

# Lessons To Be Learned: Iraqi Resistance To British Occupation 80 Years Ago

by Hussein Askary

In Iraq, as in many other places, history keeps repeating itself, sometimes with all the ironies and paradoxes of war and peace. In the view of this Iraqi author, the situation there, due to the foolish policy of the Bush Administration and the wicked plans of the war party of Cheney and his neo-conservative cronies, is moving rapidly towards a major confrontation all over the country. This most likely will recapitulate the 1920 Iraqi revolt against the British Empire. The resistance to the U.S. occupation in Iraq recently has been relatively limited to the so-called “Sunni triangle,” in the capital and north and northwest of Baghdad. However, there is an increasing pattern of dismay and calls for confrontation among the Shi’ites in Baghdad and southern Iraq.

The Shi’a Muslims, who make up 65% of the 24 million Iraqi population, have been passively watching developments while politically organizing their communities around religious institutions. The Shi’ites, like the Kurds, have suffered enormously under Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship. Ironically, most of the resistance to the U.S.-British invasion of Iraq in March-April this year took place in the south. Were the Shi’a defending Saddam Hussein? The answer is, of course, no.

## The World War I Precedent

In World War I, the Shi’a population and their religious leadership, who were also oppressed by the Ottoman Empire, joined forces with the Turks to defeat the British invading army in 1915-16. The British India army had taken Basrah and advanced towards Baghdad. They were effectively stopped in Kut Al-Amara, besieged and crushed. The British mission had to surrender. In late 1916, a new offensive was launched. This time, the resistance was much more limited, because the Turks, in their imperial folly, had gone against the Shi’a population, arresting and executing a large number of them.

On March 19, 1917, British troops took Baghdad under the leadership of Maj. Gen. Stanley Maude. Then, as now, the invaders proclaimed that they came to Iraq to “liberate” the Iraqi people from the Ottoman imperial tyranny, and promised to give the Iraqi people independence and the right to a choose their own government as soon as the war was over. That was not the intention of the British Empire. While they had promised the Arab peoples independence if they rose in Arabia against the Turks, the British had secretly drawn the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 with the French, dividing the

spoils of war in the region after the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

The idea was to put Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine under direct British occupation, while the French would get Greater Syria (Syria and Lebanon) and Mosul in northern Iraq. They had also made a secret promise to the Jewish community in Britain to “establish a homeland for the Jews in Palestine.” Today, as then, the Anglo-American neo-conservatives have drawn the “Clean Break,” a plan for redrawing the map of the Middle East.

In fact, The British Viceroy of India had openly promoted the “annexation” of southern Iraq to “British India,” making the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea a British lake. The original idea was to start a massive transfer of Indian serfs to southern Iraq, to set up cotton and rice plantations. The man to implement this plan was British Civil Commissioner Sir Arnold Wilson, a racist and bloodthirsty British army colonel. It was, however, discarded as soon as the British occupation first came into direct contact with the Iraqi people.

Suspicious of British intentions, Shi’a Muslim leaders in the holy city of Najaf started a process of political organizing against the occupation. This culminated in the forming of the Al-Nahdha (Renaissance) Party. On March 19, 1917, a limited uprising against the British occupation took place in Najaf. It was swiftly and brutally crushed by the British army, which surrounded the city and bombed one major quarter of it. Eleven Iraqis were executed in retaliation for the killing of one British officer. This incident had shown the Iraqis the real nature of what they had to deal with.

In Jan. 8, 1918, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson addressed a joint session of Congress: “Parleys have been in progress at Brest-Litovsk between Russian representatives and representatives of the Central Powers to which the attention of all the belligerents have been invited for the purpose of ascertaining whether it may be possible to extend these parleys into a general conference with regard to terms of peace and settlement.” His speech included a declaration of 14 points of what he called the “only possible program” to achieve world peace and justice in the post-war era. That declaration included the demand of “affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.” An Arabic copy of Wilson’s declaration was published on Oct. 11 of that year, and widely circulated in Iraq. Point 12 received special attention: “XII. The



*After a British invading army had been besieged and surrendered in 1916, the second British invasion of Iraq, in 1917, “succeeded” because the Ottoman Turkish imperial regime had meanwhile fiercely oppressed Iraq’s Shi’ites, generating great opposition to Ottoman Rule. British Maj. Gen. Stanley Maude’s troops finally captured Baghdad on March 11, 1917 (left). Maude was to be buried under the city’s wall seven months later (right).*

Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.”

This point was regarded as an explicit American endorsement of the independence of the nations occupied by the British and the French. Also on Oct. 11, General Marshall in Iraq issued a communiqué affirming Iraqi independence. The British-French allies issued a joint declaration, which stated, “The ultimate objective of the governments of France and Great Britain is the complete liberation of all the peoples which have for so long lived under the yoke of Turkish oppression, and to establish national governments and administrations that derive their authority and principles from representatives chosen by the people.”

