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## Occupation and resistance in southern Iraq: a study of Great Britain's civil administration in the Middle Euphrates and the Great Rebellion, 1917-1920

Scott Jones  
DePaul University, [sjones95@mail.depaul.edu](mailto:sjones95@mail.depaul.edu)

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Occupation and Resistance in Southern Iraq: A Study of Great Britain's Civil Administration in  
the Middle Euphrates and the Great Rebellion, 1917-1920

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BY  
Scott Jones

Department of International Studies  
College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences  
DePaul University  
Chicago, Illinois

Occupation and Resistance in Southern Iraq: A Study of Great Britain's Civil Administration  
in the Middle Euphrates and the Great Rebellion, 1917-1920

Scott Jones

International Studies Master's Thesis

Thesis Committee

Advisor – Kaveh Ehsani, Ph.D., DePaul University

Reader – Rajit Mazumder, Ph.D., DePaul University

Reader – Eugene Beiriger, Ph.D., DePaul University

Introduction – Occupation and Resistance in Southern Iraq

1. Introduction		3
2. A Note on Sources		6
3. Iraq in WWI, the British Occupation, and the Great Rebellion in History		7

Chapter 1 – Great Britain and Southern Iraq in WWI

1. Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire on the Eve of WWI		13
2. The Indian Army and the Invasion of Southern Iraq		16
3. The Mesopotamian Campaign and the Civil Administration		17
4. The Design and Functions of the Civil Administration		20
5. Anglo-Indian Defeats and the Hashemite Revolt		22
6. The Middle Euphrates, the Epicenter of Conflicts to Come		24
7. The Shrine Cities and the Shi'i Clergy		25
8. The Tribes and the Ottomans		29
9. The Tribes and the British		32
10. Conclusion		34

Chapter 2 – The British Occupation of the Middle Euphrates, 1917-1919

1. The Civil Administration and the Agrarian Political Economy of Hilla		35
A. The Arrival of the Civil Administration in Hilla		41
B. Taxation and Resistance in the Hilla Division		43
C. Labor Recruitment in the Hilla Division		45
D. British Interference in Hilla's Irrigation Patterns		46
E. Arnold Wilson's Plebiscite and the Shi'i Clergy in Karbala		47
2. The Civil Administration, Rice Cultivation, and Political Autonomy in Shamiya		50
A. The Arrival of the Civil Administration in Shamiya		54
B. Food Shortages, Price Inflation, Taxation and Unrest in Najaf		55
C. British Interference in Shamiya's Irrigation Patterns		58
3. The Civil Administration and the Nomadic Tribes of Samawa		59
A. The Sheikhs and Labor Recruitment		61
B. Tax Collection and the Royal Air Force		62
C. The Consolidation of Samawa and Diwaniya and Disarming the Tribes		63

## Chapter 3 – The Rebellion and Political Upheaval in the Middle Euphrates, 1920

1. Introduction	66
A. The Arrest of Sha'lan Abu al-Chon and the Revolt at Rumaitha	71
B. Political Upheaval in Hilla and Shamiya, and the Spread of the Rebellion	73
C. The Formation of an Independent Government in Karbala and Najaf	78
D. British Victories, "Water Domination," and the Collapse of the Gov. in Karbala	81
Conclusion – The Aftermath of the Rebellion and the Legacy for the Modern State of Iraq	
1. The Middle Euphrates and the Aftermath of the Rebellion	85
A. The Occupation and Disarmament of Karbala and Najaf	87
B. The Return of the Civil Administration and the Formation of the Iraqi Army	89
C. The Role of the Royal Air Force in Iraq	91
D. The Middle Euphrates and the Formation of the Iraqi State	92
E. Conclusion	95
F. Bibliography	98

## Introduction: Occupation and Resistance in Southern Iraq

### *Introduction*

The topic of this thesis is the complex history of the British occupation of the Middle Euphrates region of Iraq near the conclusion of the First World War and in its aftermath, which culminated in a massive rebellion in the summer of 1920. At the time, the former Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul were suspended in a moment of historical transition.<sup>1</sup> On the eve of WWI, Great Britain was faced with a combination of the disruption of its commercial pursuits in the Persian Gulf, fears of Russian expansionism in Persia and Central Asia, and German expansionism in Iraq. Seeking the opportunity to secure its imperial interests in the Ottoman territories of Iraq, and to join France and Russia in the European conflict with the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain declared war on the Ottomans in November 1914. An Anglo-Indian force from British India captured the commercial port of Basra in November 1914 and set up a Civil Administration to govern the local population and the territories of Ottoman Iraq as they came under British occupation. For nearly four years, Great Britain was engaged in a brutal conflict with the Ottomans that utterly devastated the landscape of the three Ottoman provinces, inflicting starvation, disease, and displacement upon local societies. By the time Anglo-Indian forces finally captured the city of Baghdad in March 1917, British civil and military authorities had attempted to fill the administrative vacuum left by the Ottoman

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the thesis, "Iraq" serves as a geographic designation, rather than a political identity, referring to the former Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, which under British occupation and the British Mandate constituted thirteen to fifteen administrative divisions stretching from the city of Mosul near the Turkish-Syrian border to the city of Basra at the head of the Persian Gulf. For an investigation of the origins and development of Iraqi political identity in the period under study, see Fanar Haddad, "Political Awakenings in an Artificial State: Iraq, 1914-1920" *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 6 (2012): 3-25.

authorities in the southern Basra province and along the Tigris and Shatt al-Arab Rivers and regions bordering Persia.

