

The British Administration of Iraq and Its Influence on the 1920 Revolution

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Dedication

I dedicate this Master's Thesis to all the people who had been with me along the long way in this project.

First of all, I want to thank the unknown universal force that had been with me, giving me strength, during the hard periods of my life.

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Mette Bundgaard Andersen "Señora Corazón", for her incredible support during these years. Thank you for being you, and for giving me and the girls, a big family in Norway and in Denmark. Thank you for being the best "bonus mamma", and the best mother of the WHOLE WORLD.

I dedicate this work to my kids: Josleidy "La Morena", Mileidy "Cuchunga" and the new man in the house, born in September 2013, my little son Carl Joel "Bulungo". This effort is for all of you, if it can be used for inspiration in your lives. To my mother Miledys Fabal, my sister Deisy Fabal "Malagón, and my nephew Junior in the Dominican Republic.

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Preface

I started this project in the year 2013, right after finishing my Bachelor Degree. All the way through these two years I had the opportunity of learning to read, interpret and write history in a critical way, guided by one of the most incredible, funny, intelligent and dedicated professors at the University of Oslo, her name is Hilde Henriksen Waage. It is a privileged for any Master student in History at the University of Oslo, to study under her guidance. Thank you Hilde! You are one of a kind.

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Introduction

At the end of World War I in 1918, Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine had become part of the British Empire. “The Ottoman Empire had taken the wrong side under World War I. They were allied with Germany and Austria against its old enemy Russia. By the end of the war The Ottoman Empire was by the losers’ side.”¹

During the war, different Arab groups had fought against The Ottoman Empire, together with the British and French. The Arab revolution of 1916-1918, initiated by Sharif Hussein bin Ali from Mecca and his sons, Ali, Zayd, Abdullah and Faysal, had an impact on the balance of power between the British and the Ottomans during the war. The main point of the Arab revolution against the Ottomans was, to create an independent Arab state with Sharif Hussein as its leader. During the war, Great Britain made several agreements with Arab leaders concerning the future of some regions in the Middle-East. Those agreements would shape the future in the relationship of Europe with the Middle-East and among the different regions of the former Ottoman Empire. The post-war period brought many changes, new doctrines and conflicts to the new world order. The end of World War I precipitated the collapse of the Ottoman Empire that would come years later, while at the same time, it gave impulse to the aspiration of independence to many regions of the former empire. It is in the light of this context that we intend to analyze the case of Mesopotamia. The research will try to explain how the post-war situation in the Middle-East affected Mesopotamia, occupied by Great Britain during the war.

At the beginning of World War I, British troops had said to the people of Mesopotamia that, they had come to their country as liberators. But after the war, the British forces extended their control to the North of the country, and by 1918, they had established an administration for the whole Mesopotamia. At the same time that Great Britain was negotiating a deal with the Sharif of Mecca, another part of the British administration was making a deal with France. The British Sir Mark Sykes and French Charles Francois George Picot had come to an agreement by January 3rd 1916. In the British-French deal, the northern coast of Syria, Lebanon and South Anatolia would become under French control. While Bagdad and Basra,

¹ Hilde Henriksen Waage, *Konflikt og Stormaktspolitikk I Midtøsten*, kapittel 2 Midtøsten fram til først verdenskrig, Cappelen Damm AS 2013: 62

today's central and south Iraq would be taken by Great Britain.² It is seemed that British politicians were making and changing agreements along the way, in order to get what was best for them during and after the World War I. Another agreement that made issues complicated for France and Great Britain was the Balfour Declaration in November 1917. With the Balfour Declaration, Great Britain had declared its support for the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine. The British were promising many things to many people. They had been dealing with the Arabs, French and Jews in order to secure their support under World War I.³ All these contradictory agreements would bring many problems and misunderstandings once the war came to an end.

With the discovery of oil in Iran at the beginning of the 20th century, Great Britain developed stronger interests on the region. When the Middle-East was pulled into World War I, Great Britain had the need of protecting its oil interests in Iran. It was in this context that the British occupied the South part of Mesopotamia in November 1914, in order to secure and protect the Iranian oilfields close to Basra, in the South of Mesopotamia. What was in the beginning a British tactical occupation, became later a permanent British administration for the whole country since 1918. The years between 1918 and 1920 were very important for the understanding of the situation of the Arabs in Mesopotamia, and the British politics through their administration of the country. Local and international events created the condition for a revolt in Mesopotamia during the summer of 1920.

The Iraqi revolution of 1920 forced the British to change the methods of their administration in Iraq. Shi'i and Sunni Arabs fought together against a common enemy represented by the British occupation. Militarily, Great Britain was able to suppress the revolt after losing hundreds of soldiers. Economically, the revolt became very expensive for the new mandate, something that made Great Britain reshape its colonial administration. Politically, the revolution gave the Arabs living in Iraq, more access to the public administration and set the roots for later independence. After the rebellion, the British government decided to create an Iraqi monarchy in 1921, installing Faysal I, son of the Sharif of Mecca, as King of Iraq.

The historical context of this thesis is from the beginning of World War I, in 1914 until 1921. But the main period that had been analyzed is, the last three years of the British Civil Administration of Mesopotamia, between 1918 and 1921.

² Henriksen Waage 2013: 66

³ Henriksen Waage 2013: 66

Subject of Research

In order to understand the causes of the Iraqi revolution of 1920, it is necessary to take a look at the situation in which Iraq was under British control. By studying and interpreting official documents from the British administration at that time, this thesis offers insight into Britain's administration in Iraq before the revolt. Before reaching a satisfactory explanation of the situation before and after revolution, this study had investigated how the relationship between the British and the Arabs were since the end of World War I. Through the use of primary and secondary sources, the thesis studies the Arab key players during the revolution and the impact the revolt had in Iraq's road to independence.

The fundamental questions that this study seeks to answer are:

Who were the people of Mesopotamia at the time of the British occupation?

What kind of administration and changes did the British implement in the country?

What caused the Iraq revolution of 1920?

Did the revolution bring any change to Mesopotamia?

These are the central questions to be answered in this thesis, focusing between the years of 1918 and 1921. There seems to be a connection between the British methods of controlling Mesopotamia and some of the reasons for the Iraqi revolt. The purpose of this thesis is, to take a closer look at the British administration of Mesopotamia during the last two years before the rebellion that challenged the British control of that country.

Current Theories

The majority of the consulted sources for this investigation explain in a brief way some of the previous questions, but almost none of them treat the social, political and cultural causes of the revolt in relationship to the British Administration. None of the books and studies investigated for this thesis had focused mainly on the British administration of Mesopotamia between 1918, when it was expanded from Basra to the whole country, and 1920 when the rebellion started.

The falling Ottoman Empire brought changes in the way tribes and leaders related to each other. British politicians applied the tactic of divide and conquer during their new administration in Mesopotamia. Many Arab Sheiks gained more power under the British mandate than what they used to have under the former Ottoman rule. In this way those Sheiks were more in obligation to the British than to their tribes. Divisions between some Sheiks and tribes, together with the promises made by the British army and politicians to some of the Arab leaders during war time, created a nationalist movement hoping to have more influence in the future Mesopotamia after the war. Thus, the British approach in dealing with different Arab leaders in Mesopotamia and Syria, together with the international context after World War I, brought unexpected events in the region, especial during 1920.

“In Karbala a leading Shi’i cleric, Ayatollah Muhammas Taqi al-Shirazi, issued a legal opinion (fatwa) declaring that “one who is a Muslim has no right to elect and choose a non-Muslim to rule over the Muslims and said service in the British administration was unlawful.”⁴ Another group felt better under British rule: “Merchants and other prominent secular notables, however, wrote declarations of support for continued British rule.”⁵

All these contradicted opinions were reflected in a survey/plebiscite ordered by the British Civil administrator, Sir Arnold T. Wilson in 1919 as a way of confirming what kind of government the Iraqi people wanted. The result created a division among the British, between those like Wilson who was in favor of continuing British control over Iraq, and those in the Foreign Office, “like Gertrude Bell, [who] concluded that Arab nationalism was developing an unstoppable momentum.”⁶ Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Arnold T. Wilson had become the acting civil commissioner of Iraq. “He was a member of the Indian Political Service, was a staff officer to the General Officer Commanding (GOC), but he reported not to the War Office [England], but to the Government of India.”⁷ This information gives an insight into the contradictions among British in Great Britain and India concerning how they applied their administrative policies in Iraq.

The revolution was, in part, the result of divisions between Arabs (Sheiks and tribes), Shi’i and Sunni Muslims, British in Iraq and those in the government in England. Through the

⁴ Reeve Spector Simon, Eleanor H. Tejrian, *The Creation of Iraq 1914-1921* Chapter 1, *The View from Basra: Southern Iraq’s Reaction to WarOccupation, 1915-1925* Columbia University Press, New York 2004: 27

⁵ Reeve Spector Simon, Eleanor H. Tejrian 2004: 27

⁶ Reeve Spector Simon, Eleanor H. Tejrian 2004: 27

⁷ Mark Jacobsen 1991: 324

following chapters this thesis will focus on the religious, social and economical differences among the Iraqi Arabs prior to the revolution. An analysis of the British foreign policy, both from Great Britain and their differences with the officials in charge of the administration in Iraq, is necessary in order to get a better picture of the situation at that time.

“From the end of 1918 to October 1920, British policy on Iraq went through a confused period, and this was a major cause of the crisis of 1920.”⁸ The London office did not take any important decision concerning the future of Iraq, until April 1920 at the San Remo conference where it was decided that Iraq would become a British Mandate. In 1917, Sir Arthur Hirtzel, Secretary of the British Political Department had suggested a semi-autonomous Arab regime for Iraq, in order to give more political influence to Iraqi Arabs. This was a suggestion that commissioner Arnold T. Wilson was not willing to accept, and the events that took place during 1920, proved that Wilson was wrong.

This thesis will take a closer look at the British administration between 1918 and 1920, because there were many contradictions among the different British offices concerning the foreign policy of Iraq. At the same time, it is important to analyze why such a revolution took the British by surprise when they were aware of a growing nationalist feeling among many Arabs in Iraq.

After months of fighting, the British army was able to suffocate the revolt, but they realized that the politics and administration had to be reorganized by giving more participation to Iraqi Arabs. The instability of Iraq made the British administration to implement changes, and that was when they decided to create a monarchy with Faisal I as a king.

It was perhaps the main achievement of the British in Iraq that they were able to create at least the resemblance of an independent monarchical state while retaining their essential interests. The solution had been planned by A. T. Wilson as early as 30 July 1920 when, hearing that Faysal had been deposed in Syria, he wired the India Office suggesting that Faysal should be offered “the leadership of the Mesopotamian State.”⁹

With the economic cost of this revolution, British officials realized it was a time for changes in the way Iraq was administrated. “At its most fundamental, the Arab revolt taught Iraq could

⁸ D.K. Fieldhouse *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958* Oxford University press 2006: 84

⁹ D. K. Fieldhouse 2006: 88

not be held as a dependent state. For financial as well as strategic reasons, there was no alternative to the mandate and to hoping that rule by “moderates” would succeed.”¹⁰

Some of the literature consulted for this thesis, focuses on the British occupation of Mesopotamia at the beginning of World War I, while other’s main analysis had been the details of the Iraqi revolution. But as far as the investigation for this thesis had come, there were not works written about the British administration of the Mesopotamia during the years before the revolution. That is the perspective this master thesis intends to bring to the historical debate of the Iraqi revolt of 1920.

Sources

This thesis had been based on primary and secondary sources. I had visited the British National Archives in order to find primary sources from the time of the British Administration of Mesopotamia, especially between the years of 1918 and 1920. Among the secondary sources that had been consulted are books like: Kadhim, Abbas. “*-Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State-*” In his book, professor Abbas Kadhim analyses the Iraqi revolution of 1920, based on Iraqi written sources, as a way of bringing another perspective in the interpretation of the events. Among the literature consulted for this thesis, there are different writers who had brought important interpretations to the British and French history in the Middle-East during and after World War I. The list of books so far consulted during the investigation for this thesis, is written with detail in the last pages of this work. But among the book consulted are: Fieldhouse, D. K. “*Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958.*”; Lieb, Peter, “*Suppressing insurgencies in comparison: the Germans in the Ukraine, 1918, and the British in Mesopotamia, 1920, Small Wars and Insurgence*” vol. 23, Nos. 4-5. October-December 2012; Waage, Henriksen Hilde, *Konflikt og Sotrmaktspolitikk I Midtøsten*; Spector, Simon Reeva – Tejirian, H. Eleanor, “*The Creation of Iraq 1914-1921*”; Tripp, Charles, “*A History of Iraq,*” Rogan, Eugene, “*Araberne, Historien om det arabiske folk.*”

This investigation intends to bring another perspective concerning some of the reasons for the Iraqi revolution of 1920. By analyzing the local and international context of the time, in connection with the revolt, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the event. The

¹⁰ Mark Jacobsen 1991: 358

British documents consulted for this investigation, especially those concerning the British Civil Administration of Mesopotamia, had given an insight of Great Britain's decisions, politics and plans for the Middle-East, during and after World War I. Through this thesis the British Administration of Mesopotamia is the central point, in relationship to some of the main reasons for the Iraqi revolution.

Chapter 1

Mesopotamia during the Late 19th Century

The Arrival of the British troops to Mesopotamia at the beginning of World War I, found a country going through a social, political and economic change. Those changes were the result of reforms that had been implemented by the Ottomans decades before. In order to understand the situation of Mesopotamia, before, and at the moment that Great Britain decided to occupy the country, this chapter is analyzing who were the people of Mesopotamia and the condition of the country at the moment of the British occupation.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire was a long process that lasted several centuries. Internal as well as international events contributed to its fall. “With the loss of Hungary in 1699 the Ottoman Empire had entered a on a long process of territorial disintegration”¹¹. After the 1850s, the Ottoman dynasty experienced a relatively rapid downfall. Inside the Ottoman Empire were different groups of people with different religions and culture. Although the majority of the people in the Ottoman Empire were Muslim, there were also Jews and Christians among them. Due to the vast extension of the empire, there were places, like Saudi Arabia and Iraq, where the Ottomans did not have the same amount of power and influence as in other central places. In the population of the empire, there were division among Turks and Arabs, Sunni, Shi’i, Druze and Wahhabi Muslims. The growing European nationalism and imperialism played a central role in the events that took place during the last sixty years of the Empire. It was after 1850 that great social, political and economic changes were experienced by the decadent Empire and its relation to the European continent.

What characterized the last period of the Ottoman Empire between 1850 and 1914 and how did it affect Mesopotamia?

The Crimean War of 1854-1856 (British, French and Ottoman against Russians) marked the beginning of a more direct influence of Great Britain and France in the Middle East. The Ottomans were on the winning side while Russia ended up losing the war. The war exposed the weakness and lack of organization of the Ottoman leaders. Due to the results of the war

¹¹ Palmer-Colton-Kramer, *A History of the Modern World since 1815* (McGraw-Hill International Edition, New York) 2007: 644

and the display of power showed by France and Great Britain, the Ottomans saw the need for reforms and organization. They started implementing reforms, based on the European state model.¹²

What kind of reform did the Ottomans implement, and how did it affect Mesopotamia?

Mesopotamia, as it was first known by the West and in later time as Iraq, became part of the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The long contact between the Ottoman Empire and Europe helped to develop a trading link that resulted in a more profit oriented economy among Ottomans and some of the countries under its domain.

Mesopotamia, due to its distance from the center of the Empire, was never under complete Ottoman dominance. “First, although formally a part of the empire, this area [Iraq] had for centuries been outside direct Ottoman control and the Ottoman reassertion of power in the area was a nineteenth century phenomenon.”¹³ The Ottoman reassertion of power in Mesopotamia was a direct consequence of the internal changes they intended to apply in order to restructure and modernize their administration. These new reforms would prove challenging, because of the nature and structure of the social and political organization of the people of Mesopotamia. This part of the empire was populated by semi-autonomous tribes, tribal confederations and influential Sheikhs. The new Ottoman reforms had a direct impact in the relations of the different groups in Mesopotamia. Some of the consequences of the reforms were that they had the effect of creating new interests and groups.¹⁴ These new groups would mark a new era in the interaction of the empire and its people in Mesopotamia.

New Laws

The Land Law of 1858 and the Vilayet Law of 1864 were the two main instruments used by the Ottomans as a way of transforming the administration of Mesopotamia. The Land Law intended to regulate the land tenure. It was meant to organize the state ownership of the land. This law had a great impact in the social organization of Mesopotamia, because from that moment the tribes started moving from having a relative autonomy of the land to becoming tenants and sharecroppers. The intention of the Ottomans with that law was to improve

¹² Palmer-Colton-Kramer, 2007: 645

¹³ Reidar Visser, *British policy and inter-sectarian relations in Iraq, 1914-1926, A preliminary study based on documents of the British government*, No. 222 September 1997: 4

¹⁴ Charles Trip, *A History of Iraq*, (Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom) 2000: 14

productivity, agriculture and investment. The negative aspect of the Land Law was that it gave all the power of the land to the Sheikhs in the countryside. In a society moving from a pastoralist way of life to agriculture as the main economic system, the ownership of the land meant to have more economical and political power. The reforms gave opportunity to new individuals for participation in the state and in the new social order that was taking place at the time.¹⁵

The Vilayet Law of 1864 intended to reorganize the administration of the empire. It would define the functions of the provincial officials, governors and people working in the administrative branch. The main problem was that the majority of people working in the public administration were Sunni Muslim, which was a minority of the population. Mosul, Baghdad and Basra, the three main provinces of Mesopotamia, later known as Iraq, were geographically divided by that new Law. “The Vilayet Law mapped out the territorial boundaries of the three provinces and established a new structure of administration down to the village level, intending to bring central administration systematically down to people.”¹⁶ These European inspired reforms would bring changes that were far from intended by the Ottomans.