### **Sykes-Picot and Woodrow Wilson**

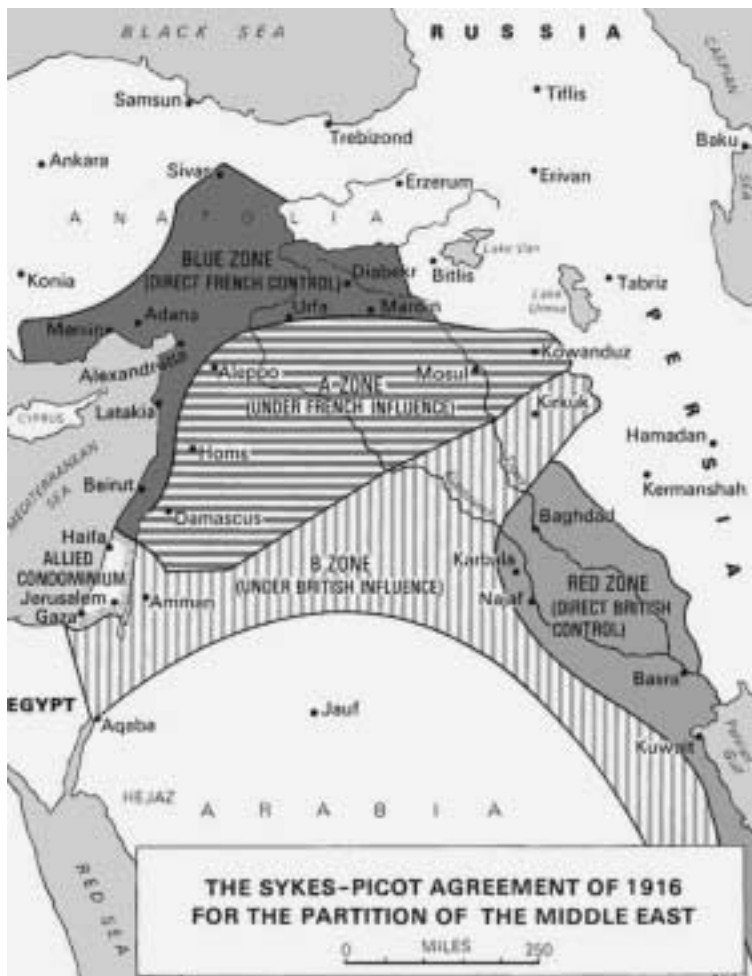
America was regarded as a great power with no imperial past and with good intentions towards weaker nations. However, the people of the region had no insight into the Anglo-ophile affinities of Woodrow Wilson, which led him into compromising in the next months. Wilson brought the U.S. into the war to bring the American republic into the imperial club on behalf of the Wall Street financial interests. However, he needed some moral cause to justify such an involvement and to persuade the anti-imperial American public and Congress to support it.

President Wilson was fully aware of the British-French secret deals and the Sykes-Picot agreement for colonial sharing of the territories to be left by “Europe’s sick man,” the Ottoman Empire. Wilson had inquired into the details of these

agreements, and British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour sent copies to Washington, through Wilson’s close friend Col. Edward M. House. House advised Wilson not to mention the secret agreements in public before the war was won. Wilson tried his best to conceal them, but these agreements were made public after the Bolsheviks took power in Russia and found copies in the office of Czarist Russia’s foreign minister Sergei Sazanov. Russia was to get parts of Turkey after the war according to the Sykes-Picot-Sazanov deal, but the Bolshevik Revolution pulled Russia out of it.

Wilson’s project for giving the war a “moral meaning” was launched on the suggestion propagandist and *New Republic* editor Walter Lippmann. Lippmann wrote to President Wilson the day after his speech to Congress: “Only a statesman who will be called great could have made America’s intervention mean so much to the generous forces of the world, could have lifted the inevitable horror of war into a deed so full of meaning.” Lippmann and Colonel House led a special group in late 1917, bypassing the State Department, to draw America’s plans for the post-war era for President Wilson, in similar fashion as the Pentagon’s current neo-conservative Office of Special Plans (OSP) bypassed both the State Department and the CIA to draw its own Iraq war plans. The British Prime Minister persuaded Wilson to put parts of the Middle East—such as Armenia and parts of Turkey—under an “American mandate.”

Germany formally surrendered on Nov. 11, 1918. Negotiations on the terms of peace led to the signing of the June 28, 1919, Treaty of Versailles. It needs no confirmation that the disastrous terms of this treaty led directly to the next war. For the Middle East, this treaty led to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, which strengthened the grip of the new colonial



*Promising Iraqis "independence and liberation" from the Turks, the British secretly agreed in 1916 with France to divide the area for oil and strategic exploitation, and to divide Iran (Persia) with Czarist Russia. When, in 1920, the "international community," meeting as the League of Nations, endorsed the British imperial division of the spoils, that was the trigger for Iraqi armed revolt.*

powers over Middle East nations. All promises of freedom, independence, and sovereignty were betrayed. The role of the United States, which had actually withdrawn from the League of Nations by that time, was reduced to that of lawyer for the American oil companies, Standard Oil of New York (SOCONY) and the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey—that day's Halliburton and Bechtel. These companies were in a fight with the British and French for a share in the oil concessions, like vultures gathered on the Ottoman imperial corpse.

The outcome of the phony deal-making was that the nations of the Middle East should be placed under imperial mandate to help these yet immature peoples become civilized and govern themselves. The recent UN Security Council deals, that legitimized the illegal war against Iraq and the current U.S.-British occupation, without any clear guarantees for the future of the Iraqi people, are a similar historic mistake.