After the capture of Baghdad, British authorities imposed their Civil Administration on the Middle Euphrates region, an irrigated flatland stretching along the Euphrates River System roughly from the town of Falluja near Baghdad to Nasiriya in the south. The Civil Administration intended to extract local resources and labor power for the use of the Indian Army, and to establish an administrative presence with objectives subject to broader British imperial ambitions in Iraq and in Great Britain's empire between India and the Mediterranean. In the Middle Euphrates, local society had little direct contact with the British invaders since 1914, but nevertheless had experienced immense economic dislocation because of the war. Further, the political, social, and economic landscape of the Middle Euphrates was complex. Local society had lived with a significant amount of political autonomy from a neglectful Ottoman regime in recent years. Its Shi'i shrine cities were home to Shi'i clerics deeply committed to protecting the autonomy of the Middle Euphrates, as well as Muslim societies elsewhere from autocratic regimes and foreign, non-Muslim powers such as Great Britain. At the same time, the cities in this region were also home to wealthy merchants and landowners, who were ready to benefit from the new commercial traffic which the vast British military occupation was providing. Yet, the Shi'i clergy had a strong spiritual and political connection to a considerable, armed society of Shi'i tribes who survived on agricultural and pastoral occupations in the rural areas of the Middle Euphrates and the hinterlands of its cities. These tribes also lived by their own customs and traditions that were often free from interference by a centralized government. These complexities were

among many others presenting an enormous challenge to the machinery of the Civil Administration in the Middle Euphrates.

This thesis focuses on the ways that the British civil and military authorities interacted with political, economic, and social patterns in the Middle Euphrates region to answer a series of interrelated questions about the manners in which the Civil Administration attempted to govern the Middle Euphrates, and how their efforts impacted political, social, and economic life in the region. It will investigate how local actors responded to British efforts to govern the Middle Euphrates, precipitating a massive armed rebellion and political upheaval in 1920. Further, the thesis will shed light on the consequences of this rebellion for the British, and the consequences of its outcome for local society in the Middle Euphrates.

This thesis argues that the British occupation and its process of blending components of state-building with efforts to extract local resources and labor power to meet military ends brought the British into conflict with various segments of local society, including Shi'i clerics, Sayyids, tribal Sheikhs and their constituencies. Despite widespread disaffection with British rule, and a series of violent episodes of local resistance to it throughout 1917-1920, the Civil Administration continued to impose its politically and socio-economically repressive policies on local society. The accumulated frictions between local actors and the British sparked a widespread armed rebellion and political upheaval in the Middle Euphrates in the summer of 1920. The British defeated this rebellion with additional armies from British India and a massive display of airpower, which devastated tribal society and left the region in a state of profound political disarray. Further, the rebellion and the attempts by its

leadership to build a government independent of British interference revealed the complexities of the political and socio-economic landscape in the former Ottoman provinces of Iraq, and the enormous challenges facing the formation of a unified Iraqi nation-state under British tutelage in the 1920s.

This thesis' detailed investigation of the British occupation of the Middle Euphrates and the 1920 rebellion aims to reveal the complexities of British colonial governance and the lasting contradictions characteristic to the emergence of modern nation states. This was, as Reidar Visser has said of contemporary Iraq, an "Iraq of its regions," where geography, for one, played a leading role in shaping the nature of political community.<sup>2</sup> The stark differences in the ways that the Middle Euphrates, its various social segments, and other regions of Iraq interacted with British occupation had consequences for the legitimacy and design of Iraq's national political system under the British Mandate and after. By focusing on the dynamics between the Civil Administration and local actors in the Middle Euphrates this investigation aims to provide a more complex micro-historical analysis than the prevalent narratives of British colonial history and Iraqi national formation.

#### *A Note on Sources*

This thesis relies on a combination of primary and secondary sources, which offer insight into the relationship between Great Britain, Iraq, and the Middle Euphrates during the First World War and its aftermath up to the early 1920s. Because I read neither Arabic nor Persian, the thesis relies heavily on primary sources produced by British civil and

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<sup>2</sup> See Reidar Visser and Gareth Stansfield, eds., *An Iraq of Its Regions: Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).



military authorities in Iraq, such as intelligence reports, administrative records, epistolary correspondence, and personal memoirs. The voices of high ranking British civil and military officials such as Arnold T. Wilson, Sir Percy Cox, Gertrude L. Bell, and Aylmer L. Haldane survive in their letter-writing and personal accounts of Great Britain and Iraq in the time period under study. As well, the British authorities of the Civil Administration reported annually the progress of their administrative assignment to the High Commissioner of the Civil Administration in Iraq. The High Commissioner was faced with the task of persuading officials and politicians in London, Delhi, and Cairo that it was both “possible and desirable” to rule Iraq through the machinery of the Civil Administration.<sup>3</sup> These reports, accessible today for example in the larger volumes of the series *Iraq Administration Reports*, reveal the ways that British authorities attempted to govern the local societies in Iraq, and how these interactions impacted the social, political, and economic landscape.<sup>4</sup> Further, in order to incorporate Iraqi voices into the narrative as much as possible, the thesis makes extensive use of secondary sources in translation that rely on Iraqi primary sources to explore the relationship between various Iraqi social groups and the British occupiers (Nakash, 1994), Atiyah (1973), Kadhim (2012).

