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The Insurrection of 1920 in Iraq. Causes and consequences

World War I had a great significance for Middle Eastern history because—by ending four centuries of Ottoman Turkish rule—it inaugurated a period of the region's dependence upon colonial powers. The Iraqi provinces of the Ottoman Empire—namely the wilayas of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul—passed to British domain. Until that happened, many events took place, which are the subject of this paper.

Dealing with the causes of the Iraqi uprising (30th June 1920—3rd February 1921), Iraqi historiography faces some significant methodological problems. For Fāriq al-Muzhir, it is the work of central Euphrates tribes¹. Al-Ḥasanī—in turn—regards it as an Arab uprising, simultaneously emphasizing the leading role of the Shi'i alims. According to him, the motion force behind the insurrection was—an unclear—Arab spirit² and “Arab instinct to jihad”³. A.R. al-Bazzāz regards the improper administration of the country and external agitation as the cause of the investigated events, rejecting—in a categorical manner—the role of economic and social factors⁵. “The intermingling of the economic factor and shaping the uprising as an expression of class struggle [...] are non-scientific attempts, based upon the generalization of events of a sporadic nature”⁵.

For British historians (mainly former officers and officials of the British administration of Iraq), the insurgence was the work of dissatisfied tribe leadership, ambitions of local šayḥs, personal interests of muḡtahids, as well as dissatisfaction with taxes and nationalist propaganda. Gen.

¹ F. al-Muzhir, *Al-Ḥaqā'iq an-nāšī'a fī at-tawra al-'irāqiyya 1920 wa-natā'iḡuhā*, vol. I, Baghdad 1952, pp. 102, 107.

² A.R. al-Ḥasanī, *At-Tawra al-'Irāqiyya al-Kubrā*, Saida 1965, p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

⁴ A.R. al-Bazzāz, *Al-'Irāq min al-iḡtilāl ḡattā al-istiqlāl*, Baghdad 1967, pp. 89-92.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Aylmer L. Haldane was the first to devote a book to the Iraqi uprising. According to him, the insurrection was the result of a conspiracy initiated in Syria, which found in Iraq a fertile ground⁶. The most objective—to my knowledge—British author of the period of Iraqi history, P.W. Ireland also gives priority to external factors, mainly Syrian propaganda⁷. P.W. Ireland, S.H. Longrigg, A.L. Haldane, P. Cox and G. Bell wrote about Bolshevik propaganda and the existence of “Bolshevik cells” in Iraq, equally before and after the outbreak of the uprising. However until the 1930’s we cannot trace the existence of any communist organization.

Hence, it should be asked: on what socio-economic basis did the Iraqi national movement develop and what social forces did participate in it? Iraq was for centuries subjected to a primitive Ottoman colonialism based upon tribal agrarian system. In the aftermath of the British occupation the country came under the rule of a modern imperial power, which used diversified methods of domination upon the economy and society. The Ottoman colonialism was based upon the decentralized administrative system of vilayas, while the British liquidated the wilayas and introduced a centralist system of government. The Ottomans resigned from any substantial investments, limiting themselves to incomes from tariffs and various taxes. The British—on the other hand—in addition to controlling vast petroleum riches of the country, proceeded even to controlling railways, the port of Basra, foreign trade and the monetary system⁸.

World War I, which brought about the occupation of Iraq, had catastrophic consequences for the economic life of the country: the downfall of agricultural output, the decline of foreign trade, rise in price levels. British invasion and occupation of the country led also to the destruction of parts of the irrigation system, lack of employees (due to their mobilization) and rise in death rate. The total output of basic grains fell in 1918 to 1/4 of its level in 1913⁹. If we add to all that the necessity of feeding the 80-thousand British occupation forces, we can conceive the conditions endured by the Iraqi population.

The decline in agricultural output, the substantial fall of foreign trade and the introduction of the Indian monetary system (Indian rupia) caused a

⁶ Aylmer L. Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia 1920*, Edinburgh-London 1922, p. 27.

⁷ P.W. Ireland, *Iraq. A Study in Political Development*, London 1938, pp. 239-265.

⁸ M.S. Hasan, *Ṭalā’i’ at-ṭawra al-‘irāqiyya al-ūlā*, Baghdad 1958, p. 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

significant rise in the prices of basic foodstuffs. If we compare the prices of such articles in the year 1913 with those of 1918 we note, that the price of barley rose by 160%, wheat—above 260%, rice—150%, sugar—more than threefold¹⁰.

The same factors which led to the serious decline in the standard of living of the great majority of the country's inhabitants, facilitated the accumulation of riches in the hands of great feudal landowners. The latter utilized war conditions and the support of British authorities in order to seize more thousands of acres and greater subjugation of peasants. It soon became clear, that the British agrarian policy was focused on supporting and nominating submissive shaiks—advocates of British policy—in exchange for granting them large areas of land, high salaries and various grants¹¹. Hence, not many small- and medium-size lands remained in such localities as Al-Ḥilla, Šāmiyya, Ba'qūba and northern Iraq. The lands were seized by big landlords, because of unpaid debts, which were undertaken earlier in order to pay the rising taxes imposed by the occupying power. During Ottoman rule prior to the World War, the total income of the government from land taxes amounted to 690 thousand sterling pounds annually, during the British occupation—in spite of the fall in agricultural output—raised the sum to 1300 thousand sterling pounds¹².

