig leaf. In essence, it resolved itself into a search for a local ruler and cultivation of social layers that could be relied upon to conceive their "self determination" as being synonymous with serving Britain and so prevent a genuine struggle for national liberation.

His Britannic Majesty's Government soon found a solution. At the Cairo conference in March 1921 it was decided that the sons of Sherif Hussein, who had been promised but deprived of an independent Arab nation, would serve as puppet kings and rule on Britain's behalf. Abdullah was rewarded with the newly created semi-nomadic state of Trans-Jordan while his brother Faisal, recently driven out of Syria by the French, became London's preferred candidate for the Iraqi throne.

They then had to figure out how to sell it to the Iraqi people. This was achieved by the simple expedient of arresting and deporting Sayyid Talib, the rival candidate for the post, after which no one else wanted the job. A staged-managed referendum returned the desired 96 percent of the vote in favour of accepting Faisal as king and he was duly installed as the monarch in August 1921.

All that remained was to settle the terms of Britain's relationship with Iraq. While the Mandate was not abrogated, as Faisal demanded, the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of October 1922 gave Iraq control over its internal affairs subject to Britain's overriding control of finance, defence, foreign policy and advisors. The terms of the treaty were so blatantly biased in Britain's favour—as the negotiations over the oil concessions and the TPC would show—that it was to take a year of unmitigated pressure and bullying by Britain for the King and Cabinet to agree to it. It was to take a further two years of threats and heavy-handed tactics in the face of fierce opposition from the nationalists before the Constituent Assembly passed it.

The Anglo-Iraqi Treaty marked the beginning of a new kind of colonial policy, the reliance on collaborators, and the end of the period of direct British rule in Iraq.

Oil—though still untapped—was undoubtedly one of the major preoccupations of the British, as the war, with the drastic shortage of oil by 1917, had added to their concerns. After the war, the collapse of Germany, the dismemberment of Turkey, the rival claims of France and the commercial demands of the Americans made the situation more complicated. The Iraqi people were the losers in the horse-trading that followed.

In practical terms, the main issues that Britain and Iraq had to resolve were the boundaries of the Iraqi state—the Mosul frontier—and the terms of the oil concession for the Turkish Petroleum Company, originally made up of British, German and Dutch interests. This provided the often unspoken backdrop to the interminable wrangling of the American, British, French and Italians at the international meetings in the years following the war. Insofar as oil was rarely mentioned, it was because it was, unbeknownst to the general public, the *sine qua non* of both the war and the peace settlement.

Under the San Remo Treaty of 1920, the British assigned the German stake in the Turkish Petroleum Company to the French in return for relinquishing their claims to Mosul. While the TPC had the concession for Mosul, virtually no exploration had taken place during and after the war pending the outcome of the ongoing hostilities against Turkey and the status of the disputed Mosul vilayet, which the 1923 Lausanne conference did not entirely resolve.

Britain was determined to keep the oilfields within Iraq since the TPC's concession agreement included them and to control their development. Without Mosul, Iraq was unviable and the southern Shi'a elite would outweigh the ruling Sunni clique. With both Turkey and the local predominantly Kurdish population opposed to this, the Iraqi elite—bereft of any independent economic or military support—were totally dependent upon the British to drive out the Turks and put down the Kurds. It was to take a sustained effort by the Royal Air Force in 1924, including the bombing of the town of Sulaimaniya, a Kurdish stronghold backed by Turkey that rejected incorporation into the Iraqi state.

But Britain ran up against US oil interests: after all the Americans had not entered the war to let Britain steal a march on them. British control over oil in all the former Turkish territories, as agreed between Turkey and the TPC before the war, was unacceptable. It would assure the British navy of continued naval supremacy, undermine Britain's dependence upon American oil and challenge American economic domination over its European rivals.

The State Department, acting on behalf of the American oil corporations, insisted that any annexations of territories acquired during the war be governed in such a way as to assure equal treatment “in law and in fact to the commerce of all nations”. In this context, this notion of equality was nothing more than the desire of one imperial power to check the greed of another. The US accused Britain of monopolising Mesopotamia's oil resources and Anglo-American relations deteriorated rapidly.

Given the US's overwhelming economic superiority, Britain had no option if it was to keep control of the oil: it had to surrender a share in the spoils of war to the Americans. Britain made a private agreement to allow two American corporations, Standard Oil of New Jersey and Socony Vacuum (later Mobil Oil), to take an equal share in the Turkish Petroleum Company, soon renamed the Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC), alongside the stakes of the French and the two British companies.