On Nov. 30, 1918, the British Viceroy of India sent a telegram to Sir Arnold Wilson, stating: "Let it be known to all that it is in the [Paris] Peace Conference that the fate of the Iraqi sectors would be decided." And, anticipating the requirement of a referendum on the mandate, the Viceroy ordered Wilson to carry out a controlled plebiscite, with only "Yes" to the mandate as an acceptable answer. The referendum would consist of three questions: 1) Do the Iraqis wish to have a united Arab state, extending from north of Mosul to the Persian Gulf, under a British mandate? 2) Do they wish, in this case, to have an Arab leader by name to head this state? and 3) In this case, who is this leader? So, the choice put to the Iraqis was either to accept a puppet government under a British mandate or direct British military rule.

### Referendum Leads to Confrontation

The myth peddled by almost all official British histories, and by private authors, is that the problem in Iraq was the ambitions of wild tribesmen who resisted any kind of modern central government, preferring to live in a lawless state. The truth is that the Iraqi population, in spite of horrific living conditions and poverty, was highly organized in political terms. The alliance between the clan leaders and the religious leadership based in Karbala and Al-Najaf, was the main source of political organizing. The *Hawzas*, religious seminaries in these two cities, are still, to this date, the source of much of the unofficial legislation for millions of Shi'ites. The *Hawza* is composed of religious *Ulamaa* (Men of Knowledge) who have deep knowledge of Islamic history, the Quran, the tradition of the prophet, Arabic literature, and a number of natural sciences. Although subjected to oppression through many centuries, including under the recent

Saddam Hussein dictatorship, the *Hawza* persisted in its following of the Shi'ite school whose roots stretch more than 1,000 years to the Islamic Renaissance era. Another branch of the Shi'ite school started to grow in Iran in the 16th Century. Therefore many scholars move back and forth between Iran and Iraq. Many of the Iraqi Shi'ite leaders were born in Iran. This gave an excuse to Saddam's Ba'ath party to accuse them as Iranian agents during and after the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

The humbleness of the Ulamaa confuses the arrogant and the mighty. Gertrude Bell, British spy in Baghdad and later assistant to High Commissioner Sir Arnold Wilson, wrote to her mother, mocking the Shi'ite clergy: "It's a problem here how to get into touch with the Shi'as, not the tribal people in the country; we are on intimate terms with all of them; but the grimly devout citizens of the holy towns and more specially the leaders of religious opinion, who can loose and bind with

a word by authority which rests on an intimate acquaintance with accumulated knowledge entirely irrelevant to human affairs and worthless in any branch of human activity.”

The opposition and uprising against the British rule was not simply a Shi’ite phenomenon. Many Sunni Muslim religious leaders and clans coordinated their efforts with the Shi’ite leaders, provoking the rage of the British. The Kurds also joined in the opposition to the British occupation, making the situation more and more difficult to control. The only allies the British had in the country were the merchants, land owners, notables, and religious leaders who were actually the lackeys of the Ottoman Empire before. One example was Abdul-Rahman Al-Naqib, some sort of a mayor of Baghdad, who used to work for the Ottomans, and later became a stooge of Gertrude Bell and Arnold Wilson. He later became the first prime minister under British rule. Those “notables” aligned themselves with the imperial power in order to protect their wealth, their plantations, and their power. Most of the population was living in virtual serfdom.

The resistance to the occupation and imposition of the mandate started peacefully, and through diplomatic initiatives. While the British promised a public referendum, they first extended the period of the referendum from December 1918 to January 1919; then, solicited petitions from their friendly notables of the major cities, stating that they accepted British rule with all their hearts, and that there was no need for a referendum. One, from Mosul, read: “We offer our thanks to Great Britain for saving us from the Turks and from death, and for giving us freedom and justice. We hope that this state [Britain] would bestow its protection upon us and to run the affairs of our country. We beg you to bring this request to the Great King George.” Another, by merchants in Karbala, said: “We have agreed to come under the shadow of our merciful and compassionate government of Great Britain for a period of time.”

These petitions were then taken by British officers to other parts of Iraq to convince the population that the leaders had agreed to the mandate. Meanwhile, they cut all communication between the major cities, in order not to allow consultation among the different groups. Anyone who was seen traveling to another city to meet with political or religious leaders was arrested as an agitator.

On Nov. 13, 1919, Arnold Wilson went to Al-Najaf, together with the military administrator of the area, Major Norbury, to meet a selected group of religious scholars, merchants, and clan leaders and to ask them about the referendum. Wilson asked the group: “Do you want our government or an Arab government?” One of the invited agents, Hadi Al-Naqeeb, answered immediately that they “would accept none other than Britain.” But another participant rejected the idea and demanded a larger meeting. Wilson left the meeting without saying anything. The next day, another meeting was held in the house of Jawad Al-Jawahiri, one of the best-known political and religious leaders. The answer to Wilson’s ques-

tion was, “No to British rule.” Furthermore, they demanded that the referendum should include everyone in Iraq, including the peasants and the coolies, on equal footing with the merchants and landowners.