The Land law focused on individual ownership of the land. But the culture and custom among the majority of tribes was collective ownership of the land, something that the new law prohibited. Consequently, the tribes placed their land ownership on the Sheikh, the most respected member of a tribe.¹⁷ From that moment on, the tribes that previously had owned land collectively, slowly became tenant farmers. Another group that benefited from the new land law was the urban elite. This group was composed of city merchants and state employees having enough means to get more economical and political power through owning land and those who would work on it. These land and administrative reforms were the basic ingredients for the new confrontations to come in Mesopotamia.

The social composition was changing with the emergence of powerful families in the cities and Sheikhs owning most of the registered land in the country side. This change became an unbreakable wall to be confronted by the Ottomans. The Ottomans had to give space to many

¹⁵ Trip 2000: 15

¹⁶ Trip 2000: 15

¹⁷ Trip 2000: 16

prominent people coming from rich and influential families in the public administration. According to Samira Haj, Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at New York University:

As a result, the Ottoman Rulers, including Midhat Pasha (Ottoman governor in Mesopotamia 1869-1872) found themselves with no other choice but to ally with, and currently incorporate the leading members of dominant houses into the new state bureaucracy.¹⁸

The pyramid, upon which the society in Mesopotamia was based on, was reshaped by the new system. Before the 1850s the old social composition was based on a highly pastoralist economy. The new focus of the Ottoman administration was on agriculture and therefore the emphasis on land redistribution. An asymmetric relation of dependence between the landlord and the cultivator developed within short time. Landlords, following the Ottoman direction, decided what and how to cultivate the land. At the same time, the cultivator without land did not receive wages as payment but a share of the crops. A struggle for power was taking place among the different social classes created by the new reforms in Mesopotamia in the last years of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁹

At the beginning of the twentieth century, after World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the traditional social and economic Ottoman system would be challenged²⁰

The Ottoman Provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra

The rivers Tigris and Euphrates were the heart of this land at the time, “[t]he term *al-`Iraq* meaning the shore of the great river along its length, as well as the grazing land surrounding it”²¹. Ottoman rulers divided this area in three Vilayets (provinces): Mosul in the North, Baghdad in the center and Basra in the South. Since the beginning of the Ottoman rule over this area, the relationship between conqueror and conquered was mostly a difficult one. In most of the sources so far consulted it is often stressed the constant opposition of the Iraqi people to the Ottomans rule. The Mountains of the North served as great wall for the Kurdish people. The Shi`i tribes of the center used the valleys and desert to their favorable advantage when fighting the Ottomans. It was after late 1850s that the central government of the empire

¹⁸ Samira Haj, *The Making of Iraq 1900-1963, Capital, Power and Ideology*, State University of New York Press 1997: 25

¹⁹ Samira Haj, *The Making of Iraq 1900-1963*, 1997: 27

²⁰ Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq, Contriving King and Country*, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, New York 2007: 2

²¹ Trip 2000: 8

decided to extend its control through the three provinces. In practice it became a challenge, because in order to rule Mesopotamia, the Ottomans had to use new laws, give power access to prominent families and sheikhs, and use military force.²² “Until the time of Midhat Pasha, the capable and enlightened Governor of Baghdad between 1869-1871, Mosul, Baghdad and Basra were only under nominal and occasional control of the authorities.”²³

Mosul

Placed in the North of Iraq, Mosul was geographical and politically closer to the heart of the Ottoman Empire. The majority of the population here were Sunni, but there were Kurds, Christian and Jews as well. Strong Kurdish nationalism grew in this region during the last years of the empire and even more after 1914. The Kurds consisted largely of sedentary and nomadic tribes dedicated to pastoralism and agriculture, but there were others engaged in commercial activities, like the transit trade. Transit trade was the commercial activity created by the passage of goods through the region. The tribe was at the center of the social composition of the region and played an important role in its relationship with the empire. “These [tribes] determined the relationship of individuals to the land and shaped the hierarchies of clans and families in the various settlements.”²⁴

Baghdad

Because of its central position in the Iraqi landscape, Baghdad was the provincial capital. In this province the Georgian *Mamluks* “[slaves taken as boys from Christian families in Georgia and converted to Islam for military purpose]” formed a military caste at the top of the social composition.²⁵ The daily activities of most of the population were as in Mosul, sedentary and semi-sedentary tribes. The Ottomans only partially imposed their rule in the regions close to the center of Baghdad. In the case of Baghdad, the Ottomans could not control the whole

²² Samira Haj, *The Making of Iraq 1900-1963*, 1997: 24
Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq, Contriving King and Country* 2007: 2

²³ Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq 1914-1932*, The Middle East Center, St. Antony's College Oxford: Ithaca Press London 1976: 1

²⁴ Tripp 2000: 10

²⁵ Tripp 2000: 8

region. In this province a large part of the population was Shi'i Muslim, although Jews made up close to 20 per cent of its inhabitants. Najaf, Karbala, al-Kazimiyya and Samarra were sacred towns in Baghdad, "long associated with the history of Caliph Ali bin Abi Talib and his descendants."²⁶ Through these towns there was a constant pilgrimage of Persians coming to the Muslims religious centers. The Shi'i in Baghdad never accepted the Ottoman rule. In this regard most of the tribes did not like the idea of paying taxes to an Ottoman authority they did not recognize as theirs. Shi'i Islam experienced a considerable growth in the last two centuries of the empire among the population of Baghdad, especially because of their position against the Ottoman rule. The *Mamluk* Pashas (governors) of Baghdad were Sunni Muslims, and that was one of the many reasons for the deep and serious religious conflicts between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims in the area.

Basra

Located in the South of Iraq, Basra was an important link to the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The Vilayet of Basra had been in and out of the Ottoman influence since the sixteenth century. "It was not until the 1870s that the al-Hasa area south Basra again became an area of actual Ottoman presence after a successful military expedition."²⁷ This province was governed by the *Mamluk* military caste as in Baghdad. Basra underwent several periods of direct rule from Baghdad, until 1884 when it came under the direct rule of Istanbul. Basra became an important trade center for the Ottomans and the British as well. The majority of the population was descendant from sedentary tribes, although others in the countryside were semi-nomadic and most of them were Arabic-speaking. A population statistic from 1919 "suggests that 78,8% were Shi'i, 14,7% Sunnis, 4,2% Jews, 1,3% Christians and 0,9% Sabeans."²⁸ The population of Basra had a considerable Shi'i majority, while the elite families were Sunni Muslim. These Sunni families enjoyed of higher status and power, something that in time would bring religious and interest conflicts, with the reforms implemented by the Ottomans after 1858.

²⁶ Tripp 2000: 12

²⁷ Reidar Visser 1997: 2

²⁸ Reidar Visser 1997: 7

Consequences

Since the nineteenth century Great Britain had a connection with Mesopotamia and the Gulf, due to British interests in the route to India and the trade that it had developed in the Indian Ocean. Between 1820 and 1899 Great Britain concluded several treaties with tribal chiefs from Bahrain and the Arab Emirates. Some of those treaties were designed by the British, where they demanded the tribal chiefs not to grant any territory except to Great Britain. Those treaties seemed to be designed in order to counter the growing French interests in the region.²⁹

With the expansion of the European influence in the Middle East and Asia, Mesopotamia became an important source for trade for Great Britain and France. At the same time the Ottoman rulers by 1850s had decided to modernize their administration in order to increase their revenues. The implementation of new laws by the Ottomans was a mean to gain more control and reorganize Mesopotamia according to their interests. These reforms had a deep socio-political and economical impact among the population. The land was supposed to belong to individuals and not the tribe under the new legislation. Prominent Sunni families and Shi'i Sheikhs became landlords, while members of most of the tribes who were the majority of the population, in a very dramatic process suddenly were in the position of tenants and cultivators without rights over their previous land. Mesopotamia was a region where the Ottomans could hardly place under their central control. The total centralization of power over the provinces of the empire was not totally complete. Many tribes had substantial degrees of autonomy until the collapse of the empire. That seemed to be reason why the Ottoman shared the power with some of the elites in many regions of the empire.³⁰

The new Land Laws and administrative system created new power groups that competed for influence in the public administration and for the owning of land. Sunni Muslim elites of the cities gained more power due to their privileged position in society and access to public administration and means to acquire land. Shi'i Muslim Sheikhs became an influential group after owning most of the land in the country side with the land reform. A population composed of tribes that previously shared the ownership of the land, became simple tenants. A conflict of interests was taking place as a direct consequence of these changes.

²⁹Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq, Contriving King and Country*, 2007: 3

³⁰ Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire 1700-1922*, Cambridge University Press 2000: 63-64

The reforms that were intended to make the economy and administration more efficient, created two powerful groups, one in the cities and the other on the country side that would later compete for the political power in Mesopotamia at the time when the Ottoman Empire was falling.

During the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the British influence in Mesopotamia consisted basically in commerce. But by the late 19th century, Russia and Germany were becoming contenders in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf and Mesopotamia. The control of the commercial routes was essential for Great Britain. With the discovery of oil in Iran and the outbreak of the World War I, the British decided to take control of the South of Mesopotamia, in order to secure their interests. The social, political and economic situation of Mesopotamia at the time of the British arrival became a challenge when Great Britain decided to organize a British Civil Administration in the country.³¹

³¹ Samira Haj, *The Making of Iraq 1900-1963*, 1997: 27

Chapter 2

The British Rule in Mesopotamia 1914-1920 and the Revolution Roots

The establishment of a British administration in Mesopotamia in 1918 had its roots in the beginning of World War I. What was a tactical occupation of the south of the country, to secure the oil fields of Persia during the World War I, became a total occupation years later, until it was turned into a British mandate in 1920. Why what was supposed to be a tactical and temporary occupation of Basra, in the south of the country, extended towards the north until British controlled the whole of Mesopotamia in 1918? What did British do once they defeated the Ottoman Empire and controlled Mesopotamia? What was the international context in the rest of the Middle East and US role in it?

The First World War Reaching the Ottoman Empire

On October 31st, 1914, the Ottoman Empire declared war against Great Britain and the Allies, after joining Germany and Austria. The decision of going to war on the side of Germany would have a great repercussion for the Ottomans, and was going to reshape the politic landscape of the whole area, creating a series of Mandates that later became the states conforming today's Middle East.

Since the 19th century Great Britain had been in close contact with Mesopotamia and the Arabian Peninsula. Because of Britain's strong interests in India, the British had the need of protecting the route through the Indian Ocean. During that time British ships had been under pirate attacks from the Gulf coast, and therefore "British concluded a treaty of maritime peace with the tribal chiefs of Bahrain and the areas now roughly corresponding to the United Arab Emirates in 1820."³² Through the rest of the 19th century, Western's ideas and technological development had been influencing the Ottoman Empire and Mesopotamia and brought important changes in almost every aspect of the society. "These changes were stimulated by the printing press, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the steam engine, the postal service,

³² Petter Sluglett: *Britain in Iraq, Contriving King and Country*. I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, London 2007:3

and the telegraph.”³³ All these ideas and technology would influence many of the most important intellectuals of Mesopotamia and would play an important role in the later events.

Like Great Britain, other European countries had developed certain interests in some of the vast area of the Ottoman Empire. During the 19th century France became attracted by the idea of having influence in the weak Ottoman Empire. However, Great Britain after having been in contact with some of the most important chiefs of the Arab Peninsula, forced an agreement with those chiefs in 1892 “largely to counter what seemed to be growing French interests. Bahrain and the lower Gulf emirate were obliged to sign further agreements with Britain under which they agreed not to grant or dispose of any part of their territories except to Britain.”³⁴

By the turn of the 20th century, British strongest rival concerning some of the areas of the Ottoman Empire was Germany. After its unification in 1870, Germany started an expansive foreign policy. “In the Iraqi part of this policy, it pressed for a railway concession in 1899 – “Berlin to Baghdad” line- and began a steamship service to the Gulf in 1906.”³⁵ The railway concession given to Germany by the Ottomans would later be headache for the British, when they suspected of the potentially rich oil deposit in northern Mesopotamia. Within its power, Great Britain was trying to isolate the Arab Peninsula, Iran and Mesopotamia from any other European power’s influence. This tactic would be reflected during and after War World I.

The Oil Discovery

William Knox D’Arcy was an English millionaire and an entrepreneur, he came to Iran in 1901 and “acquired a concession from Muzaffar ed-Din Shah (king of Persia 1896-1907) to search for oil in return for a down payment of £20,000, a further £20,000 in shares and 16 per cent the net profits of any company formed to work the concessions.”³⁶ From that moment on, Muzaffar ed-Din Shah of Iran started granting concession to others European countries interested in oil, and this in turn created the conditions for Great Britain, France and Russia to have more influence on the area.ⁱ

³³ CDR. (Commander) Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, USN: *Iraq in Turmoil, Historical Perspectives of Dr. Ali-Wardi, From The Ottoman Empire to King Feisal*. Naval Institute Press 2012: 36

³⁴ Petter Sluglett, 2007: 3

³⁵ William R. Polk: *Understanding Iraq*, HarperCollins Publishers Inc., New York, NY 2005: 64

³⁶ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy On The Euphrates, The British Occupation of Iraq and The Great Arab Revolt 1914-1921*. Saqi Books, Great Britain 2014: 13-14

The importance of oil is a vital aspect that has to be taken in consideration in order to understand the situation of Great Britain and its relationship with the Ottoman Empire before World War I. Since 1904 the British started seeing the possibility of converting the Royal Navy's warship from coal to oil, and that technological development would play a decisive role for the next years. By 1908 the British government was in charge of the oil explorations in Iran.

In 1909 another British oil company was created, it was the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. This was the company that would exploit and administrate the Persian oil from then on.

Between 1908 and 1914 an increasing interests on the Iranian oilfields among different oil companies was at its peak. The Royal Dutch/Shell Company, which originally was a Dutch concern, had come into the oil competition. By the end of 1912 "the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was fast running out of capital."³⁷ This was creating a problem for the British due to the huge capital owned by their rival the Royal Dutch/Shell Company. The increasing interests for developing modern Navy based on fuel oil instead of coal, was pressing the British government into a more direct involvement in the oil exploitation.

The need to solve these two problems "prompted the British government to acquire a majority shareholding in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1914."³⁸ The main aspect of that strategy was that the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was going to be partially nationalized, with the British government owning the 51 per cent of the shares and the authority to appoint the directors.

Between 1899 and 1905 Germany had been granted the concession for building the Berlin-Baghdad railway. With the "oil fever", Germany started searching for oil in the north of Mesopotamia and German engineers "had subsequently passed this information to representatives of the Deutsche Bank in Berlin."³⁹ After that, the race for the oil supremacy in Iran and the North of Mesopotamia was already on, between the Dutch and British companies. In 1912 the Deutsche Bank tried to reach an agreement with the Ottoman authorities in order to start drilling operations around the area Mosul in the North of Mesopotamia. Another event started complicating things for the British. "The British ambassador in Istanbul reported that the Turks themselves had plans to set up an oil company

³⁷ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy On The Euphrates* 2014: 18

³⁸ Peter Slutglett: *Britain in Iraq, Contriving King and Country* 2007: 4

³⁹ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy On The Euphrates* 2014: 21

to work the oil not only around Mosul but also in the vilayets of Baghdad and Basra.”⁴⁰ By 1912 another company was created, it was the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), which was Turkish just in name, because the owners were the Royal Dutch/Shell, the Deutsche Bank and the Turkish National Bank, a 50 per cent British owned bank.ⁱⁱ

In the beginning of 1914 Great Britain was able to restructure the Turkish Petroleum Company where they had more than 50 per cent shares, and left the Deutsche Bank with just 20 per cent of the TPC shares. Just five months before World War I, Great Britain was practically alone ruling the oil of Iran and securing some important areas of what later would become great oil deposits in Mesopotamia.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Ottoman Empire Allied with Germany

The economical penetration of Europe into the Ottoman Empire since the 19th century, internal rebellion and debt, had weakened the empire to its limits by the beginning of the 20th century. Europe had been lending money to the Ottomans, but due to multiple reasons like, lack of knowledge concerning Capitalism, corruption and internal turmoil, the Ottomans had failed to repay the huge loans taken from Europe. By the turn of the 20th century, Europe was in control of most of the tax collecting system of the empire. Great Britain was a very important member of this European Administration collecting the Ottoman taxes.