The taxation of landless, small and medium landowners (peasants) was one of the most important, direct causes of the insurrection. It broke out in rural areas, most forcefully in districts of high percentage of such categories of the population. Besides the World War brought about the virtual paralysis of foreign trade. An exception was the import of small amounts of tea from India. Stagnation noted in this field explains the dissatisfaction of traders, being the greatest part of the bourgeoisie, with British occupation and their joining of the insurgence. It should be added that, since the occupation, British companies undertook full control over both external and internal trade, together with the elimination of foreign competition, while the majority of Iraqi companies collapsed. On the other hand, the increased import of textiles ruined craftsmen¹³.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

¹¹ *Taqrīr sirrī li-Dā'irat al-Istihbārāt al-Briṭāniyya 'an al-'ašā'ir wa-as-siyāsa*, Baghdad 1958, p. 10. Loyal šayḥs were given the right to collect taxes for the government in exchange for 12,5% of taxed products. A.R. al-Bazzāz, op. cit., p. 84.

¹² M.S. Ḥasan, op. cit., p. 20.

¹³ Ibid., p. 12.

One of the goals of the British administration in Iraq was the covering of the needs of 80-thousand occupation forces. In spite of declarations on the emancipation of the country, the treatment of Iraqi population by the British did not differ from the usual practices in such circumstance. So, the British military command used to seize certain lands, take over houses after evacuating their legal owners, impose compulsory work and other harsh measures upon mass numbers of Iraqis. A further goal of the British administration was the “Indianisation” of Iraq—particularly its southern part—through the introduction of Indian laws and regulations in the direction of joining southern Iraq with India.

The judicial system introduced by the British intended above all to supercede the Ottoman civil, commercial and penal laws by Indian laws. Indian legislation acquired an obligatory validity once it was announced—without the need for the publication of Arabic or Turkish translation.

The British showed particular care in maintaining the tribal system, which had to become a force capable to preserve order as well as maintain British interests. Agreements were formulated with tribal leaders, who became directly responsible to British authorities for members of their respective tribes. Their privileges—particularly of those who were submissive to the British—were enhanced and consolidated; e.g. they were exempted from taxes, permitted to freely utilize large areas of state lands undertaken from the Ottoman state, or received arms and money. One of the most important measures of British tribal policy was the formation of special judicial courts—indirectly subjected to *šayḥs*—for members of particular tribes. In this way, judicial dualism was legalized until 1958.

From the early times of the occupation, the British endeavored to introduce an administrative system in which basic powers rested in the hands of civil commissioners and their deputies—all British. Less important posts were assigned to Iraqis. As a justification for such conduct served the alleged lack of qualified persons among Iraqis to occupy higher posts. That policy was sharpened after the departure of the first British General Civil Commissioner of Iraq Percy Cox to Persia, where he stayed in the capacity of British ambassador from spring 1918 until autumn 1920. His place became occupied at that time by a person characterized in the general opinion of authors with disregard to the will of Iraqis, namely—34-year old Arnold Wilson. The number of high-ranking state officials amounted then to 534, of whom 507 were British, 7 Hindu, and only 20 Iraqis¹⁴.

¹⁴ Z. Ḥayrī, *Taqrīr ‘an masā’il fī al-iṣlāḥ al-zirā’i*, Baghdad 1960, p. 5.

The deepening of the political crisis and rise of patriotic sentiments were caused by a number of internal and external factors. The substitution of Turkish occupation by the British generated protest on the part of independence forces. The rise in tension was also the result of non-fulfillment of the obligations covered by in the declarations of the British Expeditionary Force.

One week after the conquest of Baghdad, on the 19th of March 1917, the commander of the British Expeditionary force gen. Maude declared to the inhabitants of Iraqi lands that his forces did not come to the country as occupants or enemies, but as liberators¹⁵. In turn, the Anglo-French declaration of November 7, 1918 (called also the Allies Declaration) intended to dismiss the doubts of Arab and Iraqi allies. Thereby, it had a more friendly and promising tone, by stating that the “the objective to which Great Britain and France strive in the war waged in the East [...] is the total emancipation of nations from Turkish yoke as well as the formation of national governments and administrations, deriving their power from the free will and choice of the population. In order to accomplish these plans, France and Great Britain have agreed upon the necessity of showing support and assistance to Syria and Iraq in the direction of establishing national governments and administrations”¹⁶.

In fact, the mentioned declarations likewise many others were merely a verbal acknowledgement of rising national aspirations—directed in essence to obtain military and other material support of conquered lands against Turkish forces, and also towards the neutralization of the consequences of Bolshevik disclosure of British, French and Russian Tsarist plans on the partition of the Ottoman Empire (especially, in our case, the Sykes-Picot agreement of May 1916)¹⁷.

Hence, real British plans were directed towards the conquest of Iraqi vilayas and the direct exploitation of their resources¹⁸. A proof of such an assertion could be the speeches delivered to Basra population by each of gen. Marshall, the British commander after gen. Maude, in November 1918 and the British Commissioner Arnold Wilson in January 1919. Both of

¹⁵ A.R. al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁶ F. al-Muzhir, *Al-Ḥaqā'iq...*, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 66-67; A.R. al-Hasanī, op. cit., pp. 21, 27.

¹⁷ “Izvestia”, 1917, no. 221, [in:] L. Gelberg, *Prawo międzynarodowe i historia dyplomacji. Wybór dokumentów* (International Law and Diplomatic History. Selected Documents), Introduced and edited by..., vol. II, pp. 5-6.

¹⁸ P.W. Ireland, *Iraq. A Study in Political Development*, London 1937, p. 34.

them spoke no more about “liberation from Turkish yoke”, but merely about insignificant concessions with regard to the population such as the return of war prisoners home and the lifting of some earlier restrictions imposed upon internal and external trade¹⁹.