The participants were about to write petitions in opposition to British rule to be sent to the major powers meeting in the Paris Peace Conference. The British sent in the police and stopped the meeting. The clan leaders decided they would return to their respective areas and mobilize against the mandate. Other meetings were made to sign counter-petitions. Arrests were made to prevent this development and that drove the whole situation into a direct confrontation.

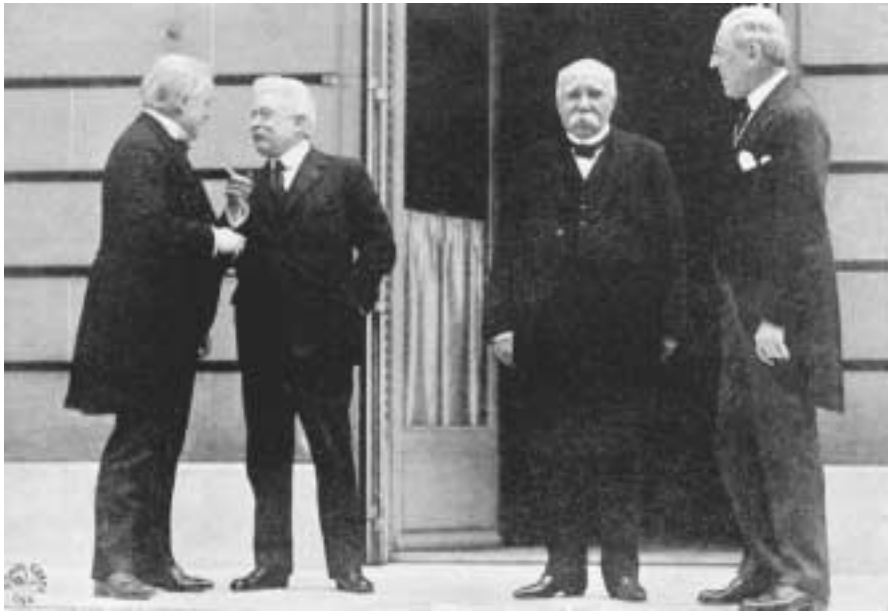
Both Sunni and Shi’a leaders in Baghdad signed a joint petition on Jan. 19, 1919 stating: “We the representatives of Muslims in Baghdad, both Sunni and Shi’a, have decided that the land of Iraq from Mosul to the Persian Gulf should be one Arab state with an Arab Muslim king as a leader, bounded by a national congress [parliament].” The proposed king would be Emir Faisal, son of Sharif Hussein of Arabia, who had been promised by the British an Arab state in all Arabia and Syria, in exchange for his help in the war against the Ottomans.

In a letter to her father, Gertrude Bell wrote, just as the revolt was breaking out: “There are 2 or 3 meetings every week in the mosques to celebrate this unexampled event. Sometimes in Shi’ah mosques and sometimes in Sunni, and all attended by both sects. It is in reality political not religious and I don’t know that anyone believes the boasted union to be permanent. There’s a lot of semi-religious, semi-political preaching and reciting of poems, and the underlying thought is out with the infidel. My belief is that the weightier people [friends of the British] are against it—I know some of them are bitterly disgusted—but it’s very difficult to stand out against the Islamic cry and the longer it goes on the more difficult it is.”

### **Sheikh Al-Shirazi Assumes Leadership**

Sheikh Mohammed Taqi Al-Haeri Al-Shirazi, the most prominent religious leader in the *Hawza* in Karbala, intervened forcefully after these events in order to organize the resistance. He was for a peaceful solution for the crisis, trying to force the British and the international community to make good on their promises. He was against a military escalation, as long as the British were willing to negotiate. Al-Shirazi put an end to the “referendum” by issuing a *fatwa* (a religious decree) saying that “No Muslim can choose or elect anyone to position of power and government other than a Muslim.” This *fatwa* was printed and spread across the country. Furthermore, Al-Shirazi was opposed to the idea of appointing one of the sons of Sharif Hussein as King of Iraq. He was more focussed on the question of independence and a constitution for a sovereign Iraq.

Realizing that the British were not intending to listen, Al-Shirazi raised the level of political and diplomatic efforts to



*At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference (the Mideast imperial follow-up to the Versailles Conference), British Prime Minister David Lloyd-George (left) talks to Italy's Vittorio Orlando, and U.S. President Woodrow Wilson (right) chats with France's Georges Clemenceau. "All promises of freedom, independence, and sovereignty were betrayed. The role of the United States was reduced to that of lawyer for the American oil companies, Standard Oil of New York (SOCONY) and the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey—that day's Halliburton and Bechtel."*

the other western powers, to expose the forgery being committed by the British. On Feb. 13, 1919, he sent three letters: one to President Woodrow Wilson, another to the U.S. Ambassador in Iran, and a third to the Prime Minister of Iran, Wathoq-ul Dawla. In the last, Al-Shirazi urged the Iranian not to sign the humiliating Anglo-Persian Agreement, which would strip Iran of its independence and put it under direct British economic and political control. If he did sign, Al-Shirazi warned that he himself would "do everything in his power to stop it," and that "Muslims would fight to liberate themselves from the chains of slavery."