Great Britain had been building two battleships for Turkey, and by 1914 one of them, The *Sultan Osman*, was already finished, but due to lacking of space at the dock in Istanbul, the British had not delivered it yet. Then “on 28 July, the day on which Austria declared war on Serbia, Churchill proposed that both ships should be requisitioned for the Royal Army and on 31 July, the cabinet approved their seizure.”⁴¹

The seizure of the battleships implemented by Great Britain provoked a quick response by the Ottoman ruler Enver Pasha, and on August 2nd the Ottoman Empire signed an alliance with Germany. On August 3rd, Germany declared war on Russia, who was allied with France. Great Britain declared war to Germany the day after. But it was not until October 31st, that the

⁴⁰ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy On The Euphrates* 2014: 21

⁴¹ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy On The Euphrates* 2014: 24

Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of Germany and Austria against Great Britain and the Allies.⁴²

With a war coming, Great Britain was facing a problem. British oilfields in south-west Persia were very close to their enemies the Ottoman Empire, namely in Mesopotamia. The next step would be to take control over Mesopotamia.

Great Britain Taking Control of Mesopotamia 1914-1918

On November 6th 1914, the British-Indian forces landed in the South part of Mesopotamia, at Fao port. With the forces came Sir Percy Cox, Chief Political Officer and Arnold T. Wilson, political officer of the Indian Army under the command of Sir Percy Cox. Sir Percy Cox and Arnold T. Wilson came to Mesopotamia from India, where they had been working as British officials. The experience and concepts applied by British officers in India would be the main reference British in Mesopotamia would put into practice. These two officials would play a very important role in the aftermath of the British occupation of Mesopotamia, especially between 1918 and 1921.

The main purpose of the British occupation of Mesopotamia was stated: “British Maritime and commercial interests in the Persian Gulf, together with its political importance to the government of India, had thrust upon us responsibilities which we could not avoid.”⁴³ From November 1914 Great Britain’s occupation of Mesopotamia was mainly to protect their financial interests linked to the oilfields in Iran. The first vilayet to be taken was Basra in the South of modern Iraq on November 22nd. The relatively easy advance and control of that vilayet triggered possibilities of continuing the march towards Baghdad.

It was from the very beginning of the British military forces took control of Basra that practical differences between the Indian Office in London and the Officials in Mesopotamia started to appear. “The India Office in London wanted a holding operation at the head of the Gulf, the kind of exercise for which minds in the Military Department of the Government of

⁴² Ian Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, 2014:22

⁴³ Review of The Civil Administration of Mesopotamia, Printed and Published by His Majesty’s Stationary Office, London. India Office 3rd December 1920, California Digital Library CDL, 1920: 1
<https://archive.org/details/reviewofciviladm00iraqrich>

India were well suited.”⁴⁴ On the one hand, just five days after the capture of Basra, a Civil Administration started taking form in order to reorganize the vilayet. At the head of it was Sir Percy Cox. On the other hand, the officials on the ground on Mesopotamia were thinking in another way, different than the Indian Office in London, while British forces continued advancing towards the north. After taking Basra without any strong defense from the Ottomans, “the temptation to advance proved irresistible and it was not checked by any serious hesitation from behind the scenes.”⁴⁵

The officer in charge of the forces on the way to Baghdad was Major General Charles Townshend. He was going to witness a devastating British setback in Mesopotamia since the arrival of the forces in November 6th, 1914. Kut-al-Amara, in the north, between Basra and Baghdad, was the place where British forces confronted the first real Ottoman backfire. From December 1915 until the spring of 1916, British forces marching on the way to Baghdad had been sent on retreat to Kut. Not only the British soldiers had to retreat, but they were kept in a siege that took almost five months to break, where British lost many soldiers. The Ottoman forces were superior in number, but, “the Ottoman numerical advantage was not decisive. The Enemy was much stronger than Townshend expected.”⁴⁶

The British military advance captured Baghdad on March 1917, and took control of Mosul, the third vilayet in the North of Mesopotamia after the Armistice of Mudros on October 30th, 1918. The Armistice of Mudros was the Ottoman Empire surrender to the British and the Allies in World War I. With the Ottoman surrender, the military conquer of Mesopotamia was a fact, and it was from 1918 that a general British Administration for the whole Mesopotamia started taking shape. “Conquering Iraq would take almost four years and cost another 20, 000 British (mainly Indian) casualties.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Peter Sluttglett: *Britain in Iraq, Contriving King and Country*, 2007: 8

⁴⁵ Peter Sluttglett: *Britain in Iraq, Contriving King and Country*, 2007: 9

⁴⁶ Nikolas Gardner: *Charles Townshend's Advance on Baghdad: The British Offensive in Mesopotamia, September-November 1915*. Article written on *War In History*, 20 (2) 182-200.

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav DOI: 10.1177/0968344512471124 wih.sagepub.com 2003: 200

⁴⁷ William R. Polk: *Understanding Iraq* 2005:71

The British Administration of Mesopotamia 1918-1920

After the Armistice of 1918, British officers started the organization of Mesopotamia under a civil administration for the whole area.

On March 1917, Lt. General Sir Stanley Maude the commanding officer in charge of the British forces taking control of Baghdad addressed to the people of the vilayet. The speech is crucial in order to understand the later dramatic events that took place just two years later in Mesopotamia:

It is the hope of the British Government that the aspiration of your philosophers and writers shall be realized once again. The People of Baghdad shall flourish and enjoy their wealth and substance under institutions which are in consonance with their sacred laws and their racial ideal. O, people of Baghdad! Remember that for 26 generations you have suffered under strange tyrants who have ever endeavoured to set one Arab house against another in order that they might profit by your dissensions. Therefore, I am commanded to invite you, through your nobles and elders and representatives, to participate in the management of your civil affairs, in collaboration with the political representatives of Great Britain who accompany the British Army, so that you may unite your kinsmen in the north, east, south and west in realizing the aspiration of your race.⁴⁸

These were the words of the British officers as they were taking control of Baghdad in 1917, and planning the civil administration for the entire country. What the British promised to the people of Baghdad on that speech, would be very distant from the reality that would come later. Mesopotamia had been very difficult to control by the Ottoman Empire through the course of several centuries, and it did not turn out to be easily controlled by the British either. What kind of impression did British officers have of the people in Mesopotamia?

British Impression of the People from Mesopotamia

The view British officers had of the people in Mesopotamia at the time of their arrival was based on what British knew and imagined about the Ottoman Empire. How the British perceived the legacy of the Ottoman Empire profoundly shaped their interaction with Iraqi society and their reform of its governmental structures.⁴⁹ For the British officers organizing the administration of Mesopotamia, the Ottomans were corrupt and inefficient in terms of

⁴⁸ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia, 1920: 32

⁴⁹ Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 2003:43

ruling that country. In the British reports, they described a very dramatic picture of what they found at the very beginning of their settlement in 1914 at the vilayet of Basra in the south: “To this end it was decided to keep intact the Turkish system, to which the people were accustomed, but to free it from corruption and abuses and increase its efficiency.”⁵⁰ But at the same time, British officers mention several times that there were not records of the Ottoman administration: “Not only were there no registers left, but the land records had been taken away.”⁵¹ In their own words, the new British administration was going to transform and the management of the country. How could the British have such a clear view of what the Ottoman Empire’s former administration was, when British themselves wrote in their reports that they did not have any documents concerning the Ottoman’s administration? “The initial difficulties in setting up civil administration in the occupied territories were greatly enhanced by the fact that, except for a few Arab subordinates, all former Turkish officials had fled, taking with them the most recent documents and registers.”⁵² This view of the Ottoman Empire was going to permeate every kind of relationship and decision of the future administration. British forces had little knowledge about who were the people living in Mesopotamia. Most of the perception the British and Europeans had about the Ottoman Empire was based on the Oriental view of the people living on the Middle East dating back to the 18th century. “The Ottoman Empire in Iraq was conceived as an Oriental Despotism. Under this rubric it was unchanging and unable to escape the constraints of its inherent superstition, violence and corruption.”⁵³

Another aspect of the British view of Mesopotamia was, how they saw and categorized the population according to their European imagination of what this people was. British officers divided the population in three categories. They were: the Bedouin and Kurds, the peasants and Sheikhs, and the third group were the town people, the bureaucrats, also known as *effendis*.

British divided the three former categories into two groups. The first and most important group, for the British, was the people from the countryside, with the Sheikh as the leader. The second group was the town *effendis*, most of them bureaucrats from the former Ottoman

⁵⁰ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia, 1920: 6

⁵¹ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia, 1920: 76

⁵² Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia, 1920: 5

⁵³ Toby Dodge: *Inventing Iraq*, 2003: 43

Empire. “The focus of British hopes, and the key to rural organization, were the tribal shaikhs. It was they who would guard against the despotic tendencies of the *effendi* class.”⁵⁴

By the end of the 19th century in Mesopotamia, there were two groups attempting to gain more political and economic power due to the benefits of the land reforms. They were the sheikhs and the *effendis* or bureaucrats of the city. What the British did, as a way of gaining influence on the countryside was, that they started seeing the sheikh as the leader that they should count with, in the process of reorganizing the country. The rural and the urban were two sides into which British divided Mesopotamia. The civil administration would rule the urban, while they would use the power and influence of the sheikhs to control the rural side.

The Officers in Charge of the British Civil Administration

The first Chief political officer of Mesopotamia was Sir Percy Cox. He was the one organizing the first civil administration of Basra just days after British forces had conquered that vilayet in 1914. Sir Percy Cox worked directly as a Chief political officer of Mesopotamia until March 1918, when had to go back to London for a consultation about the future of Mesopotamia. While Percy Cox had been away in London, another official became the acting civil commissioner of Mesopotamia, that officer was Captain Arnold T. Wilson. He would be in charge of that country from 1918 until 1920 when the revolution exploded and took him away with it. Another important person at the top of the British administration was Gertrude Lowthian Bell. She was an Arabist, explorer and writer. By 1917 she was working as Oriental secretary to the chief political officer, Sir Percy Cox in Baghdad, due to her works on archeology, literature and exploration in the Middle East.

The British civil and military personal that would rule Mesopotamia had come from India, where Great Britain had been controlling that country as a colony since the 19th century. The only reference they had on how to rule a foreign country was the experience they brought with them from India. They would use the same methods in Mesopotamia. In India British had ruled with a direct control of all the institutions. No important position of power was held by any native in India. The Indians were the people to be ruled and civilized until they were able govern themselves. In 1918 when Percy Cox went back to London, he was asked about the way Great Britain could administrate Mesopotamia, and among his replies: “He

⁵⁴ Toby Dodge: *Inventing Iraq*. 2003: 45

acknowledged that annexation was no longer possible, but wanted supervision of the Arab façade to be exercised by a nominated local council. He felt it was particularly vital to exclude any Turkish participation in the regime.”⁵⁵ On the other hand, Arnold T. Wilson, the Acting Civil Commissioner, was a man of a more colonialist mentality. He was a man convinced that direct rule was the best way to keep order in countries under British power. Arnold T. Wilson was of the opinion that, Arabs, “If let into the government, they would ruin the whole country. The bottom line was that the British must rule Iraq. Any other view was simply naïve and irresponsible.”⁵⁶ In general this was the view that the officers coming from India had about the way Great Britain had to rule Mesopotamia.

Differences between London and the Officers in Mesopotamia

The officials coming from India to Mesopotamia had a more colonialist view on how that country had to be ruled. The officers and politicians in London had a more realistic opinion about the way the administration of Mesopotamia had to be in practice. In order to understand why the London office had a different view of the way things had to be done in Mesopotamia, it is necessary to review what was happening at the international level.

First, when USA came into the war on April 1917, the Americans brought with them a new world order to the postwar plans Great Britain and France had for the new countries under their power in the Middle East. US President Woodrow Wilson delivered an important speech with Fourteen Points to the Congress on January 8th 1918. The main argument of Wilson’s speech was, the right to “self-determination of the subject peoples of the Central Powers when the war was won.”⁵⁷ By that, President Wilson was declaring the end of colonialism, and at least in theory, the new countries emerging after World War I would have the right to determine their own political system and organization.

Secondly, in November 8th 1918, an Anglo-French proclamation was made. Among the things:

The end which France and Great Britain have in view in their prosecution in the East of the war let loose by German ambition is the complete liberation of the people so long oppressed by the Turks

⁵⁵ Peter Sluglett: *Britain in Iraq, Contriving King and Country*, 2007:18

⁵⁶ William R. Polk: *Understanding Iraq*, 2005: 73

⁵⁷ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy of the Euphrates* 2014: 134

and the establishment of national Governments and Administrations drawing their authority from the initiative and free choice of indigenous peoples.⁵⁸

The Anglo-French proclamation can be seen as a direct consequence of USA's new doctrine of self-determination. After the war, USA became a very important international actor in terms of economy and politics.

Thirdly, Great Britain gave very much power to the India Office over administration of Mesopotamia. In their reports, British officials in Mesopotamia wrote:

The Civil Commissioner was given the right of direct correspondence with His Majesty's Government; he was told to address his reports to the Secretary of State for India...Mesopotamian administration benefited very greatly from being placed in direct connection with the India Office, where its needs and difficulties were the subject of careful attention."⁵⁹

The impact of these former issues, affected the way Great Britain was going to organize their administration on their new territories in the Middle East, especially in the case of Mesopotamia.

Back in Mesopotamia, Arnold T. Wilson, the man in charge of the British Administration, did not agree with the new state of affairs. He was determined to impose his view on how to rule that country. "Britain, he (Wilson) argued, could not maintain its position in Iraq by conciliating extremists."⁶⁰ In London, British were discussing whether Mesopotamia would become a colony or if it should have a semi-independent status, according to the new international order. However, Arnold T. Wilson, Acting Civil Commissioner of Mesopotamia, did not pay attention to the nationalist movements that were growing all around the Middle East.

Reorganizing the Occupied Country during 1918-1920

When World War I reached the Ottoman Empire, Mesopotamia had been ruled by a Sunni minority over the vast Shi'i population. The Ottomans were never able to completely subdue the Arabs from Mesopotamia. The growing differences between the city bureaucrats, mostly

⁵⁸ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy of the Euphrates* 2014: 34-35

⁵⁹ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia, 1920:74

⁶⁰ Toby Dodge: *Inventing Iraq* 2003:16

Sunni Muslims, and the people from the countryside, with many powerful Sheikhs as their leaders, a majority being Shi`i, would play an important role during and after the war in Mesopotamia and in their relationship with the British. “The Shaikh and his tribe were therefore “naturally” the dominant institution through which British policy aims were to be realized.”⁶¹

“In November 1914 the Ottoman sultan announced jihad, invoking his title as caliph of all Muslims. The Ottoman sultan’s call for jihad, included a call to liberate oppressed Muslims around the globe and defend the empire”⁶² The fatwa containing the jihad was read in every Sunni mosque in Mesopotamia. In the beginning, Shi`i Muslims did not recognize the Sultan as their religious leader, because he was a Sunni caliph. “According to the precepts of the Shi`i, the true successor of Muhammad had to be a descendant of the Prophet’s closest male relative, his cousin and son-in-law `Ali ibn Abu Talib.”⁶³ Nevertheless most of the Muslims followed the jihad call, seen it as a call for the defense of the Muslim brotherhood, especially going to the south to Basra where the British forces first arrived in 1914.⁶⁴

Between 1914 and 1918, British forces were able to take advantage of the weak Ottoman Empire, took control of Mesopotamia and established a civil administration. While British were fighting the Ottomans, on the other hand, the Ottomans were fighting the British and many Muslim factions inside the empire. In the case of Mesopotamia, the main social, religious and political group was the tribe. The tribe responded not to the Ottoman sultan, but to the sheikh as their leader. British officers in charge of the civil administration had a good understanding about that situation when they wrote:

Over these populations the shaikhs have such authority as their hereditary position or their personal prowess can command, but the Ottoman officials could exercise little or no control on tribesmen who vanished at will into marsh or desert, whither it was impossible to follow them. Instead of utilizing the power of the shaikhs, the Turks pursued their classical policy of attempting to improve their own position by the destruction of such native elements of order as were in existence.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Toby Dodge: *Inventing Iraq* 2003: 83

⁶² CDR. Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, USN: *Iraq in Turmoil, Historical Perspectives of Dr. Ali-Wardi, From The Ottoman Empire to King Feisal*. Naval Institute Press 2012:54

⁶³ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 32

⁶⁴ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 32

⁶⁵ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 21

The knowledge of the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the sheikhs of Mesopotamia was a very important tool British used during and after the war in order to defeat the Turks and reorganize Mesopotamia. The Sheikh became the most important figure British understood they had to relate to, in order to gain more influence in the empire they were fighting against and in Mesopotamia. Besides the British focus on increasing the status of the sheikh, another aspect British knew how to manipulate was the religious division between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims.

In order to understand the religious conflict between the different branches of Islam in today's Iraq during the British administration, it is necessary to take in consideration the importance of Mesopotamia in the development of Shi'i Islam. "Mesopotamia had declared itself for the hereditary right of the direct descendant of the prophet, as against an elected Khalif, before two divisions of Islam had taken form and name."⁶⁶ The country had the four places venerated by most of the Shi'i Muslims. These sacred towns are: Najaf, Karbala, Kadhimain and Samarra. Each one of these places is closely connected to important people in the Shi'i branch of Islam. In Najaf is the tomb of 'Ali. Karbala was the place where Husayn, 'Ali's youngest son, fought, died and was buried. In Karbala the 7th and 9th Imams descending from 'Ali are buried. And Samarra was where the 10th and 11th Imams were buried. Mesopotamia, with such an importance for the Shi'i Muslims had been ruled for centuries by a Sunni minority, and the war would heat up these differences later.

