

The Making of Modern Iraq

by Martin Walker

In the early spring of 2003, a quarter of the British army was based in Kuwait, advancing north into familiar territory. In 1916, these soldiers' great-grandfathers had first advanced up the river Tigris, to defeat and humiliation at Turkish hands. The following year the British returned, advancing to Baghdad and beyond. With General Edmund Allenby's forces thrusting north through Palestine, aided by an Arab uprising, the British toppled the Ottoman Empire. They stayed on for another 40 years, briefly interrupted by a pro-Nazi seizure of power in Baghdad in 1941. It was a period marked by considerable social and economic progress in Iraq—and by a tangled, painful, and often bloody series of political events that demand the attention of anybody contemplating the Iraqi future.

Modern Iraq was an invention of British military and administrative convenience in the wake of World War I. The British had held no coherent view of their war aims against the Ottoman Empire, simply wanting to defeat it. During the most desperate days of the struggle, the government's Arab bureau in Cairo issued letters and proclamations promising independence under British protection to Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia (as Iraq was then called) if they would help defeat the Ottomans. British officials in India, who traditionally ran foreign policy east of Suez, were appalled, dreading the impact of such involvement in Islamic affairs.

When the war ended, the British found themselves faced with a number of facts on the ground. First, the Ottoman Empire had collapsed, and outside Turkey, the British army was in occupation. But so were the Arab allies who had fought alongside the legendary British officer T. E. Lawrence, already known to an admiring world as Lawrence of Arabia, and Lawrence encouraged them in the vision of an independent pan-Arab state, stretching from the Persian frontier to the Suez Canal. Second, the French wanted a share of the Ottoman spoils, Lebanon and Syria at a minimum, though President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and his enormously popular principle of self-determination made the establishment of an outpost of empire highly problematic. Finally, the war had also demonstrated the importance of the internal-combustion engine, and thus the high strategic value of the oil supplies needed to fuel it.

The British had to contend with an Arab civil war between the Hashemite dynasty, the original custodians of the holy shrines of Mecca and Medina, and the house of ibn Saud, adherents of the puritanical Wahhabi

sect of Islam. They bumbled their way to a solution of this crisis after the House of ibn Saud took over Arabia by force (in the process deliberately destroying as idolatrous many of Mecca's shrines and graves of the Prophet's family) and established Saudi Arabia. London compensated the Hashemites by giving Prince Abdullah the country now known as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and giving Syria to his brother, Prince Faisal, who had helped wrest it from the Turks during the Great War.

Then, in the summer of 1920, the tribes of Iraq rose in revolt against the British, who had not kept their wartime pledge to grant Iraq independence. "There has been a deplorable contrast between our profession and our practice," the now-retired Lawrence wrote in a letter to *The Times* of London on August 22. He spoke for many in the colonial administration who believed that the British government should live up to its own rhetoric of Arab independence. "We said we went to Mesopotamia to defeat Turkey. We said we stayed to deliver the Arabs from the oppression of the Turkish Government, and to make available for the world its resources of corn and oil. We spent nearly a million men and nearly a thousand million of money to these ends. . . . Our government is worse than the old Turkish system. They kept fourteen thousand local conscripts embodied, and killed a yearly average of two hundred Arabs in maintaining peace. We keep ninety thousand men, with aeroplanes, armoured cars, gunboats, and armoured trains. We have killed about ten thousand Arabs in this rising this summer."

The uprising, brutally contained by British troops and bombers, erased any remaining doubts in London: The cost of direct rule was too high. A superficially neat solution was found. Prince Faisal, since evicted from Syria by the French, was available to become the monarch of a pro-British Iraq, which would be governed by Britain at arm's length under one of the new League of Nations mandates. In order to drape some sort of democratic form over Faisal's rule, Sir Percy Cox, the new British high commissioner in Baghdad, had Faisal's main rival deported—he was arrested while at a tea with Sir Percy and his wife—and arranged for a plebiscite of the adult male population. (Cox and his political adviser, Gertrude Bell, the indomitable explorer, archaeologist, and intelligence agent, also had instructions from London to require the king to acknowledge publicly the superior authority of the high commissioner; they ignored them.) Thus democratically endorsed (he won 96 percent of the vote), King Faisal took his throne, and one of Iraq's happier periods began.