Thus, despite all its political power, Britain was unable to prevent the French and the Americans from muscling in and taking a share in the TPC and, as a result, now held a much diluted share in the TPC through the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Neither was Britain able to insist that the

TPC retained the rights to oil in the former Ottoman territories other than Iraq as had been agreed with Turkey prior to the war. Given also the way that Iraq's southern boundaries were drawn up by the imperialist powers, this meant that the Americans were later able to gain oil concessions in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

The evidence notwithstanding, in 1924 Foreign Secretary and arch-imperialist Lord Curzon vehemently denied the accusation that “the trail of oil is all over the question of Mosul and Iraq”. He said, “Oil has not the remotest connexion with my attitude or with that of his Majesty's Government on the Mosul question, or the Iraq question, or the Eastern question in any aspect.”

Once this sordid deal had been done over the heads of the Iraqi government and the Kurdish people, the way was then clear for an agreement on handing over Mosul to Iraq. With Britain holding all the cards, in March 1925 the Iraqi government had no option but to sign a concession agreement with the TPC on the most unfavourable terms to Iraq for the exploration of Mosul oil, if the League of Nations' arbitrators awarded Mosul to Iraq, which was now inevitable. In July, Mosul was duly handed over to Iraq on the condition that the Mandate lasted for a maximum of 25 years or until Iraq became a member of the League of Nations as an independent state. Seven months later, in 1926, the Iraqi Constituent Assembly had no option but to agree to a Treaty with Britain, whereby if Mosul was invaded again a sea-borne force with aircraft carriers would attack Turkey. What was at stake was not Iraq's borders but its oil.

It was after these agreements that commercial oil exploration finally began. The first oilfields opened at Kirkuk in 1927, although oil did not begin to flow in commercial quantities until the late 1930s and large-scale production did not start until the 1950s. Thus it was only when Britain had taken political control by subjugating the masses and installing local collaborators that oil exploration and production began in earnest. Far from promoting development, the decades of rival imperialist intrigues, the war and further intrigues had held up the commercial exploitation of the region's resources and prevented the region's development.

The security of Britain's oil interests depended on Faisal and his regime, which had little popular support.

The king and his government rested upon a narrow social layer: the landowners, the old notables, leading merchants, the ex-Ottoman army officers who had supported him and the tribal sheikhs or leaders. The British had bolstered the power of the sheikhs by creating a legal system specifically for the tribes, one of several ways they sought to constrain the government's freedom of manoeuvre. While the government tried to limit the tribal leaders' powers, it soon found that it had to ally itself with them if it was to maintain control and came to rely increasingly upon the sheikhs and landlords to administer and police their areas and collect the taxes.

Iraq's finances were always insecure. First of all, it had begun its existence with a huge deficit imposed by Britain under the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1922—whereby the Iraqis were required to contribute to the Ottoman Public Debt Administration, the longstanding debts of the now defunct Ottoman Empire to the imperialist powers. Even more importantly the British demanded that they paid for the military equipment, stores and operations against the Turks, as well as the cost of building a military railway that had absolutely no commercial value to Iraq. Thirdly, the British demanded that the Iraqi government spend at least 25 percent of all its revenues on defence—a euphemism for putting down the insurgent tribesmen who were revolting against their tribal leaders and British rule.

In other words, the price the ruling clique had to pay to maintain its position was to bear the financial cost of imposing British imperialism—a relationship that is replicated today in the US administration's plans for post-war Iraq that have been agreed by the United Nations.

This in turn was to be achieved by imposing intolerable levels of

taxation on a peasantry whose economy had suffered due to the disruption of trade following the imperialist carve-up of the region and the landlordism encouraged by the British. The British tightened the screws still further by demanding that the government cut the wages of the few personnel that it had in education, health, agriculture and incredibly even in irrigation in order to balance its budget.

The ruling feudal clique was stuck between the rock of British imperialism and the hard place of the impoverished population. The ensuing and recurrent financial crises led to constant infighting within the ruling clique. Between 1921 and 1958, there were 59 cabinets as whichever faction was on the ascent brought its supporters into government. That these constant changes involved only 166 people over the entire 37-year period provides some indication of the extremely narrow social base of Britain's client state. By far the most prominent was Nuri al-Said, an Ottoman trained officer who had served with Faisal, whose cabinet career spanned decades.

Faisal and his regime could not therefore have maintained control over the insurgent masses without Britain's new system of "air control"—the cheapest and most efficient way of "pacifying" the country. It also had the merit, as Britain's chief of staff recorded, that "the terrain of Iraq forms an ideal training ground and experimental sphere for the RAF and its strategical value will increase from year to year."

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)