At the time of the British occupation of Mesopotamia, there were problems among the great sheikhs and the tribesmen and sheikhs of smaller sections and tribes. The main problem was the tax payment. During the last decades, important sheikhs were in charge of collecting the taxes from the tribes on behalf of the Ottoman Empire. But during the war, the less powerful sheikhs and tribesmen stopped paying the taxes to the sheikhs in charge of it. Then a fellowship started developing between some of the powerful sheikhs and the British. Once the war was over and the British were organizing the administration, "many of the greater sheikhs turned to them for assistance in pacifying their unruly vassals."⁶⁷ What happened was that, British started supporting the sheikhs in order to facilitate the collection of taxes on behalf of the new administration. This created an asymmetrical relationship between those important

⁶⁶ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 27

⁶⁷ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 128

sheikhs and British officials, where the sheikhs were under their command and following British orders.

The Land and the Law

The Revenue Department was the part of the British administration, in charge of organizing the tax collection of the country. The first Revenue commissioner was Mr. Henry Dobbs, who came from India at the beginning of the British occupation in Basra in 1915. But they were facing a difficult problem, and it was that the Ottomans, during the war, took most of the important document with them when leaving the country. The tax system applied during the time of the Ottoman Empire was not as clear and detailed as it was written on the law. At the time of the British arrival, still in many places the land was owned and cultivated without any official proprietor. Beside these problems, British forces had the need for pushing the agriculture in order to rehabilitate the economy, collect taxes and try to make the occupation less expensive for the government in Great Britain. The new administration was firm on the way they pursued their goals on the new land under their occupation, as it was written on British documents of the time: "Landowners in general were warned that if they did not cultivate their states Government would take over the management of them, and no guarantee would be given as to the at which or the terms on which the land would be restored."⁶⁸ That was the voice of the British occupants of the new country at the beginning of their administration. According to British reports, they had found an inefficient and corrupt administration that had to be reviewed and changed.

Imported Law

Among other challenges encountered by the British officials organizing their administration of Mesopotamia was the judicial system. As they explained: "British officials were frequently expected to apply a law which in Iraq, at the rate, had been a dead letter."⁶⁹ What British did in order to solve this judicial system totally different to what they were used to in Great

⁶⁸ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920:80

⁶⁹ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920:77

Britain and India? The British Civil Administration simply applied in Mesopotamia a judicial system imported from India. In 1915, “the Army Commander promulgated a code, known as the ‘Iraq Occupied Territories Code, which was based on the Indian Civil and Criminal Codes.”⁷⁰ According to British reports, the Indian Codes were superior and simpler than the Turkish already applied.

As British forces were advancing after controlling Basra in the south, by instructions from London, the Iraq Code, based on Indian law applied in Basra at the beginning of the occupation, was not going to be used in Baghdad. From 1917 on, “[t]he Baghdad Small Causes Court was established in order to administer the existing civil law of the land, while the Mohammedan Law Court was going to work on criminal law was based on the Shar‘ah law of Islam.”⁷¹ The same country was having two different law systems, one for the south and another for Baghdad and further north until 1919, when the whole country was ruled by the code approved for Baghdad. The explanation given by British officials concerning all those changes in the judicial system was the lack of records, competent judges and no operating court at the time of British arrival to Baghdad.

The British administration concerning the modification of the law system in Mesopotamia, wrote:

The Baghdad Penal Code is based on the Ottoman Penal Code, which at the date of occupation was in force in Baghdad as elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Penal Code is itself based on the French Penal Code, but contains important divergences from that Code. It was published in the year 1859, and has frequently been amended. Such amendments have usually been clumsy. The result is it now stands is unscientific, ill arranged and incomplete. It was necessary, therefore, to make very considerable amendments and additions to the Ottoman Penal Code. These have mostly been taken from the Egyptian Penal Code, which is also based on the French Penal Code, or from other Egyptian sources. –Further down British officials described- The Baghdad Criminal Procedure Regulation are based on the Sudan Criminal Procedure Code.⁷²

⁷⁰ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920:14

⁷¹ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 91

⁷² Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 95

All these changes and adaptations to the judicial system, explain how much British officials were improvising in the country they had under occupation. All the courts of first instance from Basra to Mosul had an Arab judge, but were directed by a British president.⁷³

The International Context

While British officials and members of the administration were implementing changes in the occupied country, British politicians from London and Egypt were making international deals concerning the future of the Middle East with other Arab Sheikhs.

The war of Great Britain and the allies against the Ottoman Empire was fought, both on the battlefield and among politicians and Arab leaders interested in gaining political and economical power by the defeat of the Turks. The well known contact between Sir Henry McMahon and the Sharif Husayn of Mecca through a series of correspondences in 1915 had its consequences in Mesopotamia years later. The main point of the approach between Sir Henry McMahon and the Sharif of Mecca was, the British promise of an Arab independent state including the Arabian peninsula, Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia for the Sharif and his four sons if they launched a revolt in the Hejaz against the Turks. The first part of the agreement was fulfilled by the Arabs. On June 1916 the Amir Faysal and Ali sons of Sharif Husayn launched a revolt against the Ottomans, “having previously been promised a subsidy of £50,000 per month in gold sovereigns, 5,000 rifles and a quarter of a million rounds of ammunition by decision of the British cabinet.”⁷⁴

While the Arabs were fighting alongside French and British, another agreement was made between France and Great Britain in May 1916, the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The French counselor in London M. Charles Francois Georges-Picot and the British Sir Mark Sykes came to terms on behalf of France and Great Britain. “The essence of the agreement was the Ottoman Middle East excepting the Arabian peninsula and Palestine (which was to be internationalized) was to be split in two.”⁷⁵ The Sykes-Picot Agreement would change the terms Great Britain previously had with the Sharif of Mecca. In the letters of McMahon and

⁷³ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 97-98

⁷⁴ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 95

⁷⁵ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 86

Sharif of Mecca, the promise involved territories that would become under Sharif's future Arab state, but under the new Sykes-Picot agreement, some of those territories would become under French control, like the case of Syria. The second agreement had direct consequences for the British administration in Mesopotamia, among other reasons because many of the Arabs fighting with Faysal were Arabs from Mesopotamia.⁷⁶

The Arab revolution led by Amir Faysal, increased Arab nationalism in the Middle East. Because of the promise made by Great Britain to Sharif of Mecca, some Arabs on the side of Sharif fought with the intention of becoming independent. Inside Faysal's army was the seed of a later revolution in Mesopotamia. British reports said:

"Most of the leading men in Faisal's army were of Mesopotamian origin, many of them being Baghdadis. They had always contented that they fought for the Syrian campaign for the liberation of their own country, and as early as the winter 1917-1918, during the hostilities Ma'an, they formed a society called the 'Ahd al 'Iraqi, the object of which was to secure the independence of Mesopotamia from all foreign control and its close union with an independent Syria, under the family of King Husain of the Hijaz."⁷⁷

After the war was over, British and French divided the Middle East according to the Sykes-Picot agreement. When the news of the British promise of Syria to France reached Faysal's inner circle, he declared himself king of Syria in March 1920. His kingdom lasted just five months, because at the San Remo conference in April the same year, Syria became a mandate under France control. Faysal fought the French but was defeated and sent in exile.

Mesopotamia, A Headache for Wilson and His Civil Administration

The reaction of the people from Mesopotamia concerning the British occupation was different from group to group depending on their interests. For merchants, farm owners and contractors and many sheikhs and tribe leaders, the occupation represented a positive step for their economic interests. But the main opposition came from the religious leaders. During the war "Shi'a scholars in Najaf, Karbala and Baghdad sided with the Sunni against the non-Muslim invaders."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 132

⁷⁷ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 132

⁷⁸ Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq, The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*, University of Texas Press, 2012: 54

British officials divided Mesopotamia into sixteen provinces, and each one of them subdivided into several districts. British imposed new taxes in order to reorganize the economy. There were taxes on housing, water, building taxes, animal taxes and shops. The new administration introduced the rupee as currency instead of the Turkish and laws from India. Besides that, all the provinces were directed by a British governor with almost absolute power. With these changes the relationship between British officials and many religious leaders, sheikhs and tribes started coming to a friction point. "Such absolute power, coupled with the predisposition of the officers to feel disdain for their "subjects", made for a dangerous formula that caused many officers to meet violent death at the hands, or at the behest, of the scorned shaykhs."⁷⁹

At the top of the British administration was Arnold T. Wilson, who did not want to follow the international changes. He did not pay attention to the nationalist movement in the Middle East, neither to US President Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations new anti-colonialism agenda. Differences between British officials and people from Mesopotamia started in 1917, but it was after 1918 that those differences started taking a more serious tone.

Internally among British in the Middle East there were deep differences concerning Wilson's administration. One of them was Colonel T. E. Lawrence, who later became known as Lawrence of Arabia. Colonel T. E. Lawrence had taken part in the Arab revolt against the Ottomans in 1916-18. By 1920 he had become a close friend of Emir Faysal, and a critic of Arnold T. Wilson's administration. In 1918 Lawrence had made public his opinion that, Mesopotamia had to be divided in two zones, one ruled by the Emir Abdallah, and the other by his brother Zayd, while Emir Faysal would rule over Syria. In that way three of the sons of Sharif Husayn of Mecca would rule important territories in the Middle East, something agreed by McMahon and the Sharif in their famous letters before the Arab revolt against the Ottomans. Lawrence public opinion about the future of Mesopotamia was not welcome by Wilson, who knew that, "Lawrence was fast acquiring influential friends in the government, including Winston Churchill."⁸⁰

What did Wilson do to convince London and India who were under pressure by a growing unrest in Mesopotamia and to contradict Lawrence proposal? Wilson proposed to London and the India office the organization of a referendum in Mesopotamia under his direction. In

⁷⁹ Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq, The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State* 2012: 56

⁸⁰ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 148

that way Great Britain would be seen as complying with the new international state of affairs with the self-determination of the people under their rule.

The referendum was organized by the end of 1918, and asked three vital questions:

- 1) Whether they were in favour of a single Arab State under British tutelage extending from the northern boundary of the Mosul Wilayat to the Persian Gulf?
- 2) If so, whether they considered that the new State should be placed under an Arab Amir?
- 3) And in that case whom would they suggest?⁸¹

The three main places where important people were consulted were Najaf, Karbala and Baghdad. The reports of the referendum were clear, and the answer was not what Arnold T. Wilson expected. The report said that, In Najaf they preferred an Emir under British protection, possibly a member of the Sharif family. In Karbala they wanted independence and an Islamic government. In Baghdad, considered the center of Mesopotamia by Wilson, and at the same time where British had the strongest Muslim opposition, they wanted an Arab State headed by a Mohammedan king, choosing one the sons of the Sharif. Among the minority that voted for a British rule were Jews, Christians and some leading family members and merchants.⁸² The message was clear, the majority people conforming Mesopotamia wanted its independence and an Islamic state. At the same time the referendum “was an important milestone in modern Iraqi political history. It marked the first time Iraqi leaders were even asked what kind of government they desired and which ruler they favored.”⁸³

What did Wilson and his people do in front of the results? First of all British officials discredited the people who voted for an independent state, by writing that “they (the people) did not have a definite opinion and were not position to form one.”⁸⁴ Wilson decided to proceed by ignoring what the consulted people had voted for. In 1919 in London, at a meeting with Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, Wilson presented a proposal. He proposed to create a British High Commissioner post, instead of an Arab Emir. Mesopotamia was to be divided in four provinces, each with an Arab governor chosen by the British and with British assistance. Later that year, in a speech at a banquet held on Baghdad on behalf of

⁸¹ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 127

⁸² Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 128

⁸³ CDR. Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, USN: *Iraq in Turmoil, Historial Perspectives of Dr. Ali-Wardi, From The Ottoman Empire to King Feisal*. 2012: 86

⁸⁴ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 127

the King's birthday on May 29th 1919, Wilson said: "Iraq needs expert guidance and foreign assistance if it is to escape the fate of neighbouring countries and to fulfil its destinies. It needs time to educate its sons in the ways of modern society."⁸⁵ In the meantime Wilson could maneuver at his will, because Great Britain was still in doubt about what to do with Mesopotamia in terms of government, due to the international change concerning self-determination imposed by US.

By 1919, the concept of self-determination and unconditional independence was becoming under interpretation of the leading powers. It would only be applied to "civilized" people, like those of European countries that were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. "It never seems to have occurred to President Wilson and his advisors that the "semi-civilised Iraq, Palestine and Syria should become fully independent. What the Americans wanted was order."⁸⁶ The new order wanted by US politicians in the Middle East, seemed to be mainly focused at securing their future investments in the area.

The Mandate Solution

After World War I, US became an important international power. US dollars were to be invested in the new growing business, namely the oil from the Middle East. American politicians and investors did not want any other power on its way for investments in the Middle East. US policy of free and equal access to markets was to be connected with British and French interest without the European colonial system, but through another system.⁸⁷ "The mandatory system was first discussed at a meeting of the Allies Supreme Council on 30 January 1919."⁸⁸ The façade of the mandate was presented as a stage on the way to a complete independence of any area under it. "The mandate was ratified by the principal powers at a conference at San Remo in April 1920."⁸⁹

The information about a Mandate proposal began to spread in Mesopotamia. Already in 1919 there were signs of unrest especially among Arab leaders, influenced by a growing Arab nationalism. British in Mesopotamia pointed out that: "The first symptom of *rapprochement*

⁸⁵ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 130

⁸⁶ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 156

⁸⁷ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 156. Toby Dodge: *Inventing Iraq* 2003: 6-7

⁸⁸ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 156

⁸⁹ William R. Polk: *Understanding Iraq* 2005: 75

occurred in the summer of 1919, when on two occasions Sunnis attended the religious meetings which were held in memory of the deceased Shi'ah mujtahid, Sayid Muhammad Kadhim Yazdi.”⁹⁰ During the same year 1919, “important Arab leaders from Mesopotamia wrote to US President W. Wilson, asking him for help in order to create their Arab state in Iraq.”⁹¹ A second letter was sent, but there was no answer from President Wilson.⁹² In the meantime Baghdad and Karbala became centers of Islam and Arab nationalism, “creating a secret society called the Islamic Group. Its goals were a rejection of British occupation, immediate independence, and the selection of a Muslim ruler in Iraq.”⁹³

While the unrest was growing, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was confirming Mesopotamia's oil reserves, and this confirmation gave the Mandate idea complete form. At the San Remo Conference on April 24th 1920, the fate of many areas in the Middle East was decided by British and French and the League of Nations. It was at that conference where the Mandates of Mesopotamia, later officially Iraq and Syria were assigned to France and Great Britain.⁹⁴

When the news that Great Britain had accepted the mandate for Mesopotamia reached the country in May 1920, it served as a trigger for the Arab nationalism. Sunni and Shi'i religious differences became less important, and both sects formed a united front against British new mandate. The middle Euphrates became the center of a popular movement that would explode during the summer of 1920. Between June and November 1920, the first Arab revolution for independence from a European power was set in motion in the middle Euphrates. For five months Sunni and Shi'i Muslims came together after being left with no other alternative than to fight for their independence that was promised at the beginning of the war in 1914, but turned different at San Remo in 1920. The revolt of Mesopotamia changed the rules of the game for Great Britain in that area of the Middle East.

⁹⁰ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 140

⁹¹ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 157. Salman Hai Tu'ma: *Karbela' fi thawra al-'isbrin* (Karbela' in the Revolution of 1920), Beirut, 2000: 30

⁹² Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 157

⁹³ CDR. Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, USN: *Iraq in Turmoil, Historical Perspectives of Dr. Ali-Wardi, From The Ottoman Empire to King Feisal*. 2012: 88

⁹⁴ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* (2014-163)

Chapter 3

The Revolution and British Response

During the summer of 1920, the growing differences between a considerable portion of the Muslim population of Mesopotamia and the British administration reached its climax. A mixture of issues became the ingredients and spark for the revolt. First: a strong religious opposition to British rule. Many important religious leaders did not want to be ruled by non-Muslim. Second: tribal inconformity concerning the high taxation implemented by the British administration. Third: demanding reactions to the promises of liberation made by the British to the people of Mesopotamia during the war. Fourth: the direct effect of the conflict in Syria, where Faisal was declared king in 1920, and later overthrown by the French during the same year. Several men in Faysal's army came from Mesopotamia and later became involved in the Arab struggle against the British. Fifth: the rebellion exploded at the time British military forces were not prepared for such violent movement, and serious tactic and military differences were visible between Arnold T. Wilson, chief of the administration and Lieutenant Gen. Aylmer Haldane, Commander in chief of British forces in Mesopotamia at the time of the revolt.⁹⁵ What triggered the revolt? How did British forces respond? What were the consequences of the revolt for the British administration and for Mesopotamia?