Al-Shirazi reminded the U.S. ambassador to Iran of the principles of self-determination to which the U.S. Administration had committed itself, and informed him that the Iraqi people were seeking the aid of the United States to establish an independent Arab-Islamic state. He alerted the ambassador to the fact that people in Iraq were reluctant to express their views on the issue of the mandate due to the "martial laws that have put them under siege from all sides" and that "people do not trust the alleged right to free expression of opinions."

To President Wilson, Al-Shirazi wrote on Feb. 13, 1919, together with Sheikh Al-Sharia Al-Asfahani of Karbala:

All peoples rejoiced for the declared purpose of participating in the European wars; namely, the restoration to the oppressed nations their rights, and opening the way for them to enjoy independence according to the terms

you have declared. Since you were the initiator of this project, the project of happiness and general peace, it is appropriate that you be the resort for lifting the obstacles from its accomplishment. There is indeed a strong obstacle, preventing most of the Iraqi people from expressing their aspirations, in spite of the declared desire of the British government that all Iraqis should express their views. The general opinion amongst them is that since they are a Muslim nation, it should enjoy a judicial freedom and choose a new, independent Arab-Islamic state headed by a Muslim king, who is bounded by a national assembly. As for the talk about [taking up the issue after] the post-Peace Conference period, we would like to inform you that we are responsible for bringing hope to the

Iraqi people and removing all obstacles in their way to express their views and aspiration to a sufficient degree to allow the international public opinion to see the truth about the purpose of what you have outlined, in complete freedom. To you, thus, will be the eternal honor in history and in its current modern civilization.

### **Then, and Now**

In March, the British occupation administration in Iraq compiled the petitions and results of its non-existent referendum and sent them to His Majesty's Government in London, in order to present it to the Paris Peace Conference. The person who was delegated to present the case to the government was Ms. Bell, who on March 16 wrote to her mother from Paris: "But for the moment there's nothing to be done except educate the Americans, who seem to be very willing to accept the information we have to give." Bell had written a memorandum to the British government on the subject stating: "[T]he people of Mesopotamia, having witnessed the successful termination of the war, had taken it for granted that the country would remain under British control and were as a whole content to accept the decision of arms."

The British government accepted Bell's and Arnold Wilson's "proof" that the Iraqi people favored British imperial rule instead of freedom and independence. On May 9, 1919, the government of Prime Minister David Lloyd George instructed Sir Arnold to proceed with establishing a Mesopota-

mian government under a British High Commissioner, aided by four military administrators for Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, and Middle Euphrates.

There is a great deal of confusion and fakery about the form of government the British proposed. The instructions were so vague that Sir Arnold was given greater freedom to implement his absolute military rule over the Iraqis whom he regarded as “lawless thugs.” Bell on the other hand is described in general terms as the liberal “uncrowned queen” of Iraq who was “intriguing” against Wilson and demanding a limited transfer of responsibilities to Iraqi puppets from among the rich elite. This “fight” between Wilson’s British India old imperial style of direct military rule, and Bell’s “liberal imperialist” tendency advocating the imposition of a “mandate,” was later used to scapegoat Wilson for the disaster which followed. It was the basis for launching a coup within the British establishment, putting Bell’s new “Arab Bureau of Intelligence” of the Foreign Ministry in charge of the whole Middle East, instead of the British India grouping.

When the British decision for a British government over Iraq was made known, Iraqi patriots and Al-Shirazi escalated their activities from diplomacy and dialog to “passive,” i.e., peaceful, resistance and political organizing. The danger foreseen by Al-Shirazi and others was that this new step by the British could be a prelude to giving international legitimacy to the British occupation; a swift move to organize the resistance was necessary to pre-empt such a development.

This brings to mind the current strong resistance by the Iraqi Shi’ite supreme religious leader Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, who strongly opposes the drafting of a new Iraqi constitution while the affairs of the country are run by the U.S.-British Provisional Coalition Authority. He insists that the group which will draft the constitution should be selected by the Iraqi people through free elections. Al-Sistani issued a *fatwa* recently, prohibiting the drafting of the constitution under the current conditions of occupation.

Between May and August 1919, political organizations were established, such as the “Guardians of Independence” in Baghdad, and the “Islamic Society” in Karbala, headed by the son of Al-Shirazi and a number of other scholars. These organizations then spread throughout the country and started organizing and informing the different tribes and clans about the strategy for resistance. Al-Shirazi and his collaborators made everyone aware of the peaceful nature of this resistance, while keeping an armed resistance as a last resort.

The same point was raised repeatedly during the course of 2003, by the Shi’ite political leader Mohammed Baqir Al-Hakeem, who was killed in a terrorist bombing in the holy city of Najaf in late August. Although his group, the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), is part of the Iraqi Governing Council under the occupation, he demanded a policy with a clear time-frame for the transfer of power to the Iraqi people. Otherwise, as he used to warn, peaceful—at first—resistance to the U.S.-British occupation

would be launched.

On Aug. 2, 1919 the British, becoming alarmed by the state of political organization in the country, had the army arrest six leaders of Karbala’s “Islamic Society” who were working closely with Al-Shirazi and his son. The six were sent into exile to an island in the Indian Ocean. This, the British thought, would deter the rest, especially Al-Shirazi. But Al-Shirazi sent a letter to Sir Arnold Wilson demanding the release and return of the leaders back to Iraq. Wilson, in an arrogant gesture, rejected Al-Shirazi’s letter, believing that Al-Shirazi would not risk arousing a bloody uprising and taking the blame for the loss of lives.

