Imperialism and Iraq: Lessons from the past

Part Three

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The following is the conclusion of a three-part series. Part One *appeared on May 29 and* Part Two *appeared on May 30.*

Britain provided Faisal with RAF bombers, armoured car squadrons and officers to lead the local conscripts, with which to respond to any insubordination on the part of the local population. Any uprising was handled by the bombers, which first dropped warning leaflets on the illiterate villagers and then bombed property and livestock. Bombing was even used to terrorise the peasants into paying taxes.

One the largest offensive operations mounted by the RAF was in 1923-24 in Southern Iraq. The tribal leaders responsible for collecting taxes from the semi-nomadic tribesmen and the peasants, who had become increasingly impoverished due to the diversion of the water channels by the most powerful sheikh, refused to pay up. The RAF was ordered to bomb the area in order "to encourage obedience to the government".

Over a two-week period, 144 were killed and many more were wounded. It was by no means an isolated incident. The RAF was used repeatedly in 1923-34 against the Kurds in Mosul province, who rebelled against taxation and conscription.

One officer who had seen duty in the North West Frontier—no stranger to British brutality—feared that air control would only serve to inflame the situation: "Much needless cruelty is necessarily inflicted, which in many cases will not cower the tribesmen, but implant in them undying hatred and a desire for revenge. The policy weakens the tribesman's faith in British fair play."

But the British played anything but fair. One report to the Colonial office described an air raid in which men, women and children had been machine-gunned as they fled from a village. The politicians took care to ensure that the British public never learned about that incident.

Without the RAF, the regime could not have lasted, as Leo Amery, the colonial secretary, acknowledged. "If the writ of King Faisal runs effectively throughout his kingdom it is entirely due to British aeroplanes. If the aeroplanes were removed tomorrow, the whole structure would inevitably fall to pieces," he said.

But since the RAF could not carry out normal internal security and the British required Iraqi treasury resources be spent on suppressing its own people, Faisal had to create an army. The army was to serve as an important means of advancement and social power base, providing the government or whoever controlled the army with enormous coercive powers. The degree of social discontent may be gauged by the fact that by the end of the 1920s, when the RAF had largely subdued the rebellious tribesmen in southern Iraq, the government was still spending 20 percent of its revenues on the army and 17 percent on the police.

Having established a regime that could secure the supply of oil, Britain could now dispense with Mandate rule and move to a treaty relationship that retained its substance. The Anglo-Iraqi Treaty gave Iraq formal political independence while retaining British control of foreign, defence and economic policy with military bases and a system of advisors. Iraq became "independent" in 1930 and was admitted to the League of Nations as a full member in 1932. But while the end of the Mandate gave the ruling clique a freer hand to do what they wanted within the country, real power rested with Britain and the Iraqi people knew it.

During the 1930s, the Sunni ruling clique's dependence upon Britain became ever more difficult to square with popular sentiment. The Iraqi nationalists resented the IPC's control of Iraqi oil, while the peasants and urban workers became increasingly impoverished. British policy in Palestine—its support for a Jewish homeland, Jewish immigration and the suppression of the Arab Revolt 1936-39—served to inflame tensions even further.

This led some of the Iraqi politicians and the military that had become increasingly powerful making and breaking governments to orientate towards Nazi Germany. In part this was due to a belief that it would free Iraq from the hated British, but in part it expressed political sympathy with fascism and its exploitation of anti-Semitism, fuelled by the situation in Palestine and the British cultivation of the Jewish financiers in Iraq. This was further exacerbated with the arrival in Baghdad in 1939 of Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the Palestinian nationalist leader, who had fled from the British.

The most prominent of the pro-German faction were pan-Arab nationalist Rashid Ali al-Gaylani and army officers known as the Golden Square, while the most prominent supporters of the British were Nuri al-Said and the regent for the four-year-old Faisal II. The regent, Faisal II's uncle, was appointed on the death of the anti-British King Ghazi in a road accident in 1939 in which it was widely believed that the British had a hand.

Under the terms of the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, Iraq was bound to support Britain and break off relations with Britain's enemies. When Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, Prime Minister Nuri al-Said immediately broke off relations with Germany—a deeply unpopular move. But he was unable to persuade the cabinet to declare war on Germany or break off relations with Italy. In March 1940, he resigned as prime minister but served in the government of his pro-German rival, Rashid Ali.