The country over which Faisal reigned was essentially a patchwork. Under the Ottomans, there had been for centuries three *vilayets*, or regions, in what was then called Mesopotamia. Each region was under the separate control of a governor and had little in common with the other two. The coastal province of al-Basrah included the port of Kuwait and

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Before taking the throne of Iraq, King Faisal won fame throughout the Arab world for his role at the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference. To his left stands T. E. Lawrence.

the “marsh Arabs,” or Ma’dan, who dwelled in the wetlands of the great delta formed by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. It was centered on the cosmopolitan culture of the trading city of Basra itself, with strong ties to lands throughout the Persian Gulf; most of this population were Shia Muslim Arabs. The central *vilayet* of Baghdad, proud but much-diminished heir to the Islamic caliphate that had crumbled centuries earlier, was home mainly to Sunni Muslims, and retained the strongest ties to the Ottoman capital of Constantinople (now Istanbul). It was also one of the main Jewish centers of the Middle East. The third *vilayet*, centered on Mosul in the north, was mountainous, remote, and predominantly Kurdish, with Assyrian and Turkoman pockets. It was only nominally subordinate to Ottoman rule and taxes.

Yet for all the many forms of identity available within Iraq, Faisal was still an outsider. To boost the Iraqi credentials he could not claim by birth, he brought in his train a number of the Iraqis who had fought with him against the Turks. Thanks to his role in the defeat of the Turks, and later his prominence at the Versailles Peace Conference, however, Faisal had unrivaled credentials as the symbol of a post-Ottoman, pan-Arab future. Arab intellectuals flocked to join him in Baghdad, including the Syrian-born Sati al-Hursi, who, from his post as education minister, propounded a sophisticated pan-Arab ideology that was to be enormously influential throughout the Arab world.

Under the treaty Cox negotiated with Faisal in 1922, Iraq was to be a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament, loosely based on the British model. But British advisers were installed in the key ministries, and important posts in the police and army were staffed by British and Indian army officers on contract. Britain ran foreign and security policy. To the irritation of Iraqis, much of the old Ottoman bureaucracy was maintained, and many lower-level jobs were filled by Indians, although the British were careful to ensure that most were Muslims from Bengal.

The British mandate produced for Iraq many irrigation projects and public-health services—these, rather than education, were Gertrude Bell’s priorities—and consequently a population boom that nearly doubled the nation’s headcount between 1920 and 1932. Bell’s own archaeological studies into ancient Babylon and the medieval caliphate had convinced her that the region had once supported a far larger population with irrigation and flood control works that tamed the great rivers and put their waters to productive use. So the British built dams and restored canals that were by 1950 to triple the acreage of arable land. They also constructed railway lines, roads, and a telephone system. They inaugurated a reliable postal service (including air mail), a census, ports and customs, and a taxation system, along with commercial banks and public finances, using bonds to finance public works. They established a professional Iraqi police force and army, and training colleges for officers, engineers, and schoolteachers.

Baghdad boasted cinemas, a French café, and a racecourse. By 1925, Bell herself had founded the national museum, many of whose treasures were her own finds from the Babylonian era. Iraq between the wars was a relaxed society, in which the strict Islamic code of sharia was seldom observed. Bell records hosting a dinner party in November 1925 at which Faisal was the guest of honor: “The King was as gay as could be and the final touch at dinner was some prunes over-soaked in gin. After two of these H.M. became uproarious and insisted that we should all eat two likewise.”