Against the background of complicated circumstances prevailing in the Middle East after World War I, an increasing rift emerges in Iraq between the local population and British occupants—particularly in central parts and the capital of the country, Baghdad—to the extent that in a letter written on the 10th of April 1920 the political advisor to British authorities in Iraq Miss Gertrude Bell expressed the opinion of the country being on the verge of an immense national Arab demonstration²⁰.

The declaration on May 3, 1920, of the Britain’s mandate upon Iraq was an ascertainment that the British did not intend to accomplish their earlier promises. On the basis of the British-French agreement arranged in San Remo (April 25, 1920) and the formal decision of the Supreme Allied Council, the mandatory territories were divided. In addition to Iraq (including the wilaya of Mosul, granted earlier in compliance with the secret Sykes-Picot agreement to France) Great Britain received Palestine, while France was granted Syria and Lebanon²¹.

That act was tantamount to the assignment of mandates, having as its basis article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant, which regarded the areas separated from the Ottoman Empire as independent, on condition of their temporary acceptance of the assistance of a great power, until the time they are capable to exist as an independent state²². The mentioned article pointed out that—in the process of deciding the mandatory power—the desire of the population of those countries will be taken into consideration.

The British mandate in Iraq was met with widespread condemnation and became the direct cause of the national uprising. Percy Cox held the opinion that the words “mandate” and “mandatory” power were hated by Iraqis, because of the mistaken translation of the words into Arabic language²³. However, the undisguised enmity of the Iraqi society towards the mandatory system is clearly reflected by Gertrude Bell’s letters²⁴.

¹⁹ F. al-Muzhir, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 62-65; A.R. al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., pp. 22-25.

²⁰ Lady Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, London 1922, vol. II, p. 486. In this letter she expresses an extreme pessimism about the future of British plans in Iraq.

²¹ F. Ḥusayn, *Muškilat al-Mawṣil*, Baghdad 1955, p. 9.

²² A.R. al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., p. 245.

²³ Lady Bell, op. cit., t. II, pp. 535-536.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 535, 593.

In the perception of the Iraqis, “mandate” meant subordination to a foreign power and the loss of national independence. The attempt to justify the mandate as an obligation forced upon Great Britain by the League of Nations was unsuccessful. The nationalists did not acknowledge the right of the League to grant mandates, nor the undertaking by the British government of responsibility for the Iraq’s destiny in the name of subordination to the decision of an international organization. In some sense, they were in agreement with Lord Curzon in his statement to the House of Lords on the 25th of June 1920, when he said that it is a mistake to think of the League of Nations as an institution assigned with the right to grant mandates. That right only rests with the great powers, which conquered these territories and had later them partitioned. Under such conditions, the British received and accepted the mandates over Palestine and Mesopotamia²⁵.

The decisions of the San Remo conference (division of mandates and French resignation from the Mosul wilaya in exchange for 25% of shares in Mesopotamian oil) were made public in Iraq as late as the 3rd of May, because the deputy British High Civil Commissioner Arnold Wilson deliberately delayed the publication. Earlier, he did not permit the publication in Iraq of US President W. Wilson’s declaration, in which support was rendered to the unconditional and unhampered possibility of the autonomous development of the non-Turkish nations of the Ottoman Empire²⁶. Since then tension rises and the country steadily approaches to the critical point of insurgence.

In the situation emerging after World War I, it became increasingly difficult to justify the right of West European powers to rule other nations. The American president W. Wilson declared on the 8th of January 1918, his 14 points, in which he—among other issues—postulated the right of nations to self-determination. The XII point, dealing with Arab countries, stated that non-Turkish nations of the Ottoman Empire, being at the time under Turkish rule, should be secured unhampered possibility of autonomous development.

In Iraq, where Islam had at the time a dominating position, the political movement—in order to become nation-wide—had to gain the support of the religious hierarchy. In the absence of a crystallized stratum of the intelligentsia, this role was partially performed by Shi’i ‘ālims. After the

²⁵ P.W. Ireland, op. cit., p. 263.

²⁶ Ludwik Gelberg, op. cit., vol. II, Warsaw 1958, p. 12; cf. E. Main, *Iraq from Mandate to Independence*, London 1935, p. 59.

war, the positions of Shi'i and Sunni clerics became increasingly close. So, in spite of the differences, cooperation between the two sides was initiated in the summer of 1919 in connection with ceremonies accompanying the death of the head of the Shi'i community, the muḡtahid Muḡammad Kāzim al-Yazdī. That cooperation developed favorably mainly due to the efforts of such Shi'i nationalists as Muḡammad aṣ-Ṣadr and Abū Timman. Hence, the movement received a new impetus; since some form of an alliance appeared, merging Shi'i tribes together with wide sections of the inhabitants of towns and villages.

The political leadership of the movement laid alternatively in the hands of nationalist leaders of Baghdad, Mosul and Syria—on the one hand—and the clergy of Shi'i towns of An-Naḡaf, Karbalā' and Al-Kāzimiyya—on the other hand. At the time of preparations for the insurrection and the anti-occupation agitation, the influence of nationalist leaders dominated, while at the time of the insurrection itself the leadership was dominated by the muḡtahids and those tribal ṣayḡs, who were dissatisfied with the agrarian and taxation policy of the British.