### *Iraq in WWI, the British Occupation, and the Great Rebellion in History*

In general, there is a wealth of secondary literature that explores Great Britain and Iraq in the First World War and its aftermath. Prominent histories which explore Great Britain and Iraq, such as Peter Sluglett’s *Great Britain in Iraq* (2007), Phebe Marr’s *The*

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country, 1914-1932* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007): 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert L. Jarman, ed., *Iraq Administration Reports: 1914-1932* (Melksham, U.K.: Redwood Press Ltd., 1992).

*Modern History of Iraq* (2017), and Roger Adelson's *London and the Invention of the Middle East* (1995) are valuable resources because they skillfully narrate Great Britain's occupation of Iraq within its broader international political context. These authors demonstrate how the interaction between the British occupiers and Iraqi society impacted Great Britain's broader imperial objectives beyond the former Ottoman provinces and vice versa. On the other hand, as a consequence of their limited scope, these histories sometimes falls short of taking into account the considerable complexities of Iraq's varied political, social, and economic landscapes, and the fraught interactions between Great Britain and Iraq's various regions and communities. For example, several prominent narratives share a dichotomy of "nationalist" and "self-interested" actors regarding political interests among various Iraqi social groups in relation to British rule in Iraq. Such narratives underrecognize the lack of consensus among Iraqi "nationalists" in regard to the design of the potential Iraqi nation-state, including its national boundaries, its leadership, and its relationship to Great Britain. These political cleavages played a huge role in the formation of the modern state in the early 1920s, including in shaping the machinery of its political process and the extent to which Iraq's various regions and communities were represented within it. Further, the emphasis on how nationalist or self-interested various Iraqi social groups were romanticizes the nation-state making as a progressive process, and in the process overlooks patterns of everyday life. For example, in his timeless *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (1978), Hanna Batatu's reduces the 1920 rebellion in Iraq to a "Shaykh's affair," motivated by self-interested tribesmen, as well as manipulated by nationalist-minded

ex-Ottoman officers, notables, and urban intellectuals in Baghdad and Damascus.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Phebe Marr's renowned *The Modern History of Iraq* (1985) argues that in 1920, the awarding of a mandate by the newly established League of Nations to Great Britain to rule Iraq produced a "genuine nationalist rebellion" against the British occupation, which was directed above all by overbearing British military officers and the Civil Administration.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, in this thesis my aim is to address some of these shortcomings by providing a local history of British occupation in Iraq and the massive rebellion that it sparked in the Middle Euphrates region in 1920. The secondary sources I use recognize the complexities of Iraq, unpacking the histories of Iraq's various regions and local social groups, and demonstrating how their political, social, and economic circumstances have changed over time and shaped every-day life in the modern state. In turn, these narratives present an enormous and necessary challenge to, for example, contemporary media, literature, and political discourse, which have attempted to reduce twentieth century Iraqi history to one of "artificial" state-making, sectarian conflict (especially between Shi'i and Sunni), and authoritarianism.

Hanna Batatu's *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* is one of the single most important texts on Iraqi history in the twentieth century. Batatu offers a comparative analysis of various Iraqi social groups including the elite landed and merchant classes. Batatu's work is important to this thesis because it paints a very detailed picture of life in the Middle Euphrates region under the Ottomans and near their collapse, which

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<sup>5</sup> Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: a Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commerical Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978): 119.

<sup>6</sup> Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017): 33.

informed the ways various social segments responded to British rule. Further, Batatu highlights the political dimension of anti-British sentiment and the 1920 rebellion among the predominantly tribal Shi'i Middle Euphrates rather than "nationalist" elements in Baghdad and Damascus in neighboring Syria, who briefly and only rhetorically supported armed resistance against the British.

Abbas Kadhim's *Reclaiming Iraq* is the most important source of the history of the 1920 rebellion. Kadhim's most significant contribution is his analysis of the role of journalism among local society in 1920. Kadhim claims that the 1920 rebellion was a political revolution, "a category of revolutions that 'transforms state structures but not social structures, and they are not necessarily accomplished through class conflict.'" Kadhim rightfully contends that the rebellion was a political revolution because it resulted in significant changes in the political structure in Iraq, including a reversal of the overarching British policy of "direct rule." Further, Kadhim skillfully demonstrates how the 1920 rebellion unfolded, including why and how various Iraqi social groups rebelled against the British, and why others did not.<sup>7</sup> Kadhim's text is particularly valuable to this thesis because among available texts it offers the most insight on the rebellion from the perspective of Iraqis that participated in it.

Ghassan Atiyyah's *Iraq, 1908-1921: A Socio-political Study* investigates the development of political consciousness in the former Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. Atiyyah also closely investigates the socio-economic conditions in the three provinces under Ottoman rule, and how they informed the ways that local society reacted to

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<sup>7</sup> Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq: the 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2012): 27.