## The Strategic Setting

Thinking strategically, Al-Shirazi made an important flanking maneuver. He announced on Aug. 10, 1919 that if the exiles were not brought back to Iraq, he would leave for Iran and declare *jihad* (holy war) against the British from there. Being the supreme religious leader for Shi’ites in Iraq and Iran, and also Shi’a minorities in India, the Iranian people would rally around him for *jihad* against the British, who were also controlling the Iranian king Shah Ahmed. The British in Iran (then called Persia) were in a desperate situation at the time. Popular rejection of the Anglo-Persian Agreement was at its peak. Shah Ahmed, although still under strong British control, was looking forward to gaining some benefits from the new, Bolshevik Russian policy, which abandoned Czarist territorial ambitions in the region, cancelled all debt and economic concessions, and offered cooperation with the Persian Shah. For many decades, Persia was an important part of the British Great Game, a buffer zone, together with Afghanistan, to prevent Russia from reaching to India and the Indian Ocean.

The British conceded to Al-Shirazi’s demands, but simultaneously rushed the Anglo-Persian treaty to be rubber-stamped by the Persian Prime Minister. The process of negotiations for the return of the exiles from India ended in December 1919, with their return to Karbala, where they were received as heroes. This confirmed to the Iraqis that their political organizing and the competent strategic thinking of their leaders were able to force the British to make concessions, peacefully. Al-Shirazi and other leaders did not sit back. He continued to work to abolish the shameful Anglo-Persian treaty, while his organizing of a pan-Iraqi resistance demanding full independence escalated.

In Persia, by the Winter of 1919-20, the political opposition and the Shi’ite *Hawza* in Qom mobilized to abolish the Anglo-Persian Treaty, as violating the Persian constitution. Pressure from within Iran and urging from Al-Shirazi in Iraq, who sent his collaborator Abul-Qasim Al-Kashani to meet with Shah Ahmed while on a visit to the holy sites in Iraq, induced Shah Ahmed to force his Prime Minister, Wathuq-ul Dawla, to resign. By the Spring of 1920, the Anglo-Persian Agreement was abolished. The British then pulled a coup d’état against Shah Ahmed, run directly by the British army

commander in northern Persia, Maj. Gen. Edmund Ironside. Ironside recruited an Iranian colonel, Reza Khan, to lead the force of 6,000 Persian Cossacks who were left behind by the collapsing Czarist Empire. Ironside led Reza Khan into Tehran in February 1921 to seize power. The British retreated that year, leaving behind this Iranian puppet as commander-in-chief to guard British oil concessions and strategic agreements in Iran.

In 1925 Reza Khan deposed Ahmed Shah, and appointed himself as Shah Reza Pahlawi. The Pahlawi dynasty lasted 54 years until its second king, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlawi, was overthrown by the Islamic Revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979.

British troubles between 1919-20 were not confined to Iraq and Iran. The British Empire, which was close to total economic bankruptcy by the end of the war, and being stretched thin throughout Asia and the Middle East, faced revolts all the way from Afghanistan to Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt. Afghanistan had risen in an armed revolt against the British in May 1919, through a declaration of independence of Afghanistan by the young leader Amanullah Khan. This was the third Afghan-British war. It took place only two weeks after the Amritsar massacre, in which British troops opened fire and murdered 379 Sikh worshippers who were reportedly in Amritsar, India for a political meeting. This massacre caused massive riots in many parts of India. The revolt in Afghanistan was put off through the use of brutal force by the British, especially by the Royal Air Force, which bombed whole villages.

In Turkey, the young officer Mustafa Kemal, later known as Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey, succeeded between late 1919 and 1920 in reorganizing the broken Turkish army. In a matter of a few weeks, Kemal turned Turkey from the defeated and occupied Ottoman nation, into an independent and powerful military power, threatening British and allied plans to divide the country. Egypt, in its turn, witnessed strikes and riots, culminating in violent attacks on the British army in the Spring of 1919, following the arrest and deportation of the nationalist political leaders who were demanding independence through the Paris Peace Conference.

With a faltering economy and strategic-military blunders across Asia, the leaders of the British Empire resembled the current Roman Imperial wannabes of the “Cheney Administration.”



*British occupation military commander Sir Arnold Wilson (left) represented the “arrest and kill” strategy for ruling Iraq, similar to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s pronouncements today. Liberal imperialist and British government representative Gertrude Bell (right) was part of T.E. Lawrence’s ongoing “coup” against the British India school; she cultivated pro-British Iraqi “elites.” But she found RAF bombings of Iraqi villages during the 1920 revolt “fascinating.”*

## The Explosion

Woodrow Wilson left Europe in June 1919, returning to the United States to rally support for his new policy. But, he collapsed clinically and politically. By the beginning of 1920, the U.S. Congress rejected the Treaty of Versailles, a peace treaty with the defeated Ottoman Empire, the membership in the League of Nations, and refused to accept an American Mandate over Armenia. In the absence of the United States, the April 25, 1920 meeting of the League of Nations in San Remo, Italy finally decided the fate of the conquered Ottoman Empire. Britain was to get territorial control over Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, the small emirates on the coast of the Gulf, and political control over Arabia (later known as Saudi Arabia). France was to get Syria and Lebanon; Italy to get the eastern coast of Turkish Anatolia on the Mediterranean. The French and British made some modification to the Sykes-Picot agreement; British Prime Minister David Lloyd George persuaded France’s George Clemenceau to abandon Mosul in northern Iraq to the British, in return for a 25% share in all Iraqi oil concessions.