The Military Situation at the Beginning of the Rebellion

According to historians, Amal Vinogradov and Ian Rutledge, the spark that ignited the revolt by the end of June of 1920 was the arrest of a sheikh at Rumaytha in the Diwaniya Province in June that year. He was sent to jail accused of failing to pay his taxes to the British.⁹⁶ The

⁹⁵ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates, The British Occupation of Iraq and the Great Arab Revolt 1914-1921*. Saqi Books, London 2014: 309

⁹⁶ Amal Vinogradov: *The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics*. International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 3, No. 2, April, 1972: 123-139. Published by: Cambridge University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/162680>

Province where the sheikh had been arrested was located at the mid-Euphrates, the region that came to be at the center of the rebellion. In his account of this event, Arnold T. Wilson wrote:

...the immediate excuse for this outbreak was trivial in the extreme. The Shaikh of the Dhawalim section of the Bani Buchaim, who had failed to repay an agricultural loan of the preceding year amounting to less than £ 100, was sent for by the Assistant Political Officer, Captain P. T. Hyatt, who pressed him for repayment. He was so truculent and insolent that Captain Hyatt felt he had no option but to send him by train that evening to Diwaniya. That afternoon, following an example which had been set at Samawa a few weeks earlier, his supporters broke into the sarai and forcibly released him. The neighbouring tribes to the north did their utmost to prevent the Dhawalim from entering their territory, but the latter had received definite orders from the Shamiya division (Najaf and Kufa) to rise. They were encouraged by assurances that, under the terms of the Mandate, Great Britain was precluded from using military force, and that practically the whole of our available forces had been withdrawn either to Persia or to India. The news fell upon fertile soil.⁹⁷

This account shows some important aspects to analyze. On the one hand, Wilson mentioned that the reason for the detention of the sheikh was the failure to pay taxes. Later investigations had revealed that, the efficient and centralized British control at that moment, reached tribal regions that had been isolated from the central Ottoman control, and therefore were not used to the press for tax payment.⁹⁸ “Indeed one significant feature of the 1920 revolt was that the worst of the violence occurred in regions such as the middle-Euphrates where central demands for taxation were a new and unwelcome development to the “lawless” tribes...”⁹⁹ On the other hand, Wilson wrote about the contemporary military condition of the British forces in Mesopotamia. According to him, by February 1920, the military situation was critical. Sir Aylmer Haldane, the man in charge of the British army in Mesopotamia, had 29,500 men, of whom 2,900 were Indian cavalry, 2,900 British and 23,700 Indian infantry. The task that absorbed most of the military personnel was the keeping custody of some 14,000 Ottoman prisoners of war. By June, in a telegram sent by Wilson to the India Office, he spoke

Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 249

⁹⁷ Sir Arnold T. Wilson; *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties, A Personal and Historical Record*. Oxford University Press, London: Humphrey Milford 1931 pp. 277-278

⁹⁸ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 30, No. 2, 349-377, April 2007: 371. Pembroke College, Cambridge University, UK. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0140390701248780>

⁹⁹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The British occupation of Mesopotamia, 1914-1922*. (Bell papers, Letter, Gertrude Bell to her father, 4 July 1920; Atiyyah, Iraq, 353.) *The Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 30, No. 2, 349-377, April 2007. Pembroke College, Cambridge University, UK. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0140390701248780>

of the weakness of the British forces in Mesopotamia at the time.¹⁰⁰ General Haldane had a force of 500 British and between 2,500 to 3,000 Indian troops.¹⁰¹ According to Wilson, “[the] British troops were, almost without exception, new in the country, and without previous military experience.”¹⁰² This was the condition of the British military forces in charge of Mesopotamia at the time of the revolt in June 1920.

Who were the Muslims Involved in the Revolt?

In most of the reports written by the British Administration and Sir Arnold Wilson in Mesopotamia during the period 1918-1920, the term extremist was used by the British to describe the Arabs in Mesopotamia involved in the independence movement. During the two years before the revolt, there were several political movements among the Arabs in Mesopotamia. Between 1918 and 1919, three societies were formed by Arab leaders in Mesopotamia. The first was *Jim`yat al-Nahda al-Islamiya* (The League of the Islamic Awakening), founded in Najaf in 1918. Among its members were journalists and religious leaders. The second society organized the same year was, *Al-Jim`ya al-Wataniya al-Islamiya* (The Moslem National League), formed near Karbala. The last of the three organizations was *Haras al-Istiqlall* (The Guardians of Independence), its foundation dates from 1919 in Baghdad. The last of the organizations became the most important with offices in Hilla, Kut, Kabala and Najaf. All of them had something in common, namely the independence of Mesopotamia. Most of the people participating in these groups were Shi`i and Sunni Muslims, civil and religious leaders.¹⁰³ The majority of people belonging to these groups seemed to be the same who had been opposed the British rule in the referendum organized by the British in 1918.

The political conflict in Mesopotamia in 1920 seemed to be reaching its highest point by 3rd May 1920, when the announcement of the Mandate, was made by the British administration. According to a British official report:

The announcement spurred the nationalists to fresh activity. The claim to immediate and complete independence on the Syrian model, though it commanded the sympathy of members

¹⁰⁰ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, *Inter-Departmental Conference on Middle Eastern Affairs*, June 16, 1920, 05:00 PM. FO 371/5227/109: 3

¹⁰¹ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920*: 271

¹⁰² Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920*: 272

¹⁰³ Amal Vinogradov: *The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered* p.134

of the upper classes who looked to taking a leading part in the Arab State, and of men out of job who hoped to gain a livelihood from the same source, did not make much headway in rousing the mass of the population. To that end an argument was needed which would be understood by the most ignorant and it was found in an appeal to religious fanaticism.¹⁰⁴

In March 1920, a Syrian Congress in Damascus had proclaimed Emir Faysal King of Syria. The proclamation of Faysal as King of Syria was a movement economically supported by the British.¹⁰⁵ In his speech at opening of the Syrian Congress, Faisal quoted U.S. President Wilson's self-determination doctrine from 1918, as the one of the main fundamentals for the Syrian independence.¹⁰⁶ Both in Syria and in Mesopotamia, the Arabs had appealed to the same argument of the self-determination expressed by U.S. President Wilson in 1918, as one of the fundamental reason of their struggle for their independence.

But there were differences between the Syrians and Mesopotamians in Faysal's army regarding important positions in the government. Syrians started seeing Mesopotamians as foreigners and this helped to ignite the nationalist movement of Mesopotamia.¹⁰⁷ The claiming of an independent Mesopotamia by organized groups, supported by different social classes and religious leaders, was seen as an act of religious fanaticism by the British. Another influence from the independent movement in Syria was that, Mesopotamian men attached to Faysal's army returning to Mesopotamia united themselves with the other pro-independence groups in the country. And this was a backlash to the British because of their political maneuver against France and their Mandate in Syria. Arnold T. Wilson wrote: "They [Mesopotamians in Faysal's army] had hitherto received from the British Treasury ample moral and financial assistance towards the creation in that region [Syria] of an independent Arab State. Why should they accept less in Iraq?"¹⁰⁸

During the first half of 1920, several movements started organizing resistance in different regions of Mesopotamia. Dier el Zor, a region near Syria, was occupied by a tribal army that overthrew the British Political Officer and installed a governor sent from Syria. In the city of Tel' Afar, North of Mosul, a British officer was killed and the tribesmen took over the fort.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 140

¹⁰⁵ Foreign Office Document, British National Archives, FO 371/E6799/169/44, June 1920. FO 371/E7930/169/44 July 1920. FO 371/E6477/169/44 June 1920

¹⁰⁶ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, 371/5071/E2377

¹⁰⁷ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 138

¹⁰⁸ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920*

A Clash of Loyalties 1931: 251

¹⁰⁹ Amal Vinogradov: *The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics* 1972: 134

Under these circumstances Sir Arnold T. Wilson was taking note of the degree of power that such independent movements were having. He notated that: “the attacks on Tel`Afar and the Mosul road, gave substance to the belief that our military position was not such as would enable us to hold the tribes if they could be roused.”¹¹⁰ The situation in Dier el Zor was more than a simple part of the rebellion of Mesopotamia. The events in Dier el Zor, and the situation in Syria seemed to be related to the plans of Sharif Hussein and his sons concerning the creation of an Arab state as it had been promised. In a letter from Cairo to the Foreign Office, date March 27/1920, British wrote about Sharif Hussein’s intention at the moment:

Lord Allenby has received a telegram from King Hussein, who emphasizes the principle of Arab unity, and supports the resolutions of the Syrian and Mesopotamian Congress. He quotes H. MacMahon’s letter of August 30th, 1915, which confirms Lord Kitchener’s message concerning the independence of Arabia and the Caliphate. Hussein has begun to sign himself “Gran King of the Arabs”.¹¹¹

In the same document, Sharif Hussein was mentioning the support his son Abdullah had been receiving from the people of Syria and Mesopotamia concerning his possible appointment as King of Mesopotamia. The British support of Faysal in Syria was becoming more that what British expected, due to the expansion of the Syrian independent movement to Mesopotamia and the Sharif Hussein’s plans of an Arab state. The Foreign Office’s answer to the former document was:

You should inform Hussein and Abdullah without delay that His Majesty’s Government do not regard the 29 Mesopotamians of Damascus as having any authority to speak for Mesopotamia, and that the future of that country can only be decided by the Peace Conference after ascertaining the wishes of the inhabitants.¹¹²

Through the exchange of these documents it seemed that Great Britain and the Sharif Hussein of Mecca had two different agendas concerning the future of Mesopotamia. It seemed that Sharif Hussein’s plans of including Mesopotamia in his Arab state were not welcome by Great Britain. While the British support of Emir Faysal in Syria was having an unexpected influence among the pro-independence movements in Mesopotamia.

¹¹⁰ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 255

¹¹¹ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5034/E2491

¹¹² Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5034/E2491/2/44

The outbreak in Dier el Zor, in March 1920, had showed the different views and opinions between the British administration in Mesopotamia, and the government in London concerning to the British economic support of Faysal in Syria and the people involved in the conflict of Dier el Zor in Mesopotamia. The British Commissioner Wilson was showing concerns about the connection between the pro-independence movement in Mesopotamia and Faisal's project in Syria. A letter from the India Office in March 1920, speaks of Wilson's suggestion about stopping the British economic support of Faisal, because according to him, part of the money had been used to sponsor the independent movement in Dier el Zor.¹¹³

Arabs' Peaceful Approach to the British

A delegation of Arab leaders visited Wilson in order to discuss the Mandate.¹¹⁴ But Wilson refused to negotiate with the leaders. Stating that he was: "unable to accept them as representatives of the Iraq nation; a large body of sober-minded opinion doubted the wisdom of their programme [which included the rejection of the mandate], disapproved of their methods, and questioned their good faith."¹¹⁵ Instead, in the beginning of June 1920, Wilson decided to invite another group of leaders chosen by him, together with the first self-appointed committee, as the British called them. Among the members of this group were leading notables of Baghdad, Jews and Christians.¹¹⁶

The group of leaders intended to reach an agreement with the British Administrative forces in Mesopotamia by appealing to international treaties, but met a hard wall in the person of the Wilson as the Acting Civil Commissioner. They brought out the argument of what had been stipulated in the Anglo-French declaration of 1918, demanding the formation of a Convention for Iraq, elected in conformity with Ottoman electoral law, to form a national Arab Government and asked for complete freedom of press.¹¹⁷ However, Wilson had never been a supporter of the Anglo-French declaration. According to Wilson: "Its promulgation was a disastrous error, the perpetration of which was forced upon the Allied Powers by US

¹¹³ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5029/E1870

¹¹⁴ Mark Jacobsen: *Only by the Sword, British Counter-Insurgency in Iraq, 1920*. Small Wars and Insurgencies Vol. 2, April 1991, No. 1. Frank Cass & Co. LTD Gainsborough House, 11 Gainsborough Road London, pp. 330

¹¹⁵ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 255

¹¹⁶ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 255

¹¹⁷ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 141

President Wilson: it encouraged aspiration amongst Armenian and Assyrians, Chaldean and Syrian Christians, which neither the Allies nor United States did anything further.¹¹⁸

After the meeting, Wilson sent a report to the India Office, where among other things he wrote:

Having regards to the Anglo-French declaration I therefore see no other course open to us but to issue an announcement that when the Mandate is granted steps will be taken to summon a Constituent Assembly to consult on the future form of Government.¹¹⁹

Since the referendum organized by Wilson in 1918, the British had received the same response from Arabs in Mesopotamia. The British were not wanted in the country by the majority of the population. But still on 2nd June 1920, Sir Arnold Wilson wrote to the India Office to consult on the future form of government in Mesopotamia, after being aware of the violent episodes British forces had faced with nationalist groups since the first part of 1920. However, until the day of the meeting with notables and Arab leaders, he had received the same Independence expressions from the nationalist movement in Mesopotamia.

Wilson's Differences with the Foreign Office

During June 1920, the differences between Wilson and the Foreign Office concerning the Sheriffian influence in the independent movements in Mesopotamia were becoming clear. Wilson was constant in his belief that the Arabs responsible for the outbreak in the Mid-Euphrates were connected to Faisal in Syria. But the Foreign Office in London had another opinion. During the summer 1920, the British in Mesopotamia, with Commissioner Wilson in charge were worried about the events taking place in Deir-el-Zor. In a telegram from June 15th 1920, sent by Wilson to the War Office, he stated:

Reliable information states that a Shiah Conference held at Dair-Ef-Zor about May 25th accepted Amir Abdullah as ruler of Mesopotamia. Abdullah said to be coming to Dair-Ef-Zor. This information together with my last confirms presence of Arab force of 400 strong with one machine gun at Telfadgham.

¹¹⁸ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 103

¹¹⁹ Wilson's letter to the India Office, June 2nd 1920. Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 258

According to this informant a force was advancing on Telafar and inhabitants were being urged to join the Arabs.¹²⁰

The response of the War Office to Wilson's telegram, did not show confidence in Wilson's information, but rather they wrote to the India Office inquiring if the events in the Mid-Euphrates were not provoked by other group:

I am to say that the Army Council would be glad to be informed whether, in the opinion of Mr. Montagu, Colonel Sir A. Wilson is correctly informed in so persistently attributing to Sherifian influence the anti-British activity of the Arabs on the Euphrates, or whether this hostility may not be inspired by the Young Arab Party of Damascus. The Council understands that the latter are much akin to the Young Turks of the C.U.P., in which case the fact that the Emir Faisal is unable to control the leaders of this movement does not necessarily imply that he sympathises with their anti-British activity.¹²¹

The exchange of correspondences between Sir Wilson and the War Office showed the degree of misunderstanding concerning who were the Arabs involved in the anti-British movements in the Euphrates in Mesopotamia since March 1920. As the War Office pointed out in the letter, Wilson had been persistent in his opinion that the people of the Sharif Hussein were connected with the movements of the Euphrates. But even though the War Office had received information from the Cairo Office in March that year, concerning the Sharif Hussein's support of the Syrian Congress and the Mesopotamians that were interested in appointing his son Abdullah as ruler of Mesopotamia, they were more inclined to blame the Young Turks for the anti-British movements of the Euphrates.

The discussion on who were the people involved in the anti-British movements in Mesopotamia, reached the British Parliament by the middle of June 1920. The Secretary of State of War Winston Churchill, was asked if the attacks experienced by British officers in Mesopotamia had been directed by isolated tribesmen or if they had been committed by Sherifian Arabs connected to rulers economically supported by Great Britain. To the question Churchill's answer was:

The term "Sheriffian" had been applied to the officers who led the attack on Tel Afar, but this expression may not be strictly accurate. Emir Faisal, the son of the Sherif of Mecca, has given repeated assurances that any officers of the Sheriffian army who took part in these raids would be

¹²⁰ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5129/E6717/95/44

¹²¹ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5129/E6729/25/44

repudiated by him. It seems more probable that the anti-British hostility of the Arabs on the Euphrates is inspired rather by the Young Arab party at Damascus than by the representatives of the Sheriffian family, who at least profess their desire to retain the friendship of His Majesty's Government.¹²²

The anti-British activity in Mesopotamia was taking place at a moment when neither the War Office in Great Britain nor the British administration in Mesopotamia were sure who were the people involved in it. But what was becoming clear was that Wilson's words about the issue were not taken as seriously by the War Office, as they took Emir Faisal's opinion.

On 16 June, an Inter-departmental conference was held at the Foreign Office. The top ministers of the India Office and the Foreign Office discussed Great Britain's situation in the Middle East. One of the main issues of the conference was the situation of Mesopotamia under Wilson's administration.¹²³ The Foreign Office was critical to Wilson's methods in dealing with the unrest of Mesopotamia. After reading some of the telegrams sent by Wilson to the India Office during June 1920, the Chairman of the Foreign Office, the Earl Curzon of Kedleston stated that, "these telegrams left him with an unpleasant impression of Colonel Wilson's incapacity to deal with the situation."¹²⁴ Responding to that statement, the Secretary of State for India, Mr. E. S. Montagu said that, "he had never held the view that Colonel Wilson, with his marked inclination to concentrate power in his own hands, could fairly be asked to carry out the policy of His Majesty's Government in Mesopotamia."¹²⁵ The India Office had supported Wilson in many of his policies in Mesopotamia, but the time had come when they had to agree with the Foreign Office about Wilson's capacity as a British Commissioner in Mesopotamia. The conference showed that the Foreign Office and Sir Wilson had two different concepts on how to face the situation of Mesopotamia. For Wilson there were just two options, as he wrote to the India Office. They were, either to follow the follow his methods or to leave the country, but he did not want any negotiation with extremists, as he expressed.¹²⁶ After the conference, Wilson's time was counted, and Sir Percy Cox became the person that within months would take over his post as British Commissioner in Mesopotamia. The Foreign Office was trying to find a more diplomatic approach to the situation of Mesopotamia and Wilson was not the man for that work.