A quite powerful instrument in the hands of the national movement leadership were the tribes. The tribes north of An-Naḡaf as well as of Jazira (on Upper Euphrates) were under the influence of Damascus and Aleppo leaders, including the agitation of Fayṣal administration in Syria. In turn, the nationalists of sacred towns and Baghdad had a fertile ground among the Shi'i tribes of central and lower Euphrates, although tribes of Banū Tamīm and others between Baghdad and Ba'qūba were also responsive to their agitation. Agitation among tribes concentrated upon matters close to their members. Nationalists utilized the sharp antagonisms in rural areas caused by the taxation and land policies of the British administration, as well as by the support rendered to a small stratum of rich pro-British ṣayḡs. "Government" ṣayḡs, having unlimited powers in the provinces and using that power to further their personal interests—including the seizure of lands, were in this manner aggravating rural antagonisms, to the extent that some dissatisfied provincials leaders and inhabitants shifted to the national camp. In 1919 the outbreak of dissatisfaction among Al-Ḥilla, Ad-Dīwāniyya and Muntafiq tribes was a common feature.

Gradually, the national movement acquires shape and direction. In 1919 two parties were established: the moderate Al-'Ahd and left-wing Ḥaras al-Istiqlāl. These parties, having a loose organizational structures—often, local organizations operated on their own, in the absence of a wider

membership base and consolidated membership principles—mainly derived their position from the authority of leaders²⁷.

The major impetus for the movement in late 1919 and early 1920 were the events taking place on upper Euphrates including Mosul. On March 8, 1920 Iraqi Al-‘Ahd members present in Damascus declared ‘Abd Allāh, Fayṣal’s brother, as the king of Iraq—a measure which went against British will and interests. That took place after the installment of Fayṣal as the king of Syria by the so-called Arab Congress. It was planned to carry out a military action on Mosul under the command of Ğamīl al-Midfā‘ī, who in March 1919 established an Al-‘Ahd party branch in Mosul. On the 4th of April 1920 Arab tribes and army together entered the town of Talafar, which was transformed into an incursion base on the railway line Mosul-Širqat as well as—into an agitation centre among neighboring tribes. The trans-Euphrates agitation ended however together with the downfall of Damascus and the occupation of Syria by France in July 1920. The banner of struggle for the independence of Iraq continued to be held by Baghdad.

As an occasion to semi-legal demonstrations served “mawlūds” (Arabic plural: *mawālīd*), i.e. religious celebrations organized mutually by Sunnis and Shi‘is for the commemoration of Prophet Muḥammad’s birthday. *Mawālīd* started on the 9th of May 1920. They were organized alternatively in Shi‘i and Sunni mosques, with the participation of prominent representatives of both sects. After religious ceremonies, patriotic speeches were delivered in the circumstances of mass attendance on the part of the population. There were also clashes with the police, while the arrest of one of the speakers (May 24) caused a wave of protest meetings. The turmoil covered Baghdad entirely. Attacks on British officers became an increasingly observed phenomenon.

The first victim fell during a protest gathering in the Baghdad mosque of Ḥaydar Ḥāna; a meeting, where a 15-member delegation was chosen mainly from among members of Ḥaras al-Istiqlāl, with the intention of carrying out talks with the Deputy Civil Commissioner, Arnold Wilson. On June 2, a meeting of the mentioned delegation took place at the headquarters of administrative authorities with Wilson. The delegation demanded the convening of the National Assembly. News came from various parts of the country about demonstrations organized by nationalists for the support of those demands. Delegates again demanded the calling of the National

²⁷ More details on the subject, in: A.R. al-Ḥasanī, *At-Tawra...*, op. cit., pp. 48-49, 58-59.

Assembly, which was expected to declare the immediate and total independence of the country.

The provincial areas of the country were also in turmoil. Shi'i preachers carried out vivid political activities in sacred Shi'i cities. Leaflets, open letters and documents—published in religious centers press—were distributed. They called for the defense of Islam, legalized the use of force for the cause of attaining independence, and advocated the sending of delegates for the purpose of the formation of a national Islamic government. A charter was signed with the solemn obligation of tribes to a common armed action. Numerous šayḥs signed this charter²⁸.

Increasing anxiety overwhelmed both tribes and towns' inhabitants. In the vicinity of Baghdad and Al-Ḥilla, at the beginning of June, trains were derailed. Arabs, working in government service, resigned from work in steadily increasing numbers. The collection of taxes from farm products became almost impossible. The arrest and deportation of the son of major Shi'i muḡtahid and 9 other activists from Karbalā' (22nd June) aggravated the situation on middle Euphrates²⁹. Demands for the formation of a national government were met on the part of the British administration by intensified repressions. This led to armed clashes on the 30th of June in Rumayṭa.

The picture of events would remain incomplete without the presentation of the Kurdish question and Kurds' participation in general Iraqi independence efforts. The Kurdish wilaya of Mosul was finally incorporated into the Iraqi state in 1924. However, after the truce signed in Mudros (30th October 1918) and the withdrawal of Turks from the remaining parts of the Mosul vilaya at the beginning of November, the entire area came under British control. That control was only formal, since only the districts of Kifri and Kirkuk were under British occupation³⁰. For this reason, the British applied an elastic policy towards occupied lands, sharing power with local tribal leaders and extending there British administration gradually. In Sulaymāniyya, in November 1918 the British nominated šayḥ Maḥmūd al-Ḥāfid, head of the Barziḡi tribe, as the governor of the district—in the hope that they would be able to count on his cooperation. However, Al-Ḥāfid carried out a semi-independent policy, focusing for himself the support of other Kurdish areas³¹.

²⁸ P.W. Ireland, op. cit., p 264.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 264-265.