But the signal achievements of the British era came with costs attached. Replacing the semidesert that was home to nomadic tribes with irrigated, arable land that needed a settled population to farm it required land reform and a social revolution that threatened the traditional power of tribal chiefs. To retain their loyalty, the sheikhs were invested with greater local administrative powers. A parallel social transformation was underway in the fast-growing cities. New rail and shipping systems and oil projects stimulated the emergence of engineering shops and a small but thriving industrial sector in Basra and Baghdad, along with an industrial work force, labor unions, and, to British dismay, an energetic local Communist party.

Under pressure from Arab nationalists and others, Britain several times modified the original treaty of 1922 in Iraq’s favor. Finally, in 1932, with the Great Depression underway and a new Labor government installed in London, the British gave up the League of Nations mandate. Iraq was welcomed into the ranks of the world’s sovereign states as a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament, a recognized legal system, and its own

armed forces (with strategically placed British officers). Still, a treaty gave Britain two large air bases in Iraq and the right to move troops across Iraqi territory; it also required “full and frank consultations between the two countries in all matters of foreign policy.” Another agreement gave Western oil companies access to Iraq’s oil fields, on very favorable terms.

The democratic credentials of the Iraqi parliament were limited. Its structure was approved in 1924 by a constituent assembly of 99 members, of whom 34 were tribal sheikhs. Following their traditional “divide and rule” practice, the British designed the system to balance the centralizing powers of the crown with the regional influence of tribal leaders, whether in Kurdish, Sunni, or Shia districts. King Faisal’s power base was essentially urban, composed largely of the ex-Ottoman army officers who had rallied to him, the pan-Arab intellectuals who had accompanied him from Syria, the remains of the old Ottoman bureaucracy, and the traditional Sunni elites of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. The British were able to deliver to Faisal a substantial rural vote by persuading the tribal sheikhs that their interests would be protected. Among other things, the sheikhs were favored with the pivotal right to collect taxes.

The constituent assembly gave the king significant powers. He could dismiss parliament, call for new elections, and appoint the prime minister—powers that others would use in future years to negate the results of elections. Moreover, the constituent assembly enacted only a limited franchise. Not until 1953 was every male adult given the right to vote; women gained the franchise in 1980.

King Faisal himself was no great admirer of democracy, or of his subjects. According to his friend Lawrence, in a 1917 report to the British high command titled “Faisal’s Table Talk,” Faisal claimed that the Iraqis were “unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any national consciousness or sense of unity, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, receptive to evil, prone to anarchy, and always willing to rise against the government.”

The prevention of such risings was the main objective of the crown as it tried to deal with the deep divisions between Iraq’s Sunni and Shia Islamic communities and between its Kurds and Arabs. These divisions were further complicated by the presence of other minorities, including the Turkomans, who still looked to Istanbul, and the largely Christian Assyrians, who had been armed by the British as the most reliable local troops.

Although there were many Sunni tribes and nomads, in general the



Sunni had accepted Ottoman rule, gravitated to the cities, and thus dominated Baghdad and the traditional Ottoman bureaucracy and officer corps. As a fellow Sunni, King Faisal leaned ever more heavily on their support. And although there were many wealthy Shia merchants, the Shia tended to be rural, poorer and less educated, and more resentful of rule from Baghdad. Faisal's task was further complicated by the tussles for influence and government largesse between the sheikhs and landowners, between the army and the urban magnates (whose money subsidized a profusion of newspapers), and between the labor unions and the British-run oil corporation.

As the parliamentary system got under way and parties began to form, Faisal and his successors ran into a classic paradox: What promised to be the largest and most resilient party, the National Democratic Union, which should have been a force for stability, was critical of the monarchy both as an institution and for its dependence on the British. The majorities the crown could engineer in parliament seldom included parties with a popular base of support. But under the constitution, political parties could be banned at will, a power used ruthlessly in times of crisis to prevent parliament from falling into opposition hands. If parliament threatened to become difficult, the prime minister could be replaced, allowing new coalitions to form, or the whole parliament could be dismissed and new elections called.