¹²² Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5129/E6747/95/44

¹²³ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5227E6830/2719/44

¹²⁴ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5227E6830/2719/44

¹²⁵ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5227E6830/2719/44

¹²⁶ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5227E6830/2719/44

While the situation of the Mid-Euphrates was being discussed in the British Parliament and in the Foreign Office, Wilson was reporting to the War Office the seriousness of the Arab attack between the Mid-Euphrates and Mosul. In the report Sir Wilson was emphatic about the danger British officers were under the Arab offensive. He stated that, “in the absence of strong re-inforcements unless we take the offensive against Dairazzer our position in Mosul may become untenable.”¹²⁷

On 20 June, an official announcement was made by the British, and sent to the leading Arab delegates. The message was clear:

His Majesty's Government having been entrusted with the mandate for Mesopotamia, anticipate that the mandate will constitute Mesopotamia an independent State under the guarantee of the League of Nations and subject to the mandate to Great Britain; that it will lay on them the responsibility for the maintenance of internal peace and external security, and will require them to formulate an organic law to be framed in consultation with the people of Mesopotamia and with due regard to the rights, wishes and interests of all the communities of the country. The mandate will contain provisions to facilitate the development of Mesopotamia as a self-governing State until such time as it can stand by itself, when the mandate will come to an end.¹²⁸

The announcement confirmed the implementation of the Mandate by the British, and once again the people of Mesopotamia would be consulted on the matter. On 30 June, the Arab delegates responded to the announcement with the immediate formation of a General Council for Iraq.¹²⁹ The same day, the arrest of the Sheikh in Rumaytha added the necessary spark for the spread the revolt.

The Expansion of the Uprising

Wilson's approach in dealing with Arab leaders, the nationalist movement, and the wish of many tribes from the region of the middle-Euphrates to avoid the obligation of paying taxes

¹²⁷ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5129/E6422/95/44

¹²⁸ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 142

¹²⁹ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 142

helped the fast spreading of the rebellion.¹³⁰ It was in that region that the most violent episodes took place during the revolt. By the beginning of July the tribes from the middle-Euphrates had managed to derail six trains between Samawa and Diwaniya. They cut the railway in three places in order to isolate Samawa, Rumaitha, and communications between Basra and Baghdad.¹³¹ During July 1920 the insurgents seemed to be taking control of the revolt. In the middle and lower Euphrates there were around 100,000 rebels fighting in the revolt. British forces were on the retreat from most of the towns except Hilla, Kufa and the British base in Samawa. During the retreat 180 British soldiers were killed, 60 wounded and around 160 were taken prisoners, while losing vehicles animals at the hands of Arab rebels.¹³²

The fast advance experienced by the insurgents, showed the weak side of the British troops controlling Mesopotamia at that time. Before the revolt, Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty and Minister of war by 1920, had been pressing Wilson to reduce the amount of troops. "In April [1920] he had demanded that [Lieutenant Gen. Aylmer] Haldane reduce the garrison of Iraq by 50 per cent by the next financial year."¹³³ Haldane accepted Churchill's petition but, suggested that it had to be done by the autumn that year. The revolt took the British by surprise. Haldane, who had been in charge of the British army in Mesopotamia since March 1920, did not have enough information about the conditions of the country and at the time of the revolt was travelling in Persia.¹³⁴ The defense budget the British were operating in the Middle East at the time, made them send many forces from Mesopotamia to Persia, while the rest was scattered all over Mesopotamia working on different duties. Under such conditions the revolt came at an inconvenient time for British forces. "The tribes were well entrenched and their tactics revealed a familiarity with Turkish military methods which pointed to their being led by ex-officers of the Turkish and Arab armies who had joined them from Baghdad and Dair al Zor."¹³⁵

The situation was taken seriously by the British government, because the 15 July, Churchill was asked by the Parliament about the situation of the outbreak at Rumaitha and Samawa.

¹³⁰ Liora Lukitz: *A Quest in the Middel East, Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq*. I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. Salem Road, London W2 4BU, 175 Avenue, New York NY 10010, 2013: 134

¹³¹ Mark Jacobsen: *Only by the Sword, British Counter-Insurgency in Iraq, 1920* 1991: 335

Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 278

¹³² Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 253

Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 279

¹³³ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* (2014:262)

¹³⁴ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The British occupation of Mesopotamia, 1914-1922*. 2007: 374

¹³⁵ Review of The Civil Administration Of Mesopotamia 1920: 146

Churchill confirmed that the arrest of a local Sheikh was the immediate cause the unrest, that the garrison had been surrounded by the rebels, but that reinforcement were sent from Bagdad in order to take control of the situation .¹³⁶ The British were showing concern about the information of the casualties in reported from Mesopotamia during the outbreak. However, Churchill replied that the exact number of casualties was not confirmed, but that they were Indian, not British at the moment.

Wilson Proposing Faysal for Mesopotamia

An event that added tension to the situation of Mesopotamia was the clash between French troops and King Faysal in Syria. In March 1920, Faisal had gathered a congress that declared him as the king of Syria, including Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan at the time. He was the son of the Sharif Hussein of Mecca, who had been a supporter of the British during the war against the Ottomans. On 14 July, Faisal received an ultimatum from the French army. It demanded his unconditional acceptance of the French Mandate. Even though he accepted the ultimatum, there was strong pressure from the population supporting him. On 20 July, a French outpost was attacked by Syrian fighters and French troops launched a strong offensive against the Syrian army, resulting in the occupation of Damascus on 25 July. By the end of July the deposition of Faisal was a fact.¹³⁷ When Wilson received the news of Faisal deposition, he sent a telegram to the India Office on 30 July, proposing Faysal as the head of the Mesopotamian State. Wilson stated that:

Faisal alone of all Arabian potentates has any idea of practical difficulties of running a civilized government on Arab lines. He can scarcely fail to realize that foreign assistance is vital to the continued existence of an Arab state. He realizes danger on relying on an Arab army. If we were to offer him the Amirate of Mesopotamia not only might we re-establish our position in the eyes of the Arab world, but we also might go far to wipe out accusation which would otherwise be made against us of bad faith both for with Faisal and with the people of this country...¹³⁸

Wilson's telegram seemed to show his concern about the local and international ramifications of the events that were developing in Mesopotamia and Syria. In the same telegram Wilson expressed his preoccupation in case Faysal would still had declared himself King of Syria, the

¹³⁶ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5227/E8279/2719/44

¹³⁷ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 305

¹³⁸ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 306

problem would just be for the French. But on the other hand, “[i]f he withdraws his claims for Syria and only claims paramountcy in Palestine his presence will make things hard for the French and will put us in a very difficult position”¹³⁹ At that point Wilson was acting in a more pragmatic way, forced by the internal problems in Mesopotamia and Great Britain’s politics in the region. According to Wilson, the proposal of Faysal as a head of State in Mesopotamia, would avoid problems in Palestine. But and at the same time, he thought Faisal would be accepted by Mesopotamians, while he would support the British in return. The India Office, with Mr. Montagu as its minister, was positive to Wilson’s proposal. But there were internal differences between India Office and the Foreign Office. The latter had Amir Abdulla as candidate for Iraq, according to Wilson.¹⁴⁰ These differences would take time to solve, while problems would continue in Mesopotamia.

The Rebels Advancing and the British Worried

July 1920 was a very intense month for British forces in Mesopotamia. During that time, the rebels attacked in Rumaitha where British forces were under siege for sixteen days and cost the lives of 148 British soldiers. During the same month the revolt expanded to Abu Skhair, near Najaf. There several tribes joined forces against the British. By the end of July rebels had capture Samawa, Ramaitha, Diwaniyya, Abu Skhair, Kufa, Najaf and Karbala. All those places were South of Baghdad in the Mid-Euphrates. The next step was to capture Hilla, and close in on Baghdad.¹⁴¹ Among the Arab leaders leading the uprising in the mid-Euphrates was, Sayyid Mushin Abu Tabikh, the eldest son of the Naqib of Basra. A well respected man. He was a veteran from the jihad against the British invasion back in 1914. During the latter years of the war he had been in exile in India and Egypt, returning to Mesopotamia in February 1920. He was among the Arab leaders at the meeting with Arnold T. Wilson on the 2 June, discussing the Mandate.¹⁴²

While the revolt was at its peak, General Haldane and Arnold Wilson had serious differences concerning the military tactics to be implemented facing the rebels. Wilson was concerned

¹³⁹ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 306

¹⁴⁰ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 307

¹⁴¹ Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq, The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*, University of Texas Press, 2012: 76

¹⁴² Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq, The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*, University of Texas Press, 2012: 77

Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 266

with the safety of his men, who were all over the country. He believed that the army had to be deployed in order to protect the lives of these soldiers. However, Haldane had another perception on how to direct the campaign. He became worried about the lack of reserves in case of an attack to Baghdad by the rebels. In a communication with Churchill, at the end of July, he had received the order to keep some reserve until more troops would arrive from India.¹⁴³ The different perceptions on how to face the revolt, between the top chief of the administration and the chief of British forces in Mesopotamia was a reflection of how difficult the task of controlling Mesopotamia was becoming for Great Britain at the time. “To Wilson, the order was little more than a death sentence for some of those under his command and for whom he has deepest respect and affection.”¹⁴⁴

At the beginning of August, the fighting drew ever closer to Baghdad, due to an incident where a British official was killed by a Sheikh. Until August, the tribes between Baghdad and Ramadi had not been in combat against British forces. The British had a good relationship with Sheikh Ali Sulaiman, who was an authority in the region. He was a supporter of the British, and had helped to prevent the expansion of the revolt in the Dulaym province. The British officer, Colonel Gerald Evelyn Leachman was killed by Sheikh Dari, leader of the Zoba tribe. According to British sources, both men agreed to meet in order to discuss matters concerning crops and revenue. Later that night a group of Arabs reported that they had been robbed in the near Baghdad. Colonel Leachman ordered ten of his men to arrest the robbers. The story ends when the Zoba tribe was considered responsible of the robbery. After a while, Sheikh Dari approached to Colonel Leachman, followed by two men. One of them, Sheikh Dari’s son, fired and wounded Colonel Leachman, while Sheikh Dari draw his sword and killed the Colonel¹⁴⁵ Another version of the incident, extracted from the historian Abbas Kadim holds that, “[t]he killing of Leachman was in line with tribal honor tradition. He abused the shaykh of the Zoba tribe and lost his life for it. Indeed his lawyer had said that Dari was on good terms with the British.”¹⁴⁶

The Zoba tribe was preparing for a British retaliation, but thanks to the mediation of the Sheikhs Ali Sulaiman, Fahd al-Hadhdhal and Muhsin, leaders of that region, the expansion of

¹⁴³ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 309

¹⁴⁴ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 310

¹⁴⁵ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 231, from Sir Aylmer Haldane’s book, p. 171

¹⁴⁶ Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq, The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*, University of Texas Press, 2012: 79-80

the revolution was avoided, due to their good relationship with the British. Shaikh Dari was arrested and put in jail almost eight years later, and died on 1 February 1928.¹⁴⁷ The episode of the sheikh Dari showed that still many important Sheikhs were on good terms with the British under the revolt, and even on cases like the one with Colonel Leachman and Sheikh Dari, they remained on the British side.

The news about the British casualties during late July and the beginning of August had reached the Parliament, and Churchill had to answer several questions about the situation. The detailed account of the late days in Mesopotamia stated by Churchill concerning the British casualties was:

On 24th July the Commander at Hillah, a post south of Bagdad, and between that place and Basra, sent forward to a point about 6 miles further on the road a small column of three companies of Manchesters, one company of pioneers, one squadron of cavalry, and a battery of field artillery in the hope of preventing the spread of disaffection northward. The column reached its destination. I understand that on the way back to Hillah it was attacked. The actual events are unknown, but the force returned to Hillah with the following loses: - Killed: British officers, 2; other ranks, 10; Indian officer, 1; other ranks, 7. Wounded: British officers, 4; other ranks, 22; Indian officers, 2; other ranks, 32. Wounded and missing: British, one officer; other ranks 6. Missing: British, 1 officer; other ranks, 199; Indian: 1 officer; 81 other ranks. Thirty transport drivers were lost, and 260 horses, mules and ponies were killed and wounded. One field gun, 7 ammunition wagons, 12 Lewis guns, and 89 transport carts were lost. I am at present uncertain as to the fate of the 280 British and Indian officers and men who are missing.¹⁴⁸

The report delivered by Churchill to the Parliament was not promising for the British side during that stage of the rebellion. During the same week, the 9 August, the British Parliament was interested in knowing the opinion of the British officials in administration of Mesopotamia concerning the establishment of an Arab state in that country. The Parliament was also interested about the date of the arrival of Sir Percy Cox as the new British Commissioner in Mesopotamia.¹⁴⁹ After analyzing some of the discussions that were taking place at the British Parliament during July and August 1920, is it possible to understand the British interest in finding a solution to the crisis in Mesopotamia. They were losing troops, economic resources and the revolt was spreading.

¹⁴⁷ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 292-293, Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq, The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*, University of Texas Press, 2012: 79-81

¹⁴⁸ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5228/E9519/2719/44

¹⁴⁹ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5228/E9743/2719/44

During August, British forces had received military support from India with the arrival of thousands of soldiers, and had started using airplanes for bombing the rebels. "The urgency of the crisis was impressed on the British War Minister, Winston S. Churchill, who authorized immediate reinforcement from Iran. The reinforcements included two squadrons of the Royal Air Force that proceed to break the siege of Kufa through heavy bombardment."¹⁵⁰ With the help of the air bombing General Haladane was able to take his troops out of Kufa and placed them around Falluja, in order to defend Baghdad from a possible attack. Although British reinforcement was coming in August to Mesopotamia in order to face the Arab threat, Sir Wilson was worried about the situation. The 10 August he wrote a telegram to the India office expressing his fears that the military reinforcement had come too late. According to him, in the telegram, he was worried about the expansion of the situation from the Euphrates to other places of the country.¹⁵¹ Wilson's telegram and the discussions at the British Parliament were showing the degree of seriousness of the revolt.

The Reasons of the Rebellion According to Wilson

In a letter sent from the India Office to the War Office the 12 August, 1920, the India Office was resending the letter Arnold. T. Wilson had sent to them from Bagdad in the beginning of August. In the letter Wilson was explaining, according to him, the causes of the rebellion on the Euphrates. Wilson mentioned the influence of the propaganda coming from Syria and Turkey in the rising of the rebels. But Wilson wrote about something worth to mention, and that was the weakness of the British troops in Mesopotamia at the moment of the revolt. He stated:

So long as our military weakness was not apparent, this propaganda, the objects of which were largely foreign to ideas of people at large, had little success, except in Bagdad, Kerbela and Najaf, where sentimental leaders have always been more or less in sympathy with the idea of pure Islamic state.¹⁵²

In the same document he blamed the British enemies in Syria for influencing the people on the Euphrates, about the possibilities of defeating the British. He wrote that, people had lost the confidence in the British officers to maintain order in the country. "Extremist began to

¹⁵⁰ Amal Vinogradov: *The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics* 1972: 137

¹⁵¹ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5228/E9845/2719/44

¹⁵² Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5228/E9849/2719/44

hope that they may be successful in attaining their object, viz., complete independence and freedom from all foreign interference by direct action.”¹⁵³ As it has been discussed before, many of the Arab leaders that were hoping to achieve a complete independence had been trying several peaceful approaches with Wilson. But time after time he had showed no signs of negotiation with the people he called extremists. By the time he wrote this document, Great Britain was trying to find a more diplomatic solution to the crisis, but Wilson was not the man to implement that policy in Mesopotamia.

The success of the Bolshevik revolution in other parts of the world had influenced the rebels, according to Wilson. But the United States were in another factor of bad influence in the revolt, in Wilson’s letter:

United States Consul and other United States citizens, who I have every reason to know, make it their business to convey to extremists in detail all references in English Press unfavorable to Local and Imperial policy of His Majesty’s Government, notably articles from the Times which are freely referred to by extremists in their public speeches and conversations.¹⁵⁴

Wilson’s reference concerning the English Press is treated further in this thesis. It was mainly how the some of the English newspapers were publishing the events of the rebellion and how it was captivating the English and the Arab public opinion, at the same time. The rebels had used U.S. President Wilson’s self-determination doctrine as an argument for the struggle, as it was mentioned before. Moreover, there were American interests in the oil from the region, and that seemed to explain Wilson’s concerns about the United States influence in the country. At the end of his letter Wilson stated clearly, once more, the demands of the people involved in the revolt:

The demands of the rebellious leaders so far (? formulated) are complete expulsion of British from Mesopotamia, and an “Islamic Kingdom.” To Shamiyah this means the theocratic state which is their ideal; to tribes it means no Government at all, or Government by chiefs whom they can ignore at will.¹⁵⁵

The fact that has been exposed throughout this thesis about the demands of the rebels, concerning their wish for an independent Mesopotamia, was confirmed by Wilson in this document. The tribes of the Euphrates were not used to be under control, even under the

¹⁵³ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5228/E9849/2719/44

¹⁵⁴ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5228/E9849/2719/44

¹⁵⁵ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5228/E9849/2719/44

Ottomans. Wilson was confirming that these tribes did not like to pay taxes and that was another reason for them to rise against the British. But none of that would have happened if it was not for the British military weakness and the external causes that he had explained.¹⁵⁶ For Wilson, the main causes of the rebellion were due to external factors influencing the local Arab leaders. But for the British government, Wilson's methods were not corresponding with Great Britain's policy in Mesopotamia by that time.