³⁰ S.H. Longrigg, *Iraq 1900-1950*, London-New York-Toronto 1956, p. 96.

³¹ C.J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs*, London-New York-Toronto 1957, p. 29.

Meanwhile, the Kurdish population resisted the occupation administration, being introduced through the authority of British officers, called advisors. These in turn established their own administration and—likewise in other regions of Iraq— were mainly involved in the collection of excessive taxes. Popular resistance took the shape of armed attacks against British military columns. So, with the exception of certain towns, power slipped away from British hands.

In these circumstances on the 23rd of May 1919 Maḥmūd al-Ḥāfid organized a coup d'état in Sulaymāniyya, expelled the British “advisors” and took over control of the town. In place of the British flag Al-Ḥāfid raised his own: a red crescent within a green background. Simultaneously he declared the sovereignty of Kurdistan³². However, within few months in an unequal battle the British suppressed the Kurdish uprising, which—already at that time—spread over further areas. Until early 1920, the Kurdish districts of Amadiyya, Barzān and Rāwandūz remained outside British control³³.

The mentioned British-French Sykes-Picot agreement granted France—among others—Kurdish lands of the Mosul wilāya, i.e. southwestern Kurdistan. The abrogated Treaty of Sèvres with Turkey signed in August 1920 envisaged in articles 62, 63 and 64 the foundation of a Kurdish state from territories of Turkey and Iraq with a Kurdish majority³⁴. The treaty was rejected by Turkish nationalists headed by Mustafa Kemal, because it included clauses that reduced Turkey to the status of a colony of European powers³⁵. The Turkish war of independence started. Its result ruled out the Treaty of Sèvres, together with plans for the establishment of the Kurdish state. The later peace treaty with nationalists Turkey headed by M. Kemal, signed in Lausanne in July 1923 did not mention anything about the formation of the Kurdish state.

As to a brief presentation of the uprising, that broke out on June 30 (1920), already on the 4th of July the 500-strong British garrison of Rumayṭa, a small town situated 26 km north of As-Samāwa, was encircled by insurgent forces. The latter started to build up fortifications north-west of the town in a manner, which suggested to gen. Haldane the existence of Turkish officers among the tribes³⁶. However the tribes were long time ago

³² Ibid.

³³ S.H. Longrigg, op. cit., s. 105.

³⁴ A.R. Ghassemlou, *Kurdistān wa-al-Akrād*, Prague 1965, pp. 40-41.

³⁵ D. Kinnane, *The Kurds and Kurdistan*, London-New York 1964, p. 28.

³⁶ A.L. Haldane, op. cit., p. 75.

accustomed with Turkish fighting methods; they often had to fight the Turks. An attempt to free themselves from the encirclement and simultaneously pacify the neighbouring village of Abū Ḥasan south of Rumayṭa showed the British, that the entire province is in a state of turmoil. They had therefore to withdraw back, losing 20 killed and injured³⁷. Moreover, Rumayṭa tribes took control of police posts between Rumayṭa and As-Samāwa, disarming and arresting the policemen.

The national uprising, known in Iraqī historiography as Ṭawrat al-‘Iṣrīn (Revolution on 1920) broke out on the 30th of June, lasted for seven months and was brutally suppressed by the British. Many of its famous leaders were executed, properties confiscated, revolting villages were erased to the ground, finally huge contributions were imposed upon the inhabitants of insurgent areas. There is no place here to trace the events of the insurrection.

In London, it was realized that there was no possibility to exercise direct control over Iraq. The insurrection, which did not cover the entire country, had to be suppressed by means of a large army, at the cost of 20 mln pounds³⁸.

Hence, the outbreak of the uprising induced Great Britain to replace Arnold Wilson by general Sir Percy Cox as a Deputy High Commissioner. The latter was assigned with the task of the introduction of necessary changes to British policy towards Iraq: the establishment of an interim government, the nomination of an Arab king, carrying out of elections, introduction of a constitution and the formation of organs of national central and local administration.

On the day of Cox’s arrival to Baghdad (11th October 1920) the insurrection was still continuing. The towns of central Euphrates were either controlled or encircled by insurgency forces. The main task of Cox was the easing of tension by means of the formation of a provisional government from among pro-British elements. At a meeting of the Consultative Committee he explained to British officials—members of the Committee, that Great Britain has only two options: the establishment of an Arab government or the total withdrawal from the country. He further stated, that—in order to preserve British interests in Iraq—it becomes vital to secure the cooperation of pro-British Iraqis by means of the formation of a national government working under his own personal supervision and with the assis-

³⁷ Ibid., p. 173.

³⁸ H. Foster, *The Making of Modern Iraq*, London 1936, p. 94.

tance of British advisors³⁹. This government had to become a specific bridge between the British and the population⁴⁰; it was assigned with the task of leading to stability without jeopardizing the basic foundations of British policy. Cox mentioned also the fact the nomination of ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Gaylānī, one of the greatest landlords, to the post of prime minister⁴¹. The High Commissioner preserved for himself veto right and capacity to introduce amendments to particular decisions of the future government⁴². Besides, the council of ministers had to resign from control over foreign affairs and issues of military nature⁴³.