British occupation during the First World War and after. Further, Atiyyah closely investigates the Ottoman provinces from a regionalist perspective, convincingly arguing that:

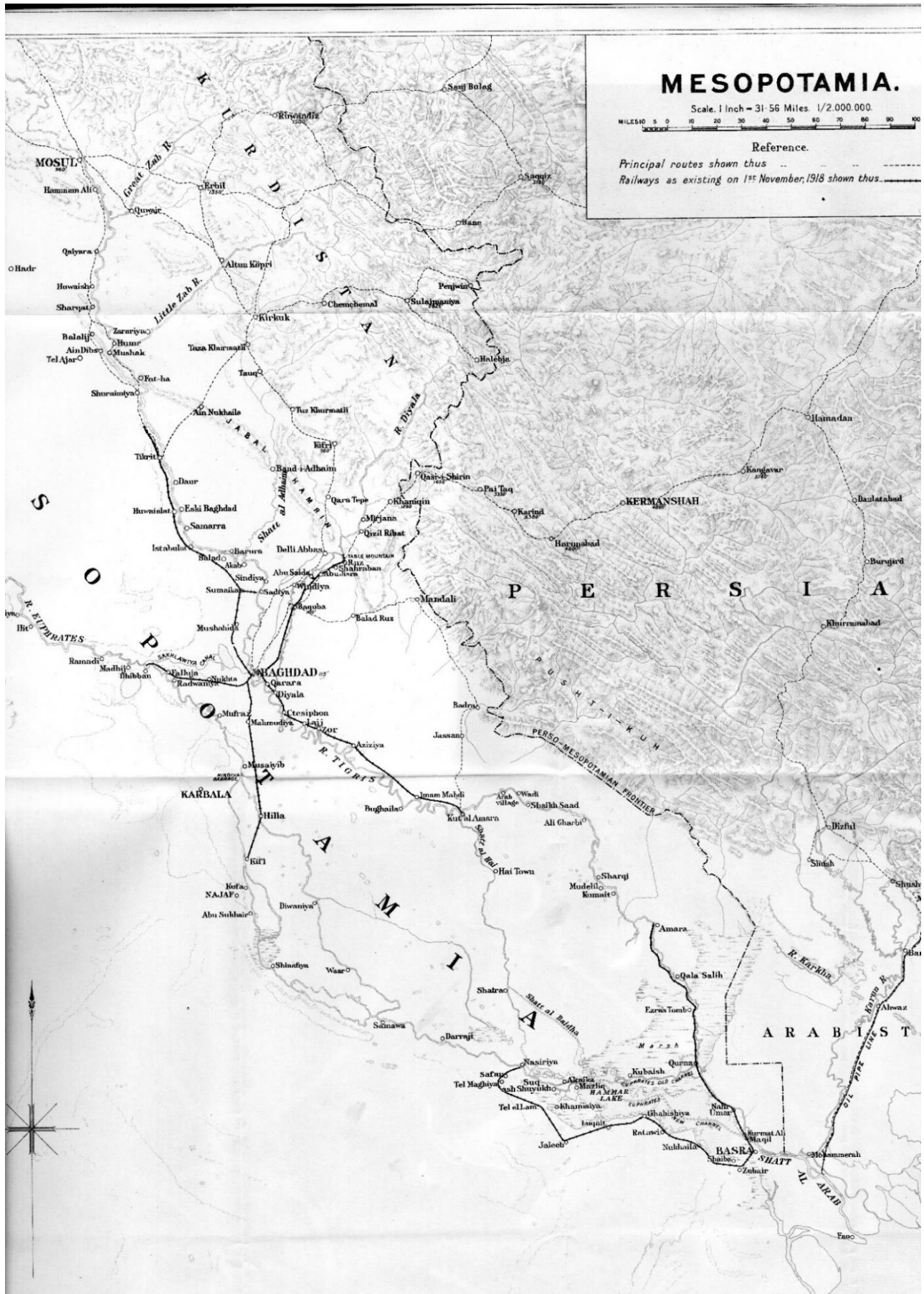
The fact that throughout the period down to 1921 there was not a single homogenous society, which could be called Iraq society, but rather a series of fragmented social groups, each developing within its own boundaries, made it imperative to examine separately the attitude of the various social groups during the whole period under study so as to see what forces were at work.<sup>8</sup>

This thesis draws inspiration from Atiyyah, as well as others' treatment of Iraq in the period under study as having a complex political, social, and economic landscape. Further, the thesis attempts to shed light on the various causes of anti-British sentiment, political upheaval, and armed rebellion in the Middle Euphrates by closely investigating the interaction between British authorities and local actors including the Shi'i clergy, chief Sayyids, tribal Sheikhs and their constituencies in the Middle Euphrates throughout 1917-1920.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ghassan Atiyyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921, a Socio-Political Study* (Beirut: The Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1973): 13.

<sup>9</sup> Map on page 12 is taken from Sir Arnold Talbot Wilson, *Mesopotamia, 1917-1920; A Clash of Loyalties; A Personal and Historical Record* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930).



## Chapter 1: Great Britain and Southern Iraq in WWI

*Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire on the Eve of WWI*

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Anglo-Ottoman alliance of the mid to late nineteenth century faced collapse, and Great Britain endeavored to expand its empire between India and the Mediterranean. Anglo-Ottoman relations had declined since the mid to late nineteenth century because, for one, the Ottomans were unable to meet the repayment of their considerable debt to London's financial district for assistance in softening the cost of a war with Russia in the Crimea in the 1850s. Similarly, in Persia, where the British also suspected the presence of oil and feared Russian expansionism, the Shah was unable to make returns on his financial debts to Great Britain. Thus financial debts accrued by Persia and the Ottoman Empire became a powerful instrument for increasing British influence. Great Britain purchased 49 percent of the shares in the French-built Suez Canal in the northeast of Africa in the 1870s. Soon after, when Egypt failed to make payments, Britain invaded and occupied the country, under the guise of relieving the Ottomans of a costly Egyptian nationalist revolt. In the 1890s the neighboring Sudan was invaded and occupied. At the outset of the twentieth century Great Britain emerged as a protector of the coastal Sheikdoms in the Persian Gulf, which had struggled for political autonomy from their Ottoman masters. Finally, after the discovery of oil in 1908 at Masjed-Soleyman in Persia, a large-scale acquisition of which could serve to modernize the British navy, British imperial investment in the then recently coined "Middle East" intensified.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Roger Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East: Money, Power, and War, 1902-1922* (London: Yale University Press, 1995): 2.