The Rebels and Their Organization

“To the vast majority of British politicians, military and officers of the Civil Administration the rebellion was a mere lawlessness.”¹⁵⁷ The British were convinced that they were fighting in order to civilize the Middle East. Any sign of Arab organization during the revolt, would be blamed on an outside influence either from Europe or other international powers.¹⁵⁸ In places where the British forces withdrew, like in Najaf, the rebels had managed to put together a state apparatus in order to substitute the British. The task was not an easy one due to communication and economic problems. In Karbela, leaders like the Gran Mujtahid Taqi al Shirazi had tried to negotiate with the British, but Wilson refused to meet Shirazi's delegation.¹⁵⁹ Shirazi's approach to Wilson, calling to a cease-fire in July, seemed to have the opposite effect on Wilson. Wilson's reaction neglecting to meet Shirazi's delegation, might point in the direction that British officers in the country saw this approach by Shirazi as a signal that British military tactics were giving positive results.¹⁶⁰

In Najaf and Karbela, different committees were formed by civil and religious leaders in order to reestablish control after the British withdrawal. In Karbela they formed the Higher Military Council, directed by four senior members of the clergy. A second committee was called the Community Council. The last one consisted of seventeen tribal Sheikhs. In Najaf the Higher Religious Committee, directed by fifteen members and the City Council composed of eight members, was formed. The respected Gran Mutjahid Taqi al-Shirazi of Karbela died on 13 August, and after his dead, the leading Sheikhs of the liberated areas of mid-Euphrates

¹⁵⁶ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5228/E9849/2719/44

¹⁵⁷ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 335

¹⁵⁸ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 335

¹⁵⁹ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 336

¹⁶⁰ CDR. Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, USN: *Iraq in Turmoil, Historical Perspectives of Dr. Ali-Wardi, From The Ottoman Empire to King Feisal*. Naval Institute Press 2012: 99

decided to organize a provisional national government headed by a *mutasarraf* (governor). The person chosen for this new post was the landowner and veteran Muhsin Abu Tabikh.¹⁶¹ An important aspect of these organizations was that, through those new committees the Shi'i clergy was acceding to power and most of the members of the committees were coming from the traditional elite of Mesopotamia. The rebels were showing signals of organization in the regions where British troops had been evacuated, and together with the forced retreat of several British troops, it was a reason for the British government to worry about Mesopotamia.

The Revolt in the British Newspapers

Meanwhile, British newspapers had started publishing articles analyzing the situation of Great Britain in Mesopotamia and the benefits and disadvantages of British direct rule in that country.¹⁶² Already in June, "[t]he Times explained that Wilson had attempted to Indianize Mesopotamia, when the rebellion was still brewing."¹⁶³ In August, T. E. Lawrence wrote some articles in the newspapers in Great Britain attacking Wilson's Administration. He was considered by many influential British, as an authority in matters of the Middle East. In the article published in the *Daily Herald* on 9 August 1920, he wrote, "They [Arabs in Mesopotamia and Syria] seek to be governed after their own fashion. We in Mesopotamia and the French in Syria are trying to impose an alien government upon them, and the attempt is bound to fail."¹⁶⁴ According to T. E. Lawrence, it was Nationalism that kept Sunnis and Shiites together, and the European way of ruling the area was causing such a response from the Arabs nationalists. At the same time, he was of the opinion that the Bolshevik revolution in Russia was exportable to the East.¹⁶⁵

T. E. Lawrence continued his public attack on the British Administration in a report published in the *Sunday Times*, 22 August 1920. He wrote:

¹⁶¹ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 339

¹⁶² Liora Lukitz: *A Quest in the Middel East, Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq* 2013: 136

¹⁶³ The Times, *A Case of Frankness*, 15 June 1920, LP&S/10/761. See, Liora Lukitz: *A Quest in the Middel East, Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq*. 2013: 136

¹⁶⁴ A. T. Wilson papers, British Library, SAD 303/1/43-52. See Liora Lukitz: *A Quest in the Middel East, Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq* 2013: 136

¹⁶⁵ Liora Lukitz: *A Quest in the Middel East, Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq* 2013: 136

The people of England had been led in Mesopotamia into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honour. They have been tricked into it by steady withholding of information. The Bagdad communiqués are belated, insincere, incomplete. Things have been worse than we have been told, our administration more bloody and inefficient than the public knows.

The sins of commission are those of the British civil authorities in Mesopotamia (especially of three “colonels”) who were given free hand by London. They are controlled from no Department of State, but from the empty space which divides the Foreign Office from India Office.¹⁶⁶

These words had a great impact on public opinion, and Wilson’s prestige as the head of the British Administration started to be seen in a different light. Wilson responded to Lawrence by saying that, “Mesopotamia as a single unit had never been included in the Arab State McMahon had promised to Sharif Husayn”¹⁶⁷ In that sense, Wilson was “quoting from McMahon’s second note to the Sharif (24 October 1915), referring to the special status of the vilayets of Baghdad and Basra, as an outcome of Britain’s interests in the Gulf area.”¹⁶⁸ However, Lawrence’s arguments seemed to be gaining the support of the public press, while Wilson’s words were not convincing the same public. For Wilson, at the moment, the reason for the revolt was due to outside forces like the Sheriffian anti-British propaganda, but none of his arguments gained support among higher British circles. In August, Wilson wrote a telegram to H. M.’s Government in London. He stated that, “President Wilson’s 14 points created more agitation in the region, stimulated by Sharifian, Turkish and Bolshevistic agencies.” According to Wilson, “Difference of race and religion between British and Arabs, was used more as an excuse in itself.”¹⁶⁹ Later political decisions taken from London showed that, Wilson’s days as Acting Civil Commissioner were counted.

October, Beginning of the End

¹⁶⁶ Ex-Lieut. Col. T. E. Lawrence: *A Report on Mesopotamia*, The Sunday Times, 22 August 1920.
<http://www.gwpda.org/1918p/mesopo.html>

¹⁶⁷ Liora Lukitz: *A Quest in the Middel East, Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq* 2013: 137

¹⁶⁸ Liora Lukitz: *A Quest in the Middel East, Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq* 2013: 137

¹⁶⁹ Sir Arnold T. Wilson: *Mesopotamia 1917-1920 A Clash of Loyalties* 1931: 312

At the end of August, Churchill informed Haldane that he would send 19 battalions from India, together with two more air squadrons¹⁷⁰ While British forces were receiving reinforcement from India and Iran, Mesopotamian rebels were running out of ammunition. From September on, British forces gained more control of certain areas outside the Middle Euphrates, especially in the northeast of Baghdad, such as in Shahraban on 9 September and Daltawa on 25 September.¹⁷¹ At the beginning of October British forces took control of the south of Hilla and by mid-October they captured Kifl. On the 17 September, British Kufa fell on British hands, and Kerbala surrender the same day as Kufa. The British offensive continued until 18 October when, “representatives of Najaf’s revolutionary government arrived at the headquarters of the 55th Brigade column to offer its surrender. They were informed that the first condition would be, the handing over the British and Indian prisoners they had there.”¹⁷² The support offered by the use of aircraft and the tactic of cutting water supplies in many regions was a tactic that gave good results for the British forces by the end of October.

Another major shift was experienced by the British Administration when, Arnold T. Wilson was asked to leave Mesopotamia. “Wilson’s departure allowed an intermediary approach – a compromise between Wilson’s theory of tight control and Lawrence’s vision of total independence – to emerge.”¹⁷³ On 4 October, Wilson handed over the keys of the Civil Commissioner Office to Sir Percy Cox after two and a half years acting as his substitute in Mesopotamia. The arrival of Percy Cox to Mesopotamia marked a more diplomatic policy to be implemented by Great Britain after months fighting the rebels.

¹⁷⁰ Mark Jacobsen: *Only by the Sword, British Counter-Insurgency in Iraq, 1920*. Small Wars and Insurgencies Vol. 2, April 1991: 351

¹⁷¹ Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq, The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*, University of Texas Press, 2012: 84

¹⁷² Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 377

¹⁷³ Liora Lukitz: *A Quest in the Middel East, Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq* 2013: 138

Chapter 4

Great Britain's New Approach

After Sir Percy Cox took the position at the head of British Administration again, he came with the order to form a Council of Arab Ministers assisted by British advisers. The British plan of a Council of State with Arab Ministers, under Percy Cox's direction, had been designed since June 1920.¹⁷⁴ Cox decided that, "full tribal disarmament would have to wait until an Arab government was in power."¹⁷⁵ But the tribes that had been involved in the revolt would have to hand over their rifles and ammunition, and from late October several British columns were in charge of collecting those weapons. One of the first names on the list of men expected to surrender to British forces was Sayyid Abu Tabikh, the man who had been in charge of the government established by the rebels in Karbala. In Kufa, Najaf, Karbala, Kilf and Twairij thousands of rifles and large amount of ammunition were delivered to British soldiers.¹⁷⁶

Still in November 1920 some tribes, in Shamiyya and Abu Skhair were fighting. But by the end of the month hostilities came to an end, after the British made an announcement on 26 November declaring the end of hostilities in that area. The British were forced to negotiate with other tribes, like the Hachcham tribes who were still fighting around the second half of November. After the falling of the most important cities, many nationalist in Baghdad and rebel Sheikhs decided to leave the country, and the safest place seemed to be the court of King Hussein in Hejaz. It was there that Abu Tabikh decided to escape with his family.¹⁷⁷ Officially the rebellion was suffocated by November 1920, even though guerrilla warfare continued until February in some places. After the surrender of the main tribes, the "British agreed to include, as the first term, the agreement of "an independent Arab government" in Iraq, which had already been decided by London, albeit not as independent as the Iraqis

¹⁷⁴ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5227/E7040

¹⁷⁵ Mark Jacobsen: *Only by the Sword, British Counter-Insurgency in Iraq, 1920*. Small Wars and Insurgencies Vol. 2, April 1991: 356

¹⁷⁶ Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq, The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*, University of Texas Press, 2012: 85

¹⁷⁷ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 385

would have expected.”¹⁷⁸ It was during November 1920, that in a telegram, Great Britain suggested the use of the name of Irak, instead of Mesopotamia. “This State will undoubtedly be known in the future as Irak, and not Mesopotamia.”¹⁷⁹

The Iraqi Revolt had cost 40 million British pounds, it was twice the annual budget destined for Iraq and three times the total amount of the subsidies paid by Great Britain to the Arab Revolt.¹⁸⁰ During the revolt, around 8,450 Iraqis were killed, a majority of them from Shi‘i tribes in the mid-Euphrates, 312 British soldiers lost their lives, around 451 were reported missing and the wounded reached the number of 1,228.¹⁸¹

The Creation of a Council of State

The official announcement of a provisional Council State in was made on 11 November 1920. This institution would function as a provisional Arab government established by the British. At the head of the new Council was a conservative Sunni notable Abd al-Rahman al Gaylani, the Naqib. He had been a loyal man to the British since 1917. Besides the Naqib, the council consisted of Jafar al-Askari, as Defense Minister; Sheikh Taleb, as Interior Minister; Sasoon Hasqiel, as Finance Minister; Mustafa Aloussi, as Minister of Religious Affairs; and Hassan Babji, Justice Minister. These provisional ministries were functioning between October 1920 and January 1921.¹⁸² After the revolt, Sunni and Shi‘i differences became visible again during the conformation of the Council. For Sir Percy Cox, the integration of Shiites into the Council became a challenge. “Anti-Shiite sentiment among Sunnis, as well as Shiite clergy dissuading Shiites from participating in the government in any form by decreeing that anyone who joined this government would be collaborating with nonbelievers.”¹⁸³ After negotiations with both religious groups, Cox appointed the Shi‘i -Bahr-al-Uloom Tabatai as the Minister of

¹⁷⁸ Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq, The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*, University of Texas Press, 2012: 86

¹⁷⁹ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5246/E13597

¹⁸⁰ Amal Vinogradov: *The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics* 1972: 138

¹⁸¹ Eli Amarilyo, *History, Memory and Commemoration: The Iraqi Revolution of 1920 and the Process of Nation Building in Iraq*, Middle Eastern Studies, 51:1, 71-92, (Page 75) DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2014.934816>

¹⁸² CDR. Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, USN: *Iraq in Turmoil, Historical Perspectives of Dr. Ali-Wardi, From The Ottoman Empire to King Feisal*. Naval Institute Press 2012:118

Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 392

¹⁸³ CDR. Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, USN: *Iraq in Turmoil, Historical Perspectives of Dr. Ali-Wardi, From The Ottoman Empire to King Feisal*. Naval Institute Press 2012: 118

Education and Health, and in representation of the Kurds, Ezzat Kirkukli was appointed as Minister of Labor and Transport.

The creation of institutions in Mesopotamia brought thousands of people into the growing bureaucracy, where people who had fled the country during the revolt began to take part of. Problems between Shiites and the British facilitated the access of overwhelming majority of Sunni in the army. The very beginning of the new Iraq, after the rebellion, seemed to bear the seed of later Sunni-Shi'i conflicts that would develop years later.

Faysal I, King of Iraq in 1921

The Council of State was a first stage into the creation of a more organized Mesopotamia, and a British way of finding a more economical alternative in dealing with the country, after the gigantic amount of money used during the revolt. Two aspects seemed to call the attention of British concerning post- revolution Mesopotamia. On the one hand, it seemed that the creation of the Council did not appease the nationalist sentiment against British control of the country. Since the times of Wilson as Commissioner, the name of Faysal as the head of an Iraqi state had been circulating among the British in Mesopotamian India and London. By the beginning of 1921, the deposed King of Syria, Emir Faysal became more openly the candidate for an Iraqi monarchy. But the idea of making Faisal the Emir of Mesopotamia had become closer to reality since August 1920, after France had overthrown his short monarchy in Syria. When France received the information about Great Britain's plan of creating a monarchy for Faisal in Mesopotamia, in August 1920, there was a negative reaction. France was totally opposed to the appointment of Faysal as Emir in Mesopotamia. The main argument that France exposed against Faisal was, that he had opposed the French in Syria by intrigue and by force, as they wrote to Great Britain.¹⁸⁴ "Emir Faisal was now being widely touted as the most suitable candidate – a "consolation prize" on the part of the British for their acquiescence in the French overthrow of his Syrian kingdom."¹⁸⁵

There seemed to be some reasons for Great Britain electing Emir Faisal as head of state in Mesopotamia after the rebellion. On the one hand, the main reason of the revolt had been the wish of an independent Mesopotamia with an Arab leader representing the country, and Faisal

¹⁸⁴ Foreign Office Documents, British National Archives, FO 371/5039/E10057/2/44

¹⁸⁵ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 393

was coming from a well-known Arab family. On the other hand, since 1915, Great Britain had an agreement with Faysal's father, the Sharif Hussein, concerning the creation of an Arab state under his direction, for his support during the war against the Ottomans. After the revolt of Mesopotamia, Great Britain was able fulfill part of the agreement with Hussein of Mecca and satisfy the wish of many Arab leaders in Mesopotamia by having an Arab head of state.

On the other hand, the military aspect of British in Mesopotamia would experiment a change. Winston Churchill together with other generals were convinced that, "controlling Iraq should be turned over to the RAF (Royal Air Force), - a far more economic way of ensuring the survival of Britain's new "friendly native state" than the traditional method of large infantry garrisons."¹⁸⁶

In February 1921 Winston Churchill became British colonial secretary, with a Middle East portfolio to work on. Among his advisers on the region was E. T. Lawrence. In March the Cairo Conference, where Emir Faisal was confirmed as the future monarchy of Iraq, was arranged. A referendum concerning Faysal candidature as King of Iraq was held in Iraq, where he received support from 96 per cent of the electorate, in the major cities like Mosul, Bagdad, Basra, Karbala, among others, and by August 1921, Faysal had become King of Iraq.¹⁸⁷

The Hashemite monarchy installed by the British in Iraq in 1921 was not well accepted by many among the population. There were still divisions between the pro-Turkish and pro-Arab government in the country. In the north of the country there were groups demanding the return of Mosul vilayet to Turkey. Many of the Arabs that had supported Faisal in Iraq had conditioned their support expecting to gain a Shi` majority in the parliament and on important positions of political influence.¹⁸⁸ The direction of the new monarchy seemed to be a challenging task for Faisal and the Great Britain after 1921.

On October 1921, Iraq and Great Britain signed a treaty for twenty years. The treaty consisted on British right to have troops in Iraq, control of the country's foreign policy and to have British advisers in the Iraqi new government among other things. British Air Force replaced

¹⁸⁶ Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 393

¹⁸⁷ CDR. Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, USN: *Iraq in Turmoil, Historical Perspectives of Dr. Ali-Wardi, From The Ottoman Empire to King Feisal*. Naval Institute Press 2012: 123
Amal Vinogradov: *The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics* 1972: 139

¹⁸⁸ Liora Lukitz: *A Quest in the Middel East, Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq* 2013. 151

the ground troops. A constitution was proclaimed and the Euphrates region was neglected and became a region controlled by landlords¹⁸⁹ The Iraqi revolt of 1920 made Great Britain change the direct rule policy that they intended to apply since the creation of the British administration of the country in 1918. The British helped to create the Iraqi state after the rebellion and brought an Arab Emir as the head of state in 1921. But it would take decades before the British gave the control of the country to the Iraqi people.