The result was an inherent political instability. In the seven years after 1932, Iraq went through 12 different cabinets, and frustration with parliament's weaknesses helped provoke a military coup in 1936. Yet the system also contributed to an extraordinary political fertility, as new parties, associations, and other political groupings emerged and faded, to be reborn under different names and with slightly different programs. Ironically, this attempt to control politics by banning parties made Iraq in general and Baghdad in particular the most energetic center of civil society and political-intellectual life in the Arab world. Parties could be banned, but not the political ferment. This meant that the real political energy of Iraqis was expressed increasingly in extra-parliamentary activities—through the army, student groups, labor unions, and the press, or in the streets.

King Faisal, while remaining committed to the dream of a pan-Arab state, wanted to keep Iraq on the course of progress and modernization begun by the British. Very often, however, his efforts backfired. In 1931, he repealed Ottoman-era laws that suppressed the Kurds, and made Kurdish an official language in schools and law courts in the Kurdish regions. These concessions were meant to compensate the Kurds for the imposition of new taxes and the rule of law from Baghdad. The Kurds revolted anyway, and were put down only with the help of British troops and Royal Air Force bombers.

In 1932, Faisal's government enacted a land settlement law, which sought to safeguard the role of nomadic tribes, such as the Beni Lam, the edh-Dafir, and the Shammar, as irrigation and farms ate into their land. The law allowed all settled tribesmen who had been cultivating a piece of land without legal title for at least 15 years to claim ownership, under the condition that the land could never be sold outside the tribe. The goal was to safeguard

tribal land, but the real beneficiaries were the tribal chiefs and wealthy city-dwellers (who could almost all claim some tribal connection), who used their political influence and wealth to obtain deeds. Many tribal people became landless peasants, while others remained on the land as sharecroppers for the new landowners, who were, like the Iraqi government ministers and officials, overwhelmingly Sunni. To the Shia of the south and the Kurds of the north, the nominally national Iraqi government in Baghdad looked increasingly like Sunni domination.

These resentments were growing fast when Faisal died in 1933, to be succeeded by his son, Ghazi, just 21. The new king was openly anti-British and a fervent believer in the pan-Arab cause, but he had little of his father's authority over the tribal chiefs and couldn't restrain their abuse of the land reform. Ghazi had to call upon the army to put down an uprising among dispossessed tribesmen in 1935, and he also used troops against the marsh Arabs in the south and Assyrian refugees from Syria in the north. The Iraqi

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army thus became less the symbol of national independence the British had hoped for and increasingly a tool of Baghdad's repression of the regions.

One of the few things the government could do to gain wider popular support, particularly from the growing numbers of educated Iraqis, was to demand the pan-Arab state the British had promised in 1916. But because that promise had included a pledge to let France have Syria and Lebanon, a pan-Arab state was the one project the British could not accept. Britain seemed likely to keep another wartime commitment, the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and for that it paid dearly when the prospect of creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine stirred an Arab revolt in 1936 and gave yet another focus to the pan-Arab cause. The large Jewish population of Baghdad, which had been an important part of King Faisal's support, began to feel a backlash. (Following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, 120,000 Iraqi Jews would abandon Iraq, virtually en masse.)

By the mid-1930s, the British design of an Iraqi nation was faltering, as the Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish regions refused to coalesce. The political dream of pan-Arabism was spreading fast, and Iraq's weak government was being further enfeebled by the Great Depression. In October 1936, Iraq experienced the first military coup in the Arab world, launched by General Banr Sidqi, a Kurd and an Iraqi nationalist. The following year, Sidqi was murdered by a group of pan-Arab and Sunni army officers. The army was now a central actor in a tangled political process that set Left against Right, the cities against the tribes, pan-Arabists against nationalists, Sunni against Shia and Kurd.

The monarch remained, however, and when King Ghazi died in an automobile crash in 1939, the British engineered a regency in the name of his infant son that left power in the hands of the regent and the pro-British

prime minister, Nuri Said. Within a year, however, the Anglophobe Rashid Ali had seized power.

