Comment: *Inventing Iraq*

Iraq was created at the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919 out of the three Ottoman Turkish provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra, principally on the initiative of a 35-year-old Englishman, Arnold Talbot Wilson. In retrospect, more than eighty years on, it seems obvious that, from the outset, it should at most have been a confederation, not a unitary state. Moreover, the best hope for something like democracy, or anyway a tolerably just and prosperous future for Iraq, surely lies in some kind of federation of the three regions: Kurdish, Sunni and Shi'a Muslim.

Even at the time, a federated state should have seemed more workable. Unfortunately, however, the decision was taken with very little consideration of the facts on the ground. Lloyd George, the British prime minister, cheerfully admitted his ignorance of where exactly the Kurds were on the map. If the United States would take responsibility for Armenia, he would have considered putting the case for an independent Kurdistan, of course under British influence; but President Woodrow Wilson was not interested. In fact, at the Peace Conference, as the Middle East was divided out among the victorious Allies, the Kurds had no friends and the Americans were content to leave the reshaping of the Middle East largely to the British and the French.

Whatever happens in the *realpolitik* of international relations today, nothing compares with the unconcealed greed of the French and the British in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman empire.

We have to allow for a certain amount of serendipity. Admittedly, the Anglo-Indian expeditionary force which landed in the Basra province in November 1914 rapidly established itself on the Shatt al-Arab, thereby securing the refinery of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company on the island of Abadan. It would nevertheless not be quite fair to say that control of the oil reserves was always the lure. The rest of the campaign was a shambles, with many British and Indian lives wasted through tactical blunders by incompetent generals and lack of medical facilities for the wounded. (No one remembers how many Turkish soldiers or local people died.) The British finally took Baghdad in 1917, after two years of bloody fighting. Even then, however, few would have agreed on the purpose of the invasion or the ultimate objective of the British.

For one thing, many people at the time did not yet understand the importance of oil. Famously, Clemenceau, the French prime minister, once said, 'when I want some oil, I'll find it at my grocer's',

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jokingly referring to olive oil, that staple of French cuisine. By 1919, however, though not until after the British had fooled him into giving up French interest in the region round Mosul, he twigged that oil, not coal, would be the fuel of the next industrial revolution. Eventually the French did negotiate a share in the Turkish Petroleum Company but the British ensured that they should have not have control over what were turning out to be the vast oil reserves in that region.

At the outset, however, control of the oil reserves was not the only or even the main purpose of the British. One reason offered for the invasion was to preempt the use of Basra as a base for German submarines to roam in the Indian Ocean – a reason, interestingly, rejected by senior officers in the Admiralty in London: they did not regard this as a serious threat. Another reason was to counter Turkish and German attempts supposedly to stir up *jihad* among the Moslems in Afghanistan and India, as well as in Arabia, a serious threat, given that so many Indian troops were fighting for the King-Emperor, in France and elsewhere. Mainly, no doubt, farsighted officials in India saw the chance to secure the sub-continent once and for all against Russia (an ally for the moment, right enough; but long suspected of having designs on Afghanistan and India).

Indeed, at the outset, the British government in India expected the provinces of Basra and Baghdad to be annexed to India. (How differently the history of the Middle East would have turned out!) In March 1917, however, as a result of a deal with the French, London decided to retain control of Basra and to turn the *vilayet* of Baghdad into an independent (albeit client) state. At the Armistice in Europe, all these three former Ottoman provinces were occupied by British troops and administered by British civil servants (mostly from India).

In 1920, as resentment against the occupying army solidified, and widespread discontent in the traditional religious centres and among the tribes increased, rebellion broke out in all three provinces. The insurgents were crushed ruthlessly, with shameful brutality, by air power and the vastly superior British and Indian troops. It is enough to recall the words of the Colonial Secretary at the time, Winston Churchill: 'I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas. I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes'.

By 1918, at the age of thirty-five, Arnold Talbot Wilson (1884–1940) headed the British administration of Mesopotamia: the land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Never slow to cite Scripture or to flourish his revolver, young Wilson was an extraordinary character. He it was who created Iraq, though not entirely the way he wanted: 'Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul should be regarded as a single unit for administrative purposes and under effective British control'. Perhaps under the heel of an army of occupation the plan might have

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worked; but London was not willing to pay for that. Wilson wanted Britain to declare the unitary state of Mesopotamia a British protectorate: 'The average Arab, as opposed to a handful of amateur politicians in Baghdad, sees the future as one of fair dealing and material and moral progress under the aegis of Great Britain'. His superiors in London had slightly different ideas: 'What we want', so an official at the India Office noted, 'is some administration with Arab institutions which we can safely leave while pulling the strings ourselves, something that won't cost very much, which Labour can swallow consistent with its principles, but under which our economic and political interests will be secure'.

In those days, of course, such decisions were taken well out of the public eye. Yet, one cannot help thinking, there was something more honourable in this shameless statement than in the stories about the imminent threat of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and his years of defying United Nations resolutions, and so forth, offered as reasons for attacking Basra and Baghdad this time round.

In 1920 there was no Iraqi people: history, religion, language, ethnicity, geography pulled the inhabitants of Mesopotamia apart. Basra looked towards the Gulf and India; Baghdad had strong links with Persia (Iran); while Mosul was largely Kurdish, linked to what would emerge as Turkey.

In 1921 the British – Churchill, effectively – installed Feisal as King of Iraq (he was briefly King of Syria, not pliably enough, so the French forced him out).

This was a triumph for Gertrude Lowthian Bell (1868–1926). Long recognized by then as one of the leading authorities on the Middle East, widely travelled, unmarried ('she loved passionately but never married'), chain-smoking, domineering, the first woman to receive a first-class degree in history at Oxford, the first to work for British military intelligence, Bell did more even than Wilson to bring about Iraq: 'We shall, I trust, make it a centre of Arab civilisation and prosperity'. She designed Feisal's flag, organized the coronation and invented the ceremonial for his court. He died in 1923; his son, 'a cheerful playboy', was killed in a motor accident in 1939; his successor was killed in the *coup* in 1958 which inaugurated the rule of the Ba'ath party (the word means 'redemption'). . . .The rest is history.

Gertrude Bell took her own life in 1926. Wilson moved to Anglo-Persian Oil: he was killed in 1940, as an air gunner, in an RAF fighter brought down over Dunkirk.

There is always more to history. Yet, when one thinks of how much Wilson and Bell contributed to the creation of Iraq, it is the contingencies that come to the fore. It could all so easily have been otherwise. The oil reserves are still there. Perhaps we now could be more honest about western ambitions in the Middle East. Perhaps, after these terrible decades of misery for the inhabitants of the land

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between the rivers we might hope that the three former Ottoman *vilayets* be allowed to develop each its own autonomy within some kind of federation. The alternative can only be another 'strong man', whoever pulls the strings.

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