When the bad news from San Remo reached Iraq, demonstrations, protests, and petitioning campaigns were organized across the country. Al-Shirazi issued a *fatwa* prohibiting Iraqis from working with the British occupation. This paralyzed the whole country and the British administration. Destabilized by these moves, Sir Arnold Wilson tried to reconcile the Iraqis and their now very powerful leadership in Karbala.

He promised to start negotiations on their demands. Religious, political, and tribal leaders held a meeting in Karbala to discuss the option of organizing an armed revolt against the British. Al-Shirazi refused to give them permission to do so, expressing his concern that this could endanger the security of the people. However, he instructed them to remain on their guard and keep the mobilization of the population, in the hope that the British would respond to their legitimate demands.

One week after the San Remo declaration, another gathering took place in Karbala, where an agreement was made among the political and tribal leaders to launch armed resistance. They requested permission once again from Al-Shirazi, who tied the possibility of an armed uprising against the British, to a last attempt to convince the British to concede peacefully. A delegation was formed to meet with Wilson in Baghdad. This development came at the beginning of the Islamic month of fasting, Ramadan. Al-Shirazi issued a declaration on April 29, 1920, urging people in all parts of Iraq to send delegates to Baghdad for the purpose of demonstrating and negotiating with the British authorities. He called for preserving calm and security, and warned strongly against causing any harm to members of other minorities, such as the Christian and Jewish residents of Baghdad. The demands of the delegations, he argued, should be no less than total independence and the establishment of an Arab-Islamic state. There was no longer any mention of bringing one of the sons of the Sharif Hussein to become the king of Iraq.

Sunnis and Shi'ites in Baghdad joined forces. While trying to appease the demonstrators in Baghdad, the British resorted to heavy-handed treatment in southern Iraq. By the beginning of June, the British realized that this movement had gone too far, and that they had made a mistake by allowing it to grow. Mass arrests of the Iraqi leaders were carried out in most towns in southern Iraq. On June 21, the British army laid Karbala under siege, and arrested a large number of its religious leaders, including the son of Al-Shirazi. Al-Shirazi sent a polite, but strong message to the British military governor of Hilla, asking him to release the detainees and refrain from further arrests. Otherwise, he warned, his call for restraint would be automatically null and void.

Far from "lawless tribesmen," Al-Shirazi and other leaders tried their best to avoid an armed confrontation. However, the British, who never intended to give the Iraqis independence and freedom, were bargaining only to buy time, relying on the power of their arms to shove the mandate down the throats of the Iraqis.

In June 29, 1920, Al-Shirazi issued his famous declaration: "It is a duty upon all Iraqis to call for their rights. While they do that, they should make sure that security and peace are preserved. But, they can resort to defensive force, if the British refuse to comply with their demands." By that time, preparations for an armed uprising had reached their peak, and the tribes were waiting for a signal. This signal came



*Today's Iraqi Shi'ite supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, who strongly opposes the drafting of a new Iraqi constitution while the affairs of the country are run by the U.S.-British Provisional Coalition Authority. He insists that the group which will draft the constitution should be selected by the Iraqi people through free elections. Shi'ite religious leaders' opposition to Cheney-Bremer dictat is strongly nationalist, but peaceful, as in 1917-20.*

when the leader of one of the tribes, Sheikh Shaalan Abul Joon, was summoned by the British military administrator of Al-Diwaniya. The first shot was fired on June 30. On July 1, the first attack on a British convoy took place in Al-Diwaniya.

This was followed by attacks on British garrisons and guard posts in almost all parts of Iraq. The tribal forces, armed with rifles only, launched a series of successful guerilla-type attacks. They started by cutting the rail lines and bridges connecting towns that housed British garrisons. They laid a successful siege to the British army base at Al-Rumaitha, which was only broken by the massive use of air bombardment. The armed tribes also resorted to assassinations of high-ranking British officers. When the uprising started, the Kurdish rebel leader Sheikh Mahmoud Al-Hafeed started to coordinate his activities with the leaders in the South; the Kurds inflicted heavy losses upon the British army in the mountainous areas. Sunni tribes, in what is today called the "Sunni Triangle" north and northwest of Baghdad, also joined the uprising.