The rise of British supremacy over the Ottomans between India and the Mediterranean coincided with blows to Ottoman imperial legitimacy from within its own territories. In 1908, in the Ottoman capital of Constantinople, a group of Turkish political dissidents, the Young Turks, led a constitutional revolution and overthrew the autocratic regime of the Ottoman Sultan Abdul-Hamid. The Young Turks restored the Ottoman Parliament, which the Sultan had suspended since 1878. The restoration of the parliament and the constitution of 1876 symbolized the possibility of greater representation in the Ottoman political arena by a diversity of Ottoman subjects including eastern Europeans, Arabs, Persians, and Armenians, among others. Backed by thousands of Ottoman soldiers and officers similarly disaffected by the Sultan's regime, parliamentary elections were held at the end of 1908. Yet, despite the political revolution in Constantinople, the Ottoman government's grip on its provinces and territories continued to weaken. Bulgaria declared its full independence from the Ottomans in 1908; Austria-Hungary subsequently annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina; while Great Britain continued to cement its imperial presence in northeast Africa and the Persian Gulf.<sup>11</sup>

Confronted with British expansionism in northeast Africa and the Persian Gulf, the Ottomans increasingly turned to Germany for diplomatic and strategic support. This alarmed the British, who became concerned about potential threats to their Indian colony. At the turn of the twentieth century, in response to the possibility of Germany's extension of its Southern Anatolian Railway through the Ottoman provinces of Iraq to the head of the Persian Gulf, policymakers in London debated its implications for British predominance in the region.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East*, 68-69.

<sup>12</sup> Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East*, 40.



Although the Ottomans, Great Britain, and Germany reached a compromise in 1913, which approved the construction of the Baghdad Railway while preserving British paramountcy in the Persian Gulf, they faced the emergence of other significant military crises elsewhere in the Mediterranean and the Balkans in the two years prior.<sup>13</sup>

In the summer of 1911, Germany dispatched a gunboat to Morocco to challenge France's imperial grip on the country. Strongly allied to France, Great Britain opted to prepare for war with Germany, with the priority of strengthening the British navy. During the Moroccan crisis, Italy declared war on the Ottomans in September 1911, and by the end of 1912 had acquired the commercial port of Tripoli in North Africa and an island chain off the coast of the Anatolian Peninsula from the Ottomans. Great Britain, France, and Russia lent no significant aid to the Ottomans during the Italo-Ottoman conflict. Further, following the Anglo-French-Russian failure to support Constantinople in the face of declarations of war by the former Ottoman territories of Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria in 1912-1913, the Ottoman government increasingly sought support from Germany. The outcomes of the Moroccan crisis and the Second Balkan War heightened diplomatic and military tensions between Germany, France, and Great Britain.<sup>14</sup>

In June 1914, the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne by a Serbian nationalist organization provoked another military crisis in the Balkans, which pitted the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary against the Triple Entente of France, Great Britain, and Russia. In Autumn, Germany signed a treaty with the Ottomans in secret, by which Germany would support the Ottomans if they declared war on Russia. In

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<sup>13</sup> Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East*, 94.

<sup>14</sup> Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East*, 87-90.

late October, the Ottoman naval fleet bombarded the Russian port of Odessa in the Black Sea, and the Ottomans joined the Central Powers.<sup>15</sup>

### *The Indian Army and the Invasion of Southern Iraq*

Although the Ottomans did not join the conflict in Europe until late October, Great Britain had been preparing for an invasion of the Ottoman Empire by armies from British India for months, if not longer. The Indian Army, Great Britain's largest available infantry force, was primarily composed of British officers and Indian soldiers.<sup>16</sup> Recruited predominantly from the north and northwest of the subcontinent, Indian soldiers were mostly illiterate peasants.<sup>17</sup> Many of those who volunteered to serve in the Indian military ranks were migrants driven by the promise of economic opportunities provided by the British colonial world. However, although many Indians loyally served in the British Imperial Army prior to 1914, the invasion of the Ottoman Empire "confronted Muslim soldiers (who made up some 30 percent of the Indian Army) with a difficult choice: doing their duty to the King-Emperor might involve fighting against the Ottoman Empire, the home of the Khalifa, the spiritual head of Islam." Most Indian Muslim soldiers chose to continue military service, but the Indian Army did face desertions, as well as several significant mutinies including one by a Muslim cavalry regiment at Basra in 1915.<sup>18</sup> The moral dilemma faced by Indian soldiers hesitant to participate in a military campaign against a Muslim power revealed the

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<sup>15</sup> Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East*, 100-101.

<sup>16</sup> Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> The Indian Army was only nominally "Indian." Rather, it was mainly recruited from a select few provinces of Punjab, the North-West Frontier, and Uttar Pradesh. This was because of the "martial races" theory, which the British relied on to recruit from regions and ethno-religious communities they considered to be more "warlike" than others, such as the Sikhs of Punjab. The Indian Army also recruited elsewhere including in Afghanistan and Nepal. See David Omissi, *India Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-1918* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Omissi, *India Voices of the Great War*, 25.

complexity of the impending Anglo-Ottoman conflict, and the complexity of the colonial encounter in Iraq.