The High Commissioner cherished the hope that the government called by himself would be capable to end the uprising and bring about stability to the country. However, the provisional government appeared to be a feeble bridge between the insurgents and the British authorities, who—unable to attain the support of the society for their plans—were compelled to resort to additional military forces with the aim of suppressing the uprising. It is worthwhile to mention in this place the opinion of a British official, that Mesopotamian Arabs were not so naive to believe that they were granted a really national government⁴⁴. An interesting consideration was, that people—who wanted to finalize their administrative affairs positively—usually referred directly to British officials; they were quite aware of the highly limited competences of the Iraqi nominal heads of particular offices⁴⁵. In addition to that, the ‘ālims of Al-Kāzimiyya did not acknowledge the interim government, because—as they stated—it was not formed through direct general elections⁴⁶. However, this weak entity remained in nominal power until the coronation of Fayṣal as the Iraqi king on the 23rd of August 1921.

Since mid-1920 Lord Curzon, the British minister of foreign affairs and simultaneously chairman of the Special Committee of Eastern Affairs supervising policies towards Iraq, was engaged in conceptualizing and accomplishing the formation of a united Iraqi state with an Arab ruler, expressing in this way an apparent realization of promises given to the Arabs—including Fayṣal’s father and Hijazi ruler Ḥusayn—promises from

³⁹ A.R. al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-‘Irāq al-ḥadīṯ*, vol. I, Saida 1957, p. 185.

⁴⁰ P.W. Ireland, op. cit., p. 280.

⁴¹ Lady Bell, op. cit., vol. II, p. 562.

⁴² A.R. al-Ḥasanī, *Aṭ-Ṭawra...*, op. cit., vol. I, p. 161.

⁴³ A.R. al-Bazzāz, *Al-‘Irāq min al-iḥtilāl ḥattā al-istiqlāl*, Baghdad 1967, p. 119.

⁴⁴ P.W. Ireland, op. cit., p. 218.

⁴⁵ A.R. Bazzāz, op. cit., p. 119.

⁴⁶ A.R. al-Ḥasanī, *Aṭ-Ṭawra...*, op. cit., p. 250.

the times of World War II. It was a matter of course for Curzon that such a state would remain for along time under British rule.

These concepts and plans were not introduced until Winston Churchill was assigned with the Colonial Office (14th February 1921). His main task with respect to Iraq was to find bring about the election of a king. Moreover, in connection with the rising criticism in the House of Commons during 1920-1921 about the rise in military expenditures (especially after the Iraqi uprising, which cost tens of millions of pounds), Churchill had to reduce British military expenditures in the East.

These two matters were closely related to each other; meaning the less costly protection of British interests. A formally free Iraq was for Great Britain the cheapest way of securing imperial interests, which meant that independence came earlier than planned, while Iraqi nationalism grew more quickly than anybody could expect⁴⁷.

In order to discuss the mentioned imperial problems, Churchill called to Cairo in March 1921 a conference of British military and political representatives in the Middle East. Iraq was represented by the High Commissioner Sir Percy Cox, Gertrude Bell—secretary of the High Commissioner, the minister of defense in the provisional government Ğa‘far al-‘Askarī, minister of finance of that government Ezekiel Sassoon, the general commander of British forces in Iraq gen. Aylmer Haldane and others. Fayṣal himself, being present in Cairo, followed up the conference from outside.

The most important conference decisions included: the nomination of Fayṣal to the Iraqi crown and the declaration of general amnesty for the insurgence participants with the exception of a long list of people accused of co-responsibility for the murder of some British officers⁴⁸. An accurate timetable was worked out for the enthronement of Fayṣal in a way showing that the Iraqi population was making the choice of their king. In the meantime, the decisions were kept secret.

After the World War Fayṣal was elected the king of Syria, but the French removed him from the throne by force. Afterwards, British politicians carried out talks with him and proposed to him the Iraqi crown in exchange for cooperation. In Cairo he was made aware that his candidacy for the Iraqi crown was conditional on his agreement to support British policy⁴⁹. The British desired to utilize for their own ends the religious position

⁴⁷ E. Main, op. cit., p. 81.

⁴⁸ A.R. al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ...*, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 148-149.

⁴⁹ E. Main, op. cit., p. 80.

of Fayṣal as the son of Mekka's sharif, as well as the fact that his father headed the anti-Turkish Arab insurrection. They were interested too in his personal acquaintance with prominent participants of the anti-Turkish uprising and Arab government in Syria. It was remembered also, that some Iraqi insurgents postulated the candidacy of "one of the sons" of the Hijazi monarch, Ḥusayn, to the Iraqi throne. On the surface, it had to look as a concession towards the insurgents and independence forces. Furthermore, the British envisaged that—after losing the Syrian crown, Fayṣal will be more submissive to them⁵⁰.

In accordance with the plan worked out in Cairo, the British authorities and the provisional government carried out a wide range of propaganda activities, preparing the background for the enthronement of Fayṣal. On the 29th of April 1921, Fayṣal arrived at Baghdad. On June 14th Churchill declared at the House of Commons support for his candidacy, and on the 5th of July the High Commissioner issued a communiqué, which included the words: "His Majesty's Government regards Fayṣal as the proper, even the most proper candidate, and cherish the hope that he will gain the support of the majority of the Iraqi nation"⁵¹. Next, the communiqué stated that Iraq is not prepared for the republican type of government, which requires a high level of development⁵².

On the basis of the decisions of the Cairo conference, the Iraqi Council of Ministers introduced the candidacy of Fayṣal to the throne on condition, that his reign will be constitutional and democratic. The High Commissioner Percy Cox declared further, that—before rendering support to the candidature of the future monarch—it would become necessary to become acknowledged with the opinion of the society. It was therefore decided to carry out a referendum. The ministry of internal affairs of the provisional government mobilized its central and local apparatus in favor of the mentioned candidature⁵³.