By 1940, British positions in the Middle East were becoming increasingly beleaguered. Fascist Axis troops threatened Egypt and the Suez Canal. With the fall of France, French forces in Syria and Lebanon were under the control of the Vichy government. With Axis troops on Iraq's doorstep, the British feared that Germany would invade Iraq and Iran upon which they were dependent for their oil supplies and wealth.

Relations between Britain and Iraq deteriorated rapidly as Rashid Ali manoeuvred Iraq into a more neutral position in the war, bought weapons from Italy and Japan and refused to grant British military forces landing and transit rights as required under the treaty. The British forced him to resign in January 1941, causing political uproar. The Golden Square officers mounted a coup in April and Rashid Ali was returned to power. Nuri al-Said and the Regent fled to Transjordan.

The new Iraqi government refused to allow the British troops to land in

Basra, in effect ripping up the Treaty, and declared a "war of liberation" against the British. It was conceived as part of a wider pan-Arab attempt to get rid of French rule in Syria and Lebanon and put an end to the prospect of a Zionist state in Palestine.

The British denounced the government's action as a revolt and sent forces from Transjordan and India to Basra, overthrew Rashid Ali and restored Nuri al-Said and the regent to power. After that, with British troops occupying southern Iraq, the government cooperated fully with the British war effort. The following year Britain was able to use it as a base from which to invade Syria and Persia where it installed a pro-British government to support its war effort. In 1943, Nuri al-Said's Iraq declared war on the Axis powers.

Although the British despatched Rashid Ali and the Golden Square with relative ease, the short-lived regime was significant because it demonstrated how little popular support there was for Britain and its arch collaborators Nuri al-Said and the royal family. The pro-British politicians were henceforth spoiled goods as far as the Iraqi people were concerned. They were forever tainted by their return to power by British bayonets. As Louis explained in *The British Empire in the Middle East*, "The year 1941 represents a watershed in the history of the British era in Iraq, and its significance is essential in understanding the nationalist rejection of the treaty of alliance with the British in 1948 and the end of the Hashemite dynasty ten years later."

Although Britain emerged from World War II with its empire in the Middle East intact, it faced very different conditions to those of 1939. The pattern of oil production had changed dramatically and by 1951 the Middle East was providing 70 percent of the West's oil. Most of the world's oil reserves were believed to be concentrated in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf.

But at the same time as the region's value was becoming ever more important, Britain faced rising political ferment in the emerging working class. In Palestine, Soviet and American backing for a Zionist state as a way of undermining British influence in the region and the widespread horror at the tragedy that had befallen the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis had paved the way for the United Nations vote in favour of the partition of Palestine and the establishment of the state of Israel. It incensed the Arab world. In Iraq, Egypt and Iran, where Britain's highhanded actions in 1942 mirrored that against Rashid Ali, almost all social layers were desperate to throw off the yoke of imperialist rule.

In Iraq, with their collaborators so thoroughly discredited, the British sought out a new ostensibly more progressive stooge in the shape of the first Shi'ite prime minister, Saleh Jabr. The British hoped he would institute reforms, prevent social discontent from fuelling the growth of the Iraqi Communist Party and forestall the overthrow of the regime. They also tried to re-jig Anglo-Iraqi relations in a new treaty that would preserve their military bases and access to the oil wells and serve as a model for restructuring relations in the region.

The incoming Labour government under Clement Attlee was no more adept at judging the political tempo in Baghdad than that of the arch imperialist Winston Churchill. When the terms of the treaty that Saleh Jabr and Nuri al-Said had agreed with Britain in January 1948—which would have extended the hated 1930 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty for another 20 years—became known, students, workers and starving townspeople poured onto the streets in protest. The police were only able to suppress the riots with an orgy of brutality that killed nearly 400 people in just one day. Nevertheless the regent was forced to repudiate the treaty. Saleh Jabr resigned and the incoming government inaugurated the most savage era of repression and martial law. Britain's model for restructuring its alliances in the Middle East policy was in tatters.

In 1950, the rising nationalist tide brought about an agreement between the US company Aramco and Saudi Arabia to share oil profits on 50-50 basis, setting up a chain reaction throughout the Middle East. The following year, the nationalist government of Mossadeq in Iran took steps to nationalise the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, forcing the British companies that owned the IPC to concede a 50-50 profit split with the Iraqi government or risk losing both the oil and its stooges, Nuri al-Said and his ministers.