Nazi Germany's military triumphs in Europe in 1940 had dramatic effects in the Middle East. The pan-Arab dream of full independence without British and French tutelage looked tantalizingly close. Along with four Iraqi generals, Rashid Ali launched a coup against the monarchy in 1941, forcing the regent and Nuri Said to flee to Jordan. Hitler's Luftwaffe sent German warplanes to support Ali, openly sympathetic to the Axis, and hundreds were killed in anti-Jewish pogroms. But the British held out at their Habaniyah air base, and reinforcements from India retook Basra and Baghdad and went on to take Syria and Lebanon from Vichy France in the name of Free France. World War I had established British authority in Iraq, and World War II reaffirmed it, this time with the solid support of Britain's wartime ally, the United States.

At war's end, little seemed to have changed in the Middle East. Britain continued to run the Suez Canal. It based troops in, and exerted massive influence on, the nominally independent states of Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan. But within three years, the Middle East was transformed.

Britain's own role was radically altered by the granting of Indian independence in 1947. British rule in the Middle East had begun with the need to safeguard the route to India, but now its presence was justified by the strategic importance of oil. The second new factor, the establishment of the state

of Israel in 1948, was central.

For all its influence in Baghdad, Britain was not able to prevent Iraq from joining in the doomed Arab attack on Israel immediately after independence was declared. Third, the Middle East was becoming an important battleground in the new Cold War, which gave

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the United States a vital strategic interest in the region for the first time. Fourth, the United Nations looked to be a far more authoritative body than the old League, and one with a much more critical attitude toward colonialism. Finally, the pan-Arab cause was very much alive again, thanks in no small part to Britain's pledge in May 1941, at one of its lowest points in the war, to support any proposal that would strengthen ties among the Arab states. This had led ultimately to the creation in 1945 of the Arab League, a body long on inflammatory pan-Arab rhetoric but with no institutional mechanism to make its words into deeds.

In 1948, Iraq was again swept by violence when Iraqis reacted against the Portsmouth Treaty, a new device through which the British sought to perpetuate their influence, in what came to be called the Watbah (uprising). Once again prime minister, Nuri Said felt obliged to repudiate the treaty he had negotiated, a sign of weakness that only strengthened the opposition to him and to the monarchy, now seen as little more than a tool of British interests. Nuri Said's

response was to tighten political repression, closing newspapers and banning political parties, publicly hanging leading Communists, and expanding the political police. Convinced that the Iraqi Communist Party was the spearhead of the Watbah, Britain and the United States supported Nuri Said. (They were much slower to see the rising influence of the secular and pan-Arabist Baathist movement.) Britain also agreed to renegotiate the system of oil royalties, swelling the Iraqi government's coffers. Despite new urban uprisings in 1952, provoked by bad harvests and Nuri Said's refusal to hold elections, the money was spent reasonably wisely, and to far better and more widespread effect than in other oil-rich countries.

In 1955, a National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq by the U.S. intelligence community (no servile observer of Britain's role in the region) reported: "Seventy percent of government annual direct oil revenue is earmarked for development programs. . . . This program is administered by the Iraq Development Board (IDB), which has a British and an American as well as Iraqi members. [But] eighty per cent of the population ekes out a meager livelihood in agricultural or nomadic pursuits." A 1957 estimate expressed more enthusiasm: "Because of its stable government, its relatively effective development program and its assured oil income, Iraq will almost certainly make more progress than any other Arab country." American approval was ensured when Nuri Said nailed his colors to the Anglo-American mast by joining the Baghdad Pact, a Cold War attempt to create a regional alliance along the lines of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

By 1958, Iraq's literacy rate was 15 percent, a pitiful figure but still one of the best in the Arab world. About a third of eligible Iraqi children were in elementary school, less than a tenth were in secondary school, and 8,500 students were enrolled in higher education. Under the independent monarchy, from 1932 to 1958, the population doubled to more than seven million, a third of this number dwelling in towns and cities, and Baghdad grew to more than a million inhabitants. Iraq had the lowest infant mortality rate and the highest life expectancy in the Arab world after Kuwait.