In spite of these efforts, the voting of Kirkuk district rejected the candidature, while the districts of Irbil and Mosul made their acceptance of Fayṣal conditional on securing respect for minority rights. Moreover, many Iraqis expressed anxiety about the real outcome of Fayṣal's London

⁵⁰ A.R. al-Bazzāz, op. cit., p. 129.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² That was an implicit rejection of some views disseminated that, also by one of British officials Philby. However the dependence of the president upon the electorate and elections could have had unfavorable results for the British in the future.

⁵³ A.R. al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ*..., op. cit., vol. I, p. 191.

talks with British politicians. Thus, they were ready to grant the crown to his brother ‘Abd Allāh, in compliance with the resolutions of the Arab Congress of March 8, 1920, when a group of Iraqi patriots being present then in Syria declared him the king of Iraq—in the aftermath of declaring Fayṣal the king of Syria⁵⁴.

However, the officially declared results gave Fayṣal 96% of the votes. No information was given about the way elections were conducted, nor the number of voters. Fayṣal was officially enthroned on the 23rd of August, 1921, and thereby inaugurated the Iraqi branch of the Hashimite dynasty ruling until July 14, 1958. It is worthwhile to mention in this place that at the coronation ceremony—due to the lack of the Iraqi national anthem—the British hymn God Save The King was played⁵⁵.

The installment of Fayṣal on the Iraqi throne did not mean the end of Iraqi national strive for the liquidation of the mandatory system and granting the country independence. In fact, the time from the insurrection of 1920 up to the summer of 1924 the internal situation in the country was featured by struggle against the mandate and the British-Iraqi treaty proposed by Great Britain.

Although until 1932 the League of Nations continued to acknowledge the validity of the British mandatory powers in Iraq, it became clear since early 1920’s that, unlike Syria and Palestine, Iraq cannot be administered according with the basic clauses of the mandate⁵⁶. Instead of that, a number of agreements were worked out between Great Britain and Iraq, which in essence were forced upon the latter, but in form had the shape of bilateral inter-state treaties. In this way, Iraq became the first mandatory territory having its own parliament, constitution, king and government.

The proposal of negotiating a treaty covering the formulations of the mandate came on the part of Lord Montagu—minister for Indian affairs—in May 1920. However Lord Curzon—the then foreign minister—was not inclined to listen to such an advise⁵⁷. When Churchill undertook his post as minister for colonial affairs in February 1921 he returned to that proposal. He held the opinion that the choice of an Arab king would facilitate the conclusion of the treaty and secure British interests more effectively than by

⁵⁴ ‘Abd Allāh resigned from his pretensions to the Iraqi throne on T.E. Lawrence’s advice in exchange for granting him the—already fictitious—Syrian crown. ‘Abd Allāh later was granted the throne of Trans-Jordania.

⁵⁵ Lady Bell, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 260.

⁵⁶ E. Main, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

⁵⁷ A.R. al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ...*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 171.

means of direct control. Already during the Cairo conference agreement was reached with Fayṣal that the mandate should be replaced by a British-Iraqi treaty.

After the enthronement of Fayṣal, in connection of the steadily growing anti-mandate movement, the British government worked out a draft treaty, which by the end of June 1922 was introduced to the Iraqi council of ministers for confirmation. The draft included 18 articles⁵⁸. The proposed treaty was intended to create a peculiar British protectorate upon Iraq. Although article 1 formally endorsed the sovereignty of Iraq, article 2 obligated the Iraqi monarch at the time of the duration of the treaty not to nominate any officials of foreign origin without the consent of the British monarch. The Iraqi king had also to introduce a constitution enacted by the Legislative Assembly—on condition that it would not collide with the clauses of the treaty (art. 3). The Iraqi monarch had to consult with the representative of the British monarch, the High Commissioner, “in all matters dealing with British interests in Iraq”—stated another article. Actually, foreign affairs and control over the army were to come under the jurisdiction of Great Britain (articles 6 and 7).

The national movement was however equally determined in its opposition to the treaty as to the mandate; the national press was carrying out an active campaign, mass meetings of the population were being called with the participation of insurrection leaders, who made use of the amnesty declared after Fayṣal’s coronation. The rise of political activities led to the emergence of two anti-British political parties: *Ḥizb an-Nahḍa* (Revival Party) and *Al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī* (National Party). They called in their programmes against the conclusion of the treaty, resembling in their vision a copy of the mandate. In the press and during public meetings organized by the parties, both the treaty and the national government were condemned.

The situation became deteriorated on the 23rd of August 1922, when on the occasion of the first anniversary of Fayṣal’s coronation both parties organized a great demonstration, which proceeded through the streets of Baghdad to the Royal Palace. Speakers in their speeches attacked the treaty, condemned occupation authorities controlling state affairs, and demanded the formation of a national government, independent of mandatory authorities. The High Commissioner, who at that time entered the palace in order

⁵⁸ Text of the draft treaty: A.R. al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-‘irāqiyya*, vol. I, Saida 1965, pp. 106-ff.; A.R. al-Barqāwī, *Al-‘Alāqāt al-siyāsiyya bayna al-‘Irāq wa-Briṭāniya 1922-1932*, Baghdad 1980, pp. 201ff.

to congratulate the king, hearing the demand: "Down with the mandate", treated this as a personal affront⁵⁹.

Making use of the king's illness, Cox disbanded the activity of both parties, confiscated their newspapers, ordered the arrest of their editors and banished seven leaders of the movement from the country⁶⁰. Other Shi'i leaders were advised to leave Iraq. Royal Air Force planes were directed to terrify insurgent tribes of central Euphrates.