In early September 1914, anticipating a Germano-Ottoman military expedition to the Persian Gulf, the British sent three ships to protect the oil refineries belonging to the Anglo-Persian Oil Company at the river island of Abadan in Persia. At the same time, Great Britain's India Office in London and the Secretary of State for War Herbert Kitchener strengthened diplomatic ties with Arab leaders in the Gulf and in the Arabian Peninsula, including the Sheikh of Kuwait and the Sharif of Mecca, with the intention of seeking their assistance in Great Britain's coming war against their Ottoman masters. Meanwhile, officials in British India made plans for the Indian Army to occupy the Ottoman commercial port of Basra in southern Iraq. The Government of India dispatched an Indian expeditionary force (IEF) to the island of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, and in the aftermath of the Ottoman attack on the Russians in the Black Sea, the IEF proceeded to the head of the Gulf and captured the Ottoman military fort of Fao. Two days later, the same Anglo-Indian force captured the port city of Basra in southern Iraq.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Mesopotamian Campaign and the Civil Administration*

The India Office spearheaded both military operations and imperial policy in British-occupied Iraq. When the IEF captured Basra in November 1914, most Ottoman officials fled, and the India Office set up an administrative machinery that could potentially transform southern Iraq into a colony of the Government of India. A combination of British civil and military authorities under Chief Political Officer for the Persian Gulf Sir Percy Cox set up the

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<sup>19</sup> Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East*, 103-104.

Civil Administration with which to govern Basra and if necessary, to facilitate the extraction of local resources and labor power to meet the demands of the industrialized Anglo-Indian military machine.<sup>20</sup> The ambition of British civil and military authorities and the continuous arrival of thousands of Anglo-Indian combatants and non-combatants to Basra led to a transformation of the local landscape. An Indian Parsi traveling to the Persian Gulf to see his nephew described the Anglo-Indian occupation of the city of Basra in 1916:

The fourth division [of the city] which makes up the totality of latter-day Basra consists of the exclusive military occupation quarters all along the eight or nine miles of the river frontage chiefly on the right bank of the Shat' [Shatt al-Arab River] [...] The great war is in evidence along the whole extent of this quarter on water as on land. There you see standing the officers' hospital, the European soldiers' hospital, their staff's resident quarters, the offices of the naval and military departments, the harbor master's and the berthing master's houses and establishment, lines and lines of barracks built and being built, military post and telegraph offices, electric installation, commissariat sheds, stores and cold storage, artillery depots, officers' club and messes, soldiers' canteens, nurses' and medical officers' residences, railway premises with sheds, stores, sidings, offices and stations and the B.I.S.N. Co.'s [British India Steam Navigation Company] offices. Busy wharves and docks and lading jetties are there and more are building where never before was known a wharf or fit landing-place.<sup>21</sup>

Although the transformation of the city of Basra into the headquarters of the Anglo-Indian armies and the Civil Administration would have certainly displaced members of local society, the British were largely welcomed by Basra's ruling elite of wealthy merchants and landowners, who had "long-standing commercial ties to British and Indian merchants."<sup>22</sup>

After the capture of Basra, the India Office expanded the Civil Administration to prepare to govern the neighboring Ottoman provinces of Baghdad and Mosul as they came

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<sup>20</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> C.M. Cursetjee, *The Land of the Date* (Washington D.C.: Westphalia Press, 2016): 168-169.

<sup>22</sup> Judith S. Yaphe, "The View from Basra: Southern Iraq's Reaction to War and Occupation, 1915-1925" in *The Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921*, eds. Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004): 20.

under British occupation. Throughout 1915-1918, the Civil Administration divided the British-occupied Ottoman provinces into smaller administrative divisions, which would enable the British to rule the region's major urban areas and vast countryside more closely. In the process of forming them, the Civil Administration assigned Political Officers (PO) to govern the divisions, and Assistant Political Officers (APO) to govern their sub-districts with supplemental Anglo-Indian staffs, and sometimes former Ottoman officials. The India Office recruited British officers from the Indian Army, as well as from the political, civil, and judicial offices in India to staff the Civil Administration. The agents of the nascent Civil Administration had very little, if any knowledge of the socio-economic and political conditions in Iraq, nor did many of them speak the local languages upon their arrival.<sup>23</sup> As a result, they replicated "the administrative machinery with which they were familiar," deriving their practices from their previous experiences in India.<sup>24</sup> As Phebe Marr has explained, the Civil Administration projected the philosophy of the "white man's burden" onto the local population in Iraq, "a predilection for direct rule, and a distrust of local Arabs' [and Persians'] capacity for self-government." As a result, throughout the rapid replacement of Ottoman administration, British authorities appointed few members of local society to any positions of administrative authority.<sup>25</sup> The APOs of each sub-district answered to the PO based at the headquarters of his respective division. POs and APOs assigned to each division and sub-district were responsible for performing the administrative functions delegated to them by the High Commissioner for the Civil Administration.

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<sup>23</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The British Occupation of Mesopotamia," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 30 (April 2007): 355-6.

<sup>24</sup> Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003): 63.

<sup>25</sup> Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 18.