If Iraq was Britain's showcase in the Middle East, the results were only moderately impressive. And they came at a stiff political price for Iraqis. The Nuri Said government was authoritarian and manipulative. Writing in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1958, the celebrated American foreign correspondent William Polk cited police records suggesting that there were as many as 20,000 secret police agents in Baghdad alone. "Virtually every educated man had a police double," he concluded. "Political opposition was a bar to professional advancement. At all levels, the younger and better educated people felt stifled under the minute observations of a paternalistic government. Political repression has been severe enough effectively to close to the opposition all peaceful means of change. Only one recent election was fairly free, and that resulted in a Parliament which Nuri dismissed after one day."

"Paternalist" is a reasonable if kindly word to describe the British-influenced government of the Iraqi monarchy. By the regional standards of the day, it achieved impressive economic and social development that laid a strong



Near Kirkuk, in northern Iraq, a welder works on an oil pipeline in 1952. Iraq at first avoided many of the ill effects of sudden oil wealth that beset other countries.

foundation for the future. It was brought down by its political failings, and by its continued acceptance of British tutelage even after Britain's humiliation during the Suez crisis in 1956.

Nuri Said assumed that a strong and repressive hand could control political unrest while development continued. But he was removed in a 1958 military coup by officers inspired by the Egyptian colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser's Free Officers Movement, which had staged a coup against the pro-British monarchy in Cairo five years earlier. The two leaders of the Iraqi coup soon fell out. Backed by the Baathists, one wanted to join the new (and destined to be short lived) pan-Arabist union between Egypt and Syria. Backed by the Communists, General Abd el-Karim Qasim believed in transforming Iraq first. Within the year, Qasim's rival was under sentence of death.

Ironically, this power struggle may have saved Iraq from a far worse fate. It distracted the coup leaders from their shared objective of occupying Kuwait, which Iraqis had seen as a "lost province" of Iraq since Britain established the independent sheikhdom in 1920. The British and Americans were not just prepared to go to war to preserve oil-rich Kuwait; President Dwight D. Eisenhower was ready to use nuclear weapons. He ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff to "be prepared to employ, subject to my approval, whatever means might be necessary to prevent any unfriendly forces from moving into Kuwait."

Qasim's rule was brief and turbulent. In 1959, he survived a coup attempt, and, six months later, he narrowly escaped assassination by a Baathist team, one of whose members was Saddam Hussein, then 23. In 1962, with Qasim's army bogged down in a grueling and fruitless campaign to suppress a Kurdish revolt, the Baathists launched a general strike against the regime. In February 1963 Qasim fell after bloody street fighting in Baghdad, in a coup that enjoyed discreet support from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The Baathists then launched a new terror against the Communists, and finally consolidated their power in 1968, thanks in part to the ruthless efficiency of the secret police chief, Saddam Hussein.

Through all of this, Iraq continued to make marked social progress. By the time Saddam Hussein became president in 1979, Iraq's literacy rate was 50 percent, and with a million students in secondary education and another 120,000 in universities, the country could claim to be the most developed in the Arab world. The performance might have been even better had not Iraq's rulers tripled the share of government revenues spent on the armed forces, from seven percent in 1958 to 20 percent by 1970. Beginning in the 1970s, soaring oil prices encouraged the increasingly wealthy Baathist regime to greater regional (and nuclear) ambitions; the war launched against Iran in 1980 by Saddam Hussein ground on for eight terrible years, with more than one million dead. Iran and Iraq were left impoverished.