¹⁸⁹ Amal Vinogradov: *The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics* 1972: 139
Ian Rutledge: *Enemy on the Euphrates* 2014: 393

Conclusion

The discovery of oil in Iran at the beginning of the 20th century, opened a new era concerning technology and warfare in the world. Great Britain, France, Germany, Netherland were among the countries interested in the new source of energy discovered on that region of the Middle-East. The creation of international companies with interests in extracting the Persian oil produced a competition among the different countries involved. With the outbreak of World War I, the protection of the oilfields in Iran became part of the war strategy for Great Britain, being the country with most of the rights for oil exploitation of that region. It was in this war context that Great Britain decided to occupy the South part of Mesopotamia, in order to protect the Persian oilfields close to that region. During the war period, Great Britain made promises to important Arab leaders in order to bring them on their side against the Ottomans. At the same time, the British deals with France on how to distribute the Middle-East between them, and the plans of a home for the Jewish in Palestine, made the post-war situation difficult for the British.

The promises made by Great Britain to Arab leaders like Sharif Hussein from Mecca at the beginning of the war, played a very central role during and after the war. While receiving economic support from the British, Sharif Hussein and his sons organized the Arab revolution against the Ottomans from 1916, until 1918. But those promises became difficult to put into practice once the war was over, due to the agreements Great Britain had with France and in Palestine.

The British occupation Basra, in the South of Mesopotamia during World War I, triggered a chain of events far from expected. It is from today's historical perspective that is possible to say, that what followed the occupation of Basra in 1914 until the summer of 1920, was not totally planned by the British. What initially was a local occupation in Basra, extended later to North of the country, and by 1918 there was a civil administration for the whole Mesopotamia. The extension of the British occupation to the North was not a planned strategy, but a result of the war context, as we have explained before. The British expansion from South to North in Mesopotamia was not an easy campaign. The Arab resistance was stronger than what the British had experienced in Basra at the beginning of their invasion. By the time Baghdad came under British control in 1917, Great Britain had lost many soldiers during that campaign. The Arab resistance proved to be more organized than the British soldiers had

realized. But more resources and technology, the British forces were able to take control of Bagdad and started the organization of the British Civil Administration for the whole Mesopotamia.

As we have seen, the population of Mesopotamia was majority of Arabs, but there were minorities like, Christians and Jews. Between the Arabs, there was a majority of Shi'i Muslims, but while Sunnis represented a minority of the Muslim population, it was that group who had more access to power through the bureaucracy appointed by the Ottomans. These differences were more visible after the arrival of the British troops, through their interaction with the different Sheikhs of the country that had continued on the British side after the war.

The British Administration had economically supported a large group of Arab leaders in Mesopotamia, in order to keep their tribes under control. But not all the Arabs leaders agreed to follow and support the British in the country. There were many who had fought against the British troops when they arrived to in Basra at the beginning of the war. Some of those leaders, as we have discussed before, were interested in an independent country, while others were interested in an independent Arab state with one of Sharif Hussein's sons as its leader. Another important group that did not take side with the British was among the most important religious leaders. But the point to focus is that there was a pro-independence movement since the war years, and the movement continued expanding until it reached its climax by 1920.

The British officials in Mesopotamia decided to apply the same colonial administrative system that Great Britain had used in India. In fact, most of the official in charge of the administration in Mesopotamia had come from India, including Arnold T. Wilson, the Commissioner in charge of the British administration since 1918, until the revolt of 1920. The way British officials were directing the administration in Mesopotamia, was without a direct participation of the Arabs of the country. As it was the case in India. The law system applied in Mesopotamia was a copy of what the British had done in India. Although they kept some of the laws used during the time of the Ottomans in Mesopotamia, most of the new laws implemented by the British were a mix of the Indian, Egyptian, French and Ottoman codes, as we had discussed before. The result of this new law system was not welcome by many of the Arabs leaders and tribesmen of the country. But the Commissioner in charge of the administration, Arnold T. Wilson had a vision that Mesopotamia had to be ruled, until the Arabs could be civilized and able to do it by themselves. For him and many British officials, any Arab leader who did not agree with the British administration was considered an

extremist, as it had been pointed out in several British documents. Wilson's concept on how Great Britain had to rule over Mesopotamia was clashing with the new doctrine of self-determination and the beginning of a post-colonial era that was expressed at the international level.

The international post-war context played a central role in the development of the situation in Mesopotamia. The self-determination doctrine expressed by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson of 1918 was an argument used by some of the nationalist leaders in Mesopotamia in their quest for an independent country. In a period where colonialism was not welcome by many countries in the post-war years, Great Britain was facing a challenge in Mesopotamia, concerning the way of ruling the country. Officially, Mesopotamia could not become a colony, as India and other African countries had been under British rule. However, the promises of liberation made during the war to many Arab leaders in Mesopotamia, were becoming difficult to fulfill. It was during the years of 1918-1920 that the nationalist movement was becoming organized and started growing in Mesopotamia. While Great Britain had not, at least in practice, a clear agenda on how to rule that country without turning it officially into a colony. The British had agreements with France, and the Sharif Hussein from Mecca about the distribution of some of the Middle-East regions, and it was becoming a challenge to come with a peaceful solution.

The year 1920 marked a difficult period for Great Britain in the Middle- East. Several British officials were killed in Mesopotamia during the first part of that year, in assaults directed by different nationalists groups. The declaration of Faysal as King of Syria in March 1920, by a Syrian Congress, had been economically supported by the British, and it brought unexpected results months later. The French reaction was the overthrowing Faisal from his brief monarchy months later. Faysal's project in Syria made the situation tense for the British and France.

The announcement of the British Mandate over Mesopotamia in May 1920 triggered the reaction of many nationalists in the country. However, the way the British Commissioner Wilson faced the situation with the Arab leaders in the country, did not bring any solution to the impasse between the Arab leaders and the British administration of the country. The period of Wilson at the head of the Civil Administration between 1918-1920, especially the last year, was marked by difference of opinion between London and the India Office, how to rule Mesopotamia. These differences seemed to be the product of the problems faced by Great

Britain concerning the way on how to rule the Mesopotamia. Documents and later investigations have showed how the Arab leaders tried to reach a peaceful agreement with the British Administration in the light of their aspirations for an independent country. But Wilson was not interested in negotiating with those leaders. In June 1920, the nationalist movement reached its climax in Mesopotamia and the rebellion exploded.

The revolt came at the moment when the number of British troops in Mesopotamia was not sufficient in order to suffocate a rebellion like that. That seems to be one of the causes why the revolt expanded faster through the Mid-Euphrates. British troops at the moment of the revolt were spread over the country and that seemed to help the offensive of the rebels. Something that had given relevance to the revolt was that, during that period many Sunni and Shi'i Muslims put aside their religious differences and fought together against the British. Between June and August the rebels seemed to have the advantage over the British in the conflict. By August 1920, many of Faisal's men in Syria had joined the rebellion in Mesopotamia. The reason was that several of them were Iraqis, and the brief monarchy installed by Faysal in Syria had produced another movement of Arabs in Mesopotamia wanting Faysal's brother, Abdullah as a king of the country. Since June 1920, Great Britain was facing a revolt in Mesopotamia, and by August their project with Faisal in Syria had been stopped by the French.

After Great Britain decided to send troops from Iran and India to Mesopotamia in August, the balance of power turned to the British side from September 1920. The use of airplanes for bombing the rebels was another important advantage for the British during the rebellion. It was the beginning of tactical use of airplane in warfare. Besides the British superiority in weapons, ammunition and technology, the revolt became a disorganized movement without a central organization after it had spread during months. It took months before the British could control the revolt during the summer of 1920, before the government in London decided to send Sir Percy Cox to Mesopotamia, to take command of the Civil Administration that year.

By November, the revolt had been controlled by the British, but at a heavy cost. Thousands of Arabs and hundreds of British died during the conflict and a military campaign that was very expensive for the British. The time for a new approach on how to rule that country had come after the revolt.

The creation of the Council of State, including Sunni and Shi'i Ministers, was the first change applied by the British in Mesopotamia after the revolt in October 1920. For years, many Arab leaders of the country had showed their intentions of being part of the government, but it was not until the revolt that the British decided to create a space for Arab Ministers. The Council of State was a step before the creation of a monarchy with Emir Faysal as King of Iraq in August 1921. As it has been analyzed before, Faisal's short monarchy in Syria had been sponsored by Great Britain, but the French had overthrown him and the country became a French Mandate. The creation of a monarchy for Faysal in Mesopotamia seemed to be part of the war promise made by the British to Faysal's father, Sharif Hussein. But at the same time, to install a Muslim monarch in Mesopotamia seemed to be the best outcome, in order satisfy most the Arabs of the country with a head of a state of their own race and religion.

What kind of administration and changes did the British implemented in the country?

The majority of the British officers in charge of the administration of Mesopotamia had come from India. While Great Britain had ruled over India, the direct and total control of the administration had been the method applied by the British in that country. India had become an English colony, and that was the concept Great Britain and Colonel Arnold T. Wilson, in charge of the British Administration, since 1918, had decided to put into practice in Mesopotamia.

Since 1915, British officers established a local administration in Basra, the first region of Mesopotamia occupied by Great Britain, at the beginning of World War I. The public administration the British had found in Basra from the time of the Ottomans experienced important changes, with the arrival of the British troops. The juridical system existing in Mesopotamia since the time of the Ottomans, was supplanted by the British with the application of a civil code imported from India. Between 1917 and 1919, the British were using a civil code imported from India and a penal code based on the Shar'a law of Islam, for the same country. But many of the new adaptations that the British made to the penal code of Mesopotamia were taken from the French and Egyptian penal code. In practice, the British officers in Mesopotamia seemed to be improvising while their administration was being established in the country. The main reason for the implementation of the different codes of laws seemed to be the lack of records left by the Ottomans during their retreat, as they wrote.

The country was divided into sixteen provinces and those provinces were subdivided again into districts, in order to reorganize the administration, and the taxes imposed by the British Administration in Mesopotamia were not welcome by many Sheikhs and tribes. Since the time of the Ottoman, the tribes of Mesopotamia, especially those from the Mid-Euphrates were not used to pay taxes. The Ottomans had not been able to completely subjugate the whole Mesopotamia under their rule. But the British through the new tax collection system applied in the country started facing differences with certain tribes and Sheikhs.

At the arrival of the British to Mesopotamia, the Sunni Muslim, who were a minority in the country, were the ruling class over the Shi'i who were the majority the population. There were differences between the Sunni Muslims from the cities and many of the Shi'i Sheikhs and tribes from the countryside. What the British did was to rely on and support many of the Sheikhs, as a way of pacifying the country during and after the war. For the British, the Sheikh represented a natural institution they could rely on. The economic support of many Sheikhs implemented by the British would clash with important religious leaders and many other Arab leaders who had fought against the British occupation of the country in 1914. From the beginning of the British occupation of Mesopotamia, the population was divided among the pro-British, the pro-Turkey, and the pro-independence group.

For British Administration of Mesopotamia, the population was in its majority, a group people to be civilized according to the British system.

What caused the Iraqi revolution of 1920?

The implementation of imported laws, a more efficient taxation system, and the British economic support of many Sheikhs was creating division among the population. The constant resistance of many Arab leaders against the British rule of the country was growing and organizing through the years.

There seemed to be both local and international causes for the rebellion of 1920. On the local aspect, many British documents pointed in the direction that Arnold T. Wilson was not a man of negotiation with the Arabs in Mesopotamia. At the beginning of World War I, when the British troops arrived in Basra, they had come as liberators. Many Arab leaders had fought against the Ottomans based on war promises made by the British. What was supposed to be a

local occupation of Basra, became a complete administration of Mesopotamia after the war. During the first two years after the war, the pro-independence movements of Mesopotamia became more organized. Many Arab leaders sought the diplomatic approach with the British Commissioner Wilson, without any positive result between 1918 and 1920. For Wilson it was impossible any negotiation with the people he called extremists. His position was to rule Mesopotamia by force, if necessary, or the British should leave the country, as he wrote to the India Office several times.

There were signals of unrests in the country among the pro-independence groups. After 1918, there had been sporadic clashes between British officers and Arab groups. But by the beginning of 1920, several British officers lost their lives in different circumstances, involving violent incidents between Arabs and British. The war had changed an empire for another in Mesopotamia. But the difference seemed to be that under the Ottoman rule, Mesopotamia was never under the direct control of the Ottomans as they were becoming under the British rule after 1918.

On the international level, the United States had interests in the oilfields found in Iran by the British at the beginning of the 20th century. But after the war U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, had spoken about a self-determination doctrine in 1918. The point of the self-determination was going in a post-colonial direction after the war. The countries liberated after the war were supposed to determine their own future, without external influence. That was an argument used by the Arabs who were pressing for an independent Mesopotamia before the revolt. Great Britain double policy with France led them into the sponsorship of Emir Faysal in the establishment of a monarchy in Syria in 1920.

While Great Britain was supporting Faisal in Syria, there seemed to be that the Hashemite family, with the Sharif of Mecca in the leadership, was supporting the pro-independence groups in Mesopotamia by 1920, especially those interested in establishing Emir Abdullah, the other son of Sharif Hussein, at the head of an Emirate in Mesopotamia. Wilson wrote several letters to the India Office expressing his concerns about that situation during 1920. Sir Winston Churchill had to answer several interrogations at the British Parliament about the same situation in Mesopotamia. Wilson was constantly blaming the Sheriffian [supporters of the Sharif Hussein and his family], for the growing unrest of the independent movement in Mesopotamia. However, for Churchill, the causes of the unrest in Mesopotamia were not sponsored by Faisal, but from the pro-Turkish groups in Syria, as he stated in the Parliament.

The brief monarchy of Faysal in Syria, during 1920, served as a trigger for the independent movements of Mesopotamia. Many of Faysal's men in his army had come from Mesopotamia, and after France had overthrown Faysal, many of them started joining the rebellion on the Euphrates. The years between 1918 and 1920, seemed to be a period where Great Britain did not have any clear plan on how to rule Mesopotamia. The post-war had brought a new international order with the influence of the self-determination doctrine, and officially Great Britain could not rule Mesopotamia based on a colonial system. The war had left Great Britain with a weak economy and the troops that were in Mesopotamia were not sufficient for keeping the control of the country in case of unrest, as Sir Wilson stated as one of the reasons for the fast spreading of the revolt in Mesopotamia during the summer of 1920.

The British seemed to be divided between those in London who wanted to give more participation to the Arabs in the administration of Mesopotamia, and those like Wilson who were of the opinion that Great Britain needed to have direct control of the country. Those differences had reached the public opinion in Great Britain through the British newspapers by 1920. Different articles were written denouncing the British "indianization" of Mesopotamia. Influential people like the British Colonel T. E. Lawrence, who was pro-Arab and close friend of Faysal, wrote several articles in different British newspaper, directly confronting Wilson's policy in Mesopotamia.

It was in the middle of this local and international context, that the announcement of the British official control of Mesopotamia through the creation of a British Mandate was given to the people of Mesopotamia in May 1920. The news of the Mandate was not welcome by many of the Arab leaders of the country. Arab Committees were organized in order to speak with Commissioner Wilson about the meaning and content of the Mandate of Mesopotamia system announced by the British. But the lack of diplomacy expressed by Wilson several times when dealing with some of the Arab leaders of Mesopotamia did not help to prevent the outbreak of June in 1920.

In London, the Foreign Office did not agree with Wilson's methods in dealing with the situation at the moment of the outbreak on the Euphrates. The central government in Great Britain was by 1920, intending to seek a more diplomatic solution for the unrest of Mesopotamia months before the rebellion. It took months of fighting, Arab and British lives lost during the revolt, before the British would send Sir Percy Cox again to Mesopotamia in

October 1920, to take the place as British Commissioner and a more diplomatic solution and policy was implemented in Mesopotamia by Great Britain, after the revolt.

Did the revolution bring any changes to Mesopotamia?

The Iraqi revolution brought changes to the relationship of Great Britain with Iraq. The violent level that the rebellion reached between June and July 1920, placed Great Britain in a defensive position. The letters and documents exchanged by the different British Offices expressed the level of seriousness of the situation. The debates and interrogations at the British Parliament during the first months of the revolution, showed how worried the British government was about the event. British troops had to retreat and evacuate from several places around the Euphrates. Important communication lines like the train were destroyed by the rebels during the outbreak.

For years, many Arab leaders had expressed their interests in the participation of the administration of the country. But it was after the revolution that Great Britain created the Council of State for Mesopotamia, with both Sunni and Shi'i ministers. There was an Arab monarchy created and Iraqis were able to reach high positions on the state apparatus. Great Britain had for decades a direct influence in Iraq, through the monarchy of Faysal, but the rebellion had showed the British that the time for a new approach in the direction of Iraq had come. For years the revolution of 1920, had been cultivated as a political inspiration for many Pan-Arab nationalists.

Although after a short period, the Sunni Muslims became again the most influential group of the country. In reality, the British still had control over the country until the revolution of 1958, but in a different way, not with a direct colonial system as it was before the rebellion. The revolt of 1920 had reached an important place in the narrative of Iraq's modern history. Although a full independence was not achieved, it opened the way for nominal independence of 1932, and had been used as an example by different religious and revolutionary Muslim groups in modern Iraq, of how Sunni and Shi'i fought together against a common enemy in modern times.

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