By 1952, Britain's imperial interests in the Middle East were resting on an even more fragile base. The Hashemite King Abdullah of Jordan had been assassinated in 1951 and his son, mentally unstable, had ceded the throne to his 17-year-old son, Hussein. In July 1952, the Free Officers under the formal leadership of General Muhamed Naguib and the actual leadership of Second Lieutenant Gamal Abdel Nasser had overthrown the Egyptian monarchy and repudiated the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty.

Against this background Nuri al-Said's support for the British set him apart as a traitor in the Arab world. He was thus forced to carry out an unprecedented wave of repression, banning all opposition parties, closing down the press and handpicking a parliament to rubberstamp his decrees. It was under these conditions oil production finally surged ahead. Oil production doubled in the five years after the war, while revenues increased tenfold as a result of the Iranian crisis of 1951-53 and the 50-50 profit share agreement with the IPC. They rose from 10 percent of GNP and 34 percent of foreign exchange earnings in 1948 to 28 percent and 59 percent respectively in 1958. But instead of transforming the social conditions of the ordinary working people, the revenues went on agricultural developments that favoured the big landowners and swelled the bank accounts of the corrupt politicians.

In February 1955, Nuri al-Said played host to the British-organised regional security alliance of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Iraq, known as the Baghdad Pact, that completed a network of alliances spanning the southern rim of Eurasia aimed at containing the Soviet Union. It represented a bid by the British to offset their declining power and give them a say in regional affairs. It was no more acceptable to the Iraqis than the 1948 treaty had been. The other Arab countries would have nothing to do with it. Egypt's President Nasser, who was becoming a hero in the Arab world for his opposition to the British, denounced the pact vehemently as an attempt by Britain to assert its domination over the region and split the Arab world.

The Anglo-French military campaign in support of the invasion by Israel of the Suez Canal in 1956, aimed at getting rid of Nasser and reinstating Anglo-French control of Suez, outraged the Iraqi people. There were massive anti-British demonstrations all over Iraq. No one doubted for a minute that Nuri al-Said and the regent supported the British. Notwithstanding some face-saving formal protests to Britain, the Iraqi government clamped down violently on the demonstrations and once again resorted to martial law.

The Americans, in pursuit of their own national interests, forced the British to withdraw. The Suez crisis was a turning point. It marked a humiliating end to Britain's hegemony in the region. Coming so soon after the CIA's coup against Mosaddeq in Iran, it left the US the uncontested Western power in the Middle East. That in turn spelt the end of Britain's client regime in Iraq.

The opposition parties, including the Istiqlal (the nationalists), the National Democratic Party, the Iraqi Communist Party and the small Ba'ath Party, the Iraqi branch of the pan-Arab party founded in Syria, came together to form a national opposition front. In July 1958, as tensions and mass demonstrations against the regime mounted, a military group known as the Free Officers overthrew Britain's venal political agents, the Hashemite monarchy of Faisal II and the government of Prime Minister Nuri El Said, in a military coup. The royal family and Nuri were assassinated. Such was the loathing of the ancien regime that his naked body was dragged ignominiously through the streets of Baghdad until it was reduced to pulp.

Forty years of brutal exploitation and political repression by the British

and their collaborators had come to an end.

British imperialism had depended upon the political submission of the colonial people, control of the political system and the ability to prevail over or at least placate its imperial rivals. As the record has shown, it was only with the utmost difficulty that the British maintained their rule in Iraq in the 1920s and ’30s. By the late 1940s, although Britain had emerged from World War II as the strongest of the second ranking military powers, it was all but bankrupt and totally dependent upon American support to maintain its imperial interests. By the 1950s, when American interests diverged from Britain’s, Britain was edged or shoved out of Palestine, Iran, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq.

Forty-five years on, the defeat of Saddam Hussein and the Ba’athist regime, by the US with Britain as its junior partner, signifies the return of direct imperialism and the most brutal forms of repression and exploitation that the Iraqi people thought they had got rid of in 1958. It is already apparent that many of the events of the past few months could have come straight from the records of the first imperialist occupation of Iraq.

The lessons of history show firstly that the US will—with UN endorsement—impose a military occupation fronted by some corrupt émigrés, former Ba’athists and anyone else who can be bought to enable US corporations to take charge of Iraq’s oil industry. Secondly, the US’s determination to control the world’s most strategic resources will lead to further invasions and occupations.

The re-emergence of wars and colonialism demonstrates more forcibly than ever before the need to build a broad international movement against imperialism and militarism. There is only one social force that can resolve the crisis for mankind created by imperialist capitalism and that is the international working class. It must fight for its own independent programme—the reorganisation of the world on the basis of a socialist perspective.

Concluded

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