There's a clear set of lessons to be drawn from Iraq's history of independence. (1) Social progress and development through wise deployment of oil wealth guarantee neither democracy nor stability. (2) Governments too closely identified with foreign influence, no matter how well intentioned the foreign power may be, will generate intense domestic opposition. (3) The Iraqi armed forces are both crucial and dangerous to any new government, and have hitherto been held in check only by the ruthless use of a secret police force, a remedy that has proved worse than the disease. (4) The Iraqi national identity that the British tried to foster from the 1920s remains at constant risk from the ethnic and religious tensions among the three dominant elements of Iraqi society: the Sunni, Shia, and Kurds. (5) The political stability of Iraq should never be considered in isolation but within a broader context of developments throughout the Arab world and in Iran.

It is now 85 years since the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and successive attempts by the French and British, by the Soviets and their communist allies, by the Americans with their democratic instincts, and by the Arabs themselves have all failed to generate stability in the region in general, and in Iraq in particular. The pan-Arab dream, secular and modernizing in intention, never managed to overcome the suspicions of tribes, mosques, and national governments, nor did it succeed in identifying itself with the lurking counterforce of pan-Islamism. The great schism between pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism had been implicit since the bitter struggle between the Hashemites and the Saudis to control Mecca at the end of World War I. The Saudis were Wahhabites, puritanical and suspicious of modern and Western ways and receptive to pan-Arabist dreams only insofar as they helped spread the Wahhabi creed through the Muslim world. The

Hashemites in Jordan and Iraq, by contrast, believed in pan-Arabism as an ideal in itself, and as the mechanism that would enable the Arab world to modernize and develop and take its place in the great councils of the world, just as Faisal had done at Versailles in 1919.

Eighty years on, pan-Arabism has faltered, discredited by recurrent failures and authoritarian rule, and by the rivalries between the various Arab nations the British and French carved from the Ottoman corpse. Its most promising early exponent, King Faisal, initially saw pan-Arabism as a British gift rather than an Arab creation, and his monarchy was debilitated by its dependence on British support. Faisal's conception of the cause, monarchic rather than democratic, vied with the rival communist, Nasserite, and, later, Baathist versions of pan-Arabism, each of them authoritarian in instinct and ruthlessly nationalist in practice. By contrast, pan-Islam has found a generous sponsor in Saudi oil wealth and a ferocious new spearhead in Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

Perhaps the final lesson of Iraq's complex career since independence is that a secular and modernizing pan-Arabism has proved to be one of the sadder might-have-beens of history. Had the British been able to encourage it along more genuinely democratic lines it would certainly have been preferable to the succession of military coups and authoritarian rulers that marked Iraq's course, and to the aggressive and uncompromising pan-Islamic forces that now grip much of the Muslim world. It was probably the only alternative vision that could have competed with the pan-Islamic fervor. And, in years to come, a secular and democratic pan-Arabism—if those terms are not inherently contradictory—may yet be able to play that role.

Having taken a direct hand in forging a stable and democratic post-Saddam Iraq, Americans could do worse than ponder two contrasting thoughts from Gertrude Bell, one of the foreigners who knew the Iraqi people best. The first was written in despair during the uprising of 1920: "The problem is the future. The tribes don't want to form part of a unified state; the towns can't do without it." The second, far more optimistic observation came at the end of her career a half-dozen years later, when the British mandate was proceeding reasonably smoothly: "Iraq is the only country which pulls together with Great Britain and the reason is that we have honestly tried out here to do the task that we said we were going to do, i.e. create an independent Arab state."

She may have thought so, but few Iraqis truly believed it. For all their good intentions and achievements, the British, under the strains of war, recession, and dependence on oil, were never quite able to surrender their remaining control over Iraq's independence until they were forced to do so. And by maintaining that control, the British precluded the development of a political system that might have produced a non-authoritarian regime capable of governing the unstable, improbable country they had created. But as an alternative to pan-Arabism or pan-Islamism, that hope of building an Iraqi nation based on a constitution and representative government appears to be the political goal of the American and British armies of today, just as it was of Britain's proconsuls 80 years ago. □