*The Design and Functions of the Civil Administration*

Although during the war its operations were secondary to military objectives, the Civil Administration anticipated a permanent occupation of southern Iraq, if not the whole of it. Thus, the Civil Administration had many functions, including filling the administrative vacuum left by Ottoman officials in the urban areas, and setting up new administrative machinery where the Ottoman government previously had little, if any presence. Setting up the Civil Administration was difficult because most Ottoman officials fled, taking with them, or destroying existing documents concerning tax records, as well as judicial policies and practices.<sup>26</sup> Initially, the Civil Administration applied Anglo-Indian legal codes in the towns and urban areas, and while relying heavily on local notables friendly to the British, the political officers administered the courts. When the war between Great Britain and the Ottomans concluded in 1918, the Civil Administration set up a system of legal codes designed to administer justice in the tribal areas according to tribal custom, with the local district political officer overseeing the settling of intertribal disputes.<sup>27</sup>

Political officers were also charged with forming municipal councils within their districts to manage local political affairs. These councils, made up of wealthy dignitaries, and members of the landowning classes including tribal Sheikhs were deliberately restricted in their administrative roles. Further, because British officers distrusted Sheikhs in particular, Arnold Wilson wrote in 1918, "these councils will at the beginning fulfil an educative [for the Iraqis] rather than an administrative function." Their functions were most often "purely

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<sup>26</sup> Gertrude L. Bell, "Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia," in *IAR: 1914-1932: vol. 5, 1920*, 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> Yaphe, "The View from Basra," 24.

advisory," and limited to addressing public health and sanitation concerns, trade, assistance to the urban poor, and the building of roads.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, the Civil Administration set up a revenue administration in Basra in 1915 to facilitate the collection of taxes from local society. Tax collection would primarily serve to finance the Civil Administration, including the salaries of British officers and payments made to tribal Sheikhs to serve as British government agents. In the absence of adequate Anglo-Indian military forces, political officers in each division and district relied on local notables such as tribal Sheikhs, as well as local police recruited from the towns and tribal areas to enforce tax collection. The demands of each tax varied, "fixed each year by assessments or by counts of the objects subject to taxation, such as sheep, buffaloes, and camels, or date and fruit trees, or, in the case of crops, by estimation of the yield."<sup>29</sup> The Civil Administration was also responsible to the Anglo-Indian military authorities for purchasing supplies (the same objects that would become subject to taxation such as vegetables, fruit, livestock, and cereal grains) from local markets for the use of the Indian Army. Anglo-Indian military authorities also charged the Civil Administration with recruiting labor for the use of the Indian Army and its various military projects, often for little or no pay.<sup>30</sup> These projects included the construction and maintenance of railroads, which served as the most efficient mode of transportation for the military in Iraq. The Anglo-Indian military authorities also required labor for its Irrigation Department, which, for one, oversaw the dredging of silted-up canals for maintaining and improving local irrigation systems. Collectively, the functions

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<sup>28</sup> Arnold T. Wilson, "Review of the Civil Administration of the Occupied Territories of Al 'Iraq, 1914-1918," in *IAR: 1914-1932: vol. 1, 1914-1918*, 35-37. See also, Judith S. Yaphe, "The View from Basra," 27.

<sup>29</sup> Gertrude L. Bell, "Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia," 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> Gertrude L. Bell, "Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia," in *IAR: 1914-1932: vol. 5, 1920*, 8.

of the Civil Administration served to secure British political predominance in Iraq, to provide the Indian Army with the resources and labor power necessary to sustain the military campaign against the Ottomans, and to reduce the imperial expenditure on the Civil Administration in Iraq (primarily through revenue collection and taxation), which increased by more than seven hundred percent between 1916 and 1918.<sup>31</sup>

### *Anglo-Indian Defeats and the Hashemite Revolt*

By the latter half of 1915, Great Britain had secured the southern Basra province, and the Anglo-Indian forces were on their way to capturing the northern central city of Baghdad from the Ottomans. However, after suffering major defeats and over 40,000 casualties at the hands of strong Ottoman military opposition north of Baghdad, the Anglo-Indian force surrendered at the town of Kut in April 1916. The surrender at Kut prompted Great Britain's War Committee to transfer Anglo-Indian military operations in Iraq from the India Office to the War Office. The India Office fiercely opposed this transfer but retained control of civil operations. For the time being, the War Office pursued a defensive military strategy, and restricted the Civil Administration's operations to the south along the Tigris River and within the Basra province.<sup>32</sup>

In June 1916, Arab-Ottoman military forces in the Arabian Peninsula revolted against the Ottoman government in the name of the Sharif of Mecca, the spiritual head of the Islamic holy cities of Medina and Mecca. The revolt came after months of negotiations between Sharif Husayn of the Hashemite dynasty and British officials in Egypt, who had hoped that a revolt

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<sup>31</sup> Yaphe, "The View from Basra," 25. For expenditure figures on the Civil Administration see Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 219.

<sup>32</sup> Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East*, 128.



by the Arab subjects of the Ottoman Empire would precipitate a crushing blow to the Ottomans and take them out of the war. The British government in Egypt subsidized the Hashemite Revolt, and in principle promised the Sharif Husayn the formation of a pan-Arab nation-state stretching from the Arabian Peninsula across Syria to the head of the Persian Gulf in exchange for the security and expansion of Great Britain's commercial interests in the region.<sup>33</sup>

The Hashemite Revolt renewed the War Office's interest in capturing northern Iraq, and in December 1916, an Anglo-Indian force of 150,000 combatants was organized for an assault on Baghdad. The Anglo-Indian forces recaptured Kut in February 1917, and captured Baghdad in March. The swift success of the new offensive impressed Great Britain's War Cabinet, and to consolidate Great Britain's territorial gains the Anglo-Indian forces were ordered to set up a strong defensive position along Baghdad's northern hinterland.<sup>34</sup> The Civil Administration also moved its headquarters to Baghdad. Despite the success of the early 1917 Anglo-Indian offensive, it imposed devastating conditions on the local population by demanding too much of their local resources including grains, pack animals, and fruits and vegetables. Normally, the Anglo-Indian forces in Iraq would rely on supplies primarily from the British Isles and British India. However, British shipping in the Atlantic was vulnerable to enemy submarines and in April 1917 alone, the British had lost 875,000 tons of shipping in the North and Atlantic Seas to German submarines.<sup>35</sup> As a result, the War Office required the Anglo-Indian military and civil authorities in Iraq to rapidly expand their extraction of

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<sup>33</sup> Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East*, 127.