Meanwhile, in the circumstances of the rising opposition and grave internal situation, the council of ministers could not decide upon signing the treaty. The matter was not much improved by the declaration by British ministry for colonial affairs of a memorandum about the interim character of the treaty and its termination on Iraqi access to the League of Nations. Finally, on the 10th of October 1922, the council of ministers signed the text of the treaty, making the ratification conditional on the will of the National Assembly⁶¹.

Elections to the National Assembly, decided for August 1923, became the next moment of contest for the internal situation in Iraq. Patriotic elements were against elections carried out by a subordinate to the British government. The ulemas of holy cities of Karbalā' and Al-Kāzimiyya, thinking about the sense of participation in such elections, issued on the 8th of November a religious verdict fatwā to the effect of calling for the boycott of elections. The northern Kurdish districts also joined the boycott of the campaign, while the very city of Sulaymaniyya became out of control of central authorities at the turn of 1923/1924⁶². The arrest and banish of Ḥāliṣī, one of Al-Kāzimiyya 'ālims, and his two sons caused wide protests among Shi'i centers; as a sign of protest the 'ālims left the country.

As one of the steps intended at the easing of the situation was the signing on the 13th of April 1932 of a protocol which shortened the validity of the initially agreed treaty from 20 to 4 years, starting from the moment of the eventual ratification of the peace treaty with Turkey. Nonetheless, under the pressure of public opinion, the already third Al-Gaylānī government was forced to resign⁶³. The new government was formed by the former

⁵⁹ A.R. al-Barqāwī, op. cit., p. 66; M. Foster, op. cit., p. 114; F.O.77771 E. 9258/33/65: Telegram from the High Commissioner from Iraq to the Secretary of State for Colonies (No. 597).

⁶⁰ F.O. 7771 E. 9258/33/65: Telegram from Iraq to the Secretary of State for Colonies (No. 607).

⁶¹ M. Foster, op. cit., 119.

⁶² S.H. Longrigg, op.cit., p. 149.

⁶³ A.R. al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt...*, op. cit., vol. I, p. 115.

minister for internal affairs Sa'dūn, who was assigned with the task of suppressing the wide national movement for the boycott of elections and rejection of the treaty. However, also this government was forced to resign—even before the convening of the Legislative Assembly in the spring of 1924⁶⁴.

On the 25th of March 1924 both sides signed four additional agreements to the British-Iraqi treaty. These were military, judicial, financial agreements and another dealing with British officials. Particularly unpopular were the financial agreements, which put upon Iraq the cost burdens of British installations, constructed during the World War by occupation forces for their own requirements.

The Legislative Assembly was called for the 27th of March 1924. The deliberations were inspired by a group of patriotic members-lawyers. Not limiting itself to parliamentary action, the group carried out a campaign for the rejection of the treaty as well as the attached agreements. The entire anti-mandate opposition was again mobilized⁶⁵.

In the Assembly, the agenda imposed by the High Commissioner was imposed as follows: 1) ratification of the treaty; 2) enactment of the constitution; 3) the endorsement of election law. The Assembly had to accept that pre-arranged agenda. However in the assessment of its activity we should remember that—particularly after the ratification of the treaty—events took place under an enormous impact of the public as well as patriotic agitation. Discussion concentrated upon the most significant questions, such as: limitations imposed upon the country's sovereignty and the severe clauses of the financial agreement. In order to block a parliamentary resolution on the matter, sessions were prolonged and obstruction methods were used⁶⁶.

Assessing the political atmosphere dominating among the Iraqi population and the Assembly, the "Times" correspondent wrote on the 27th of April 1924, that he does not foresee the ratification of the treaty⁶⁷. It was widely acknowledged that the price for ratification would be the introduction of essential changes in the text of the treaty. The dominating opinion expressed during British parliamentary deliberations was, that—if it is left free to decide—the Iraqi National Assembly would surely reject the treaty⁶⁸.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 145-146.

⁶⁵ S.H. Longrigg, op. cit., p. 150.

⁶⁶ A.R. al-Barqāwī, op. cit., pp. 78ff.

⁶⁷ H. Foster, op. cit., p. 122.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 123.

In this situation the British High Commissioner submitted a warning to Iraqi authorities, that—if the treaty was not ratified in its initial form until the 10th of June 1924—he will treat that as tantamount to its rejection, and the consequences could be far-reaching. Another form of pressure was British government's request from the League of Nations to undertake discussions about the League's future policy towards Iraq. Threats were even forwarded to the effect of the renewed introduction of the mandatory system together with the direct control of state administration⁶⁹. In spite of threats, the Assembly did not undertake any resolution on the pre-determined date (10th of June 1924), adjourning the debate until next day. However, before midnight the Iraqi government—acting under pressure—managed to gather 68 members of parliament out the total number of 100, bringing them to the session by means of military vehicles. Parliament building and the surrounding streets were encircled by military forces, parliamentarians were threatened with repressions in case of rejecting the treaty and attached agreements. In such conditions the treaty was “accepted” by merely 37 votes, as against 24 votes, while 8 abstained. It is clear that not many more than half the number of MP's present at the session voted for the treaty; and if we take into consideration the 32 absent MP's we can easily conclude that—in spite of repressions and threats—the treaty was ratified by a minority of the Assembly⁷⁰.

The ratification of the British-Iraqi treaty closes the process of the formation of the Iraqi system of government, which had to perform the task of protecting British interests in the country. A new chapter is opened in the history of Iraq, and the chapter closely related to national aspirations and endeavors for complete independence will find their finale at a later time.

⁶⁹ A.R. al-Barqāwī, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.