## Massacre

In spite of the great military imbalance between the British army and the Iraqi rebels, the revolt was not brought to an end before the end of October. The British used brutal force to kill civilians in the villages which were known to have members in the rebellion. They did not spare women and children. "Wholesale slaughter," argued Col. Gerald Leachman of the British army in northern Iraq, was the only way to deal with the tribes. Leachman himself was assassinated in southern Iraq a few weeks later. These methods that were used against the Iraqi people in this revolt and later ones were described in detail by some of the British actors on the scene. Gertrude Bell wrote to her mother on July 4, 1920: "And more serious, the tribes down the Euphrates between Samawah and Diwaniyah are in open rebellion and have cut the [rail] line in three places. I don't know the details, but what I know is this: the tribes down there are some of the most lawless in Iraq. The Turks were helpless before them and for years had never got



a penny of revenue from the district. We've taken our full demand, and when the Shaikhs resisted we've bombed their villages. They're rogues I know; everyone knows it. But I doubt whether we've gone the best way to make them appreciate the benefits of settled govt."

In another letter, Bell told her father: "The most interesting thing which happened during this week was a performance by the R.A.F., a bombing demonstration. It was even more remarkable than the one we saw last year at the Air Force Show because it was much more real. They had made an imaginary village about a quarter of a mile from where we sat on the Diyala dyke and the two first bombs, dropped from 3000 ft, went straight into the middle of it and set it alight. It was wonderful and horrible. They then dropped bombs all round it, as if to catch the fugitives and finally firebombs which even in the bright sunlight, made flares of bright flame in the desert. They burn through metal, and water won't extinguish them. At the end the armoured cars went out to round up the fugitives with machine guns. . . . I was tremendously impressed. It's an amazingly relentless and terrible thing, war from the air."

But Bell added: "In conclusion I may mention that there is a gathering cloud in the north. The Turks are assembling troops in Van and have sent fresh officers and promised reinforcements at Rawanduz. . . . The RAF has done wonders bombing insurgent villages in extremely difficult country, but it takes them all their time to keep a sufficient number of machines in the air and now if we are called upon to bomb Rawanduz intensively, our resources will be strained to the utmost."

### **'Steady Withholding of Information'**

"A Report on Mesopotamia" by T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) appeared in the *Sunday Times* on Aug. 22, 1920: "The people of England have 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 a steady withholding of information. The Baghdad communiqués are belated, insincere, incomplete. Things have been far worse than we have been told, our administration more bloody and inefficient than the public knows. It is a disgrace to our imperial record, and may soon be too inflamed for any ordinary cure. We are to-day not far from a disaster."

British historian David Omissi, author of *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919-1939*, wrote in the *Guardian* in 1991 that "When the tribesmen of the Euphrates rose in rebellion against British military rule in the summer of 1920, the British army used gas shells—'with excellent moral effect'—in the fighting which followed."

In late 1919, like Donald Rumsfeld in 2002-03, Winston Churchill, then Minister of War and Air, devised a new, "cheaper" method for deployment of British troops in the Middle East: He argued for drastically reducing the ground force and replacing it with increased deployment of the Air

Force for "policing" Mesopotamia. Any village or town which showed any signs of armed resistance would be bombed from the air. Omissi stated in his book: "Churchill believed that the country could be cheaply policed by aircraft armed with gas bombs, supported by as few as 4,000 British and 10,000 Indian troops."

Churchill argued forcefully for using gas bombs and chemical weapons against the Kurdish villages—Saddam Hussein's notorious crime. In the event, the air force did not use gas bombs, for technical reasons; but the campaign was brutal enough. Some Iraqi villages were destroyed merely because their inhabitants had not paid their taxes.

More than 10,000 Iraqis were killed in the four months of the uprising. The British, with all their superiority in terms of arming, suffered 2,000 casualties, including 450 dead.

Politically, exactly as the U.S.-British coalition in Iraq blame international terrorists, Syria, Iran, Bin-Laden, Saddam Hussein, and everyone in sight but their failed policies for the disaster, the British in 1920 had a list of 14 "foreign" forces who were behind the Iraqi revolt. The list of suspects included Ataturk, the Young Turks, the Russians, the Hashemite King Hussein, the Jews, the American oil companies, and the American Ambassador in Baghdad, who was accused of sending money to the rebels in Karbala! The British called it a "mysterious uprising," and never realized what was really behind it!

The Iraqi revolt in 1920 derailed the British plans for Iraq. They continued to rule it, but indirectly, through the Hashemite King Faisal and his successors. The significance of this revolt was that the Iraqi people set an example in the modern history of the Middle East, in rising in defense of their basic rights. It also set a precedent which was replicated many times in the successive years and decades.

Did the revolt achieve any immediate objective? No. But it created a political legacy whose memories are still proudly reflected upon, and still vivid in the minds of at least two living generations of Iraqis. It created a true anti-imperialist sense in the historical mind of the Iraqi individual. And this was a greater achievement, which none of the successive British puppets and military dictators who have ruled Iraq since, could erase.

The role of the clergy, both Sunni and Shi'a, who are playing an increasingly great role in shaping Iraq's political environment now, is still maintained. This author, whose grandfather on the mother's side and great grandfather on the father's side participated in the revolt in 1920, does not wish the tragic events of that revolt to be repeated today. Nor does he yearn for a theocratic state. But this story is an important reminder of what could be in progress, if American policy continues to be run by the "Cheney junta" in Washington. Unless the Bush Administration shifts to a rapid and reasonable exit strategy, giving way to the United Nations and restoration of Iraq's sovereignty, the nation will remain one *fatwa* away from an explosion.