<sup>34</sup> Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East*, 143-144.

<sup>35</sup> Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East*, 146.

local resources to meet the demands of the Indian Army, and to combat food shortages and famine in other parts of war-torn Iraq.<sup>36</sup> In turn, the India Office imposed the Civil Administration upon the grain-rich Middle Euphrates region spanning central Iraq and parts of the south. There, the local population had experienced little contact with Great Britain since the outset of World War I, and, unlike northern Iraq, had previously lived with a significant amount of political autonomy from the Ottoman regime.

*The Middle Euphrates, the Epicenter of Conflicts to Come*

In the early twentieth century the Middle Euphrates was an irrigated flatland, stretching along the Euphrates River system from the towns of Falluja in the north to Nasiriya in the south. As both subsistence crops and the bases of the region's livelihood, rice, wheat, and barley were the pillars of agrarian economy of the region. Rice was an irrigated cash crop planted in June along the western, Hindiya branch of the Euphrates River and harvested in winter, while wheat and barley (irrigated or dry-farmed) were planted in winter along the eastern Hilla branch and harvested in spring and summer for subsistence. In order to combat flooding and create more control over water distribution, the Ottomans had overseen the construction of the Hindiya Barrage (1911-1913) in the north where the Euphrates splits into two large channels, the Hilla and the Hindiya, as well as various tributaries which provided water for cultivation and drinking. The river valley also hosted shepherds and the cultivation of dates and other fruits and vegetables. At the outset of WWI however, enormous parts of land in the Middle Euphrates had deteriorated since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the silting up of canals, inhibiting the elaborate system of perennial

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<sup>36</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The British Occupation of Mesopotamia," 355-6.

irrigation. Further, the construction of the Hindiya Barrage also cut off the water supply to some areas, while favoring others. As a result, many tribes of settled agriculturalists had been impoverished, and turned semi-nomadic to survive on mobile cattle and sheep rearing.<sup>37</sup>

The Middle Euphrates was politically and economically oriented towards Persia to the east and the adjoining deserts west, in part because of their proximity but mainly because communication between Baghdad and Basra was unreliable. Travel from Basra to Baghdad could take more than a week, because road and river transport were risky and unreliable for the long journey.<sup>38</sup> Cultural, kinship, and sectarian ties also played a role in facilitating some regional networks rather than others. The Middle Euphrates was also oriented towards Persia in part because tribes of the Middle Euphrates as well as most of central and southern Iraq were Shi'i. This trend dated back to the massive migration of families of Shi'i clerics, or *ulema*, from Persia to Iraq in the eighteenth century.<sup>39</sup> Many clerics had migrated to the Middle Euphrates for its Shi'i shrine cities, including Najaf, Karbala, Kazimain, and Samarra.

### *The Shrine Cities and the Shi'i Clergy*

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf emerged as the main centers of Shi'i scholarship and education in Iraq and abroad.<sup>40</sup> Located 55 miles south of Baghdad, Karbala was an important Shi'i sanctuary, as it contains the shrines of Husayn, son of 'Ali and the third Shi'i imam, and of his half-brother 'Abbas.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 250.

<sup>38</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994): 15.

<sup>40</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Husayn was a martyr glorified among Shi'i Muslims. With his half-brother 'Abbas and their followers, Husayn died in the year 680 at a battle at Karbala. Nakash notes, "The martyrdom of Husayn was most fervently celebrated by

Karbala received thousands of pilgrimages annually to its mosques, shrines, and cemetery. Similarly, located south of Karbala, Najaf contains the shrine of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin of Muhammad and the fourth Caliph. Like Karbala, Najaf drew thousands of Shi'i pilgrims to it annually for worship and for burial at its largest cemetery. With around nineteen religious schools at the outset of the twentieth century, Najaf was the most illustrious of the shrine cities, and often housed the world's most prominent Shi'i clerics, who would receive significant monetary contributions from Shi'i communities abroad.<sup>42</sup> Further, because of their the proximity to one another, Shi'i Najaf rapidly blended politically, socially, and economically with the tribes of the Middle Euphrates following the mass migration of Shi'i clerics to the Middle Euphrates in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a result, much of the tribal population in the Middle Euphrates had converted to Shi'ism by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Shi'i clergy in the Middle Euphrates had become a major political player in Iraqi and Persian political affairs. In the early 1890s, Shi'i clerics in Persia led a movement protesting a monopoly over the Persian tobacco industry granted to a British firm by the Shah. The movement against the Tobacco Concession put pressure on the Shi'i clerics in Iraq to participate more actively in Persian politics and spurred deeper investment in the design and functions of Islamic governance among the clerics and students of Shi'ism in the shrine cities. During 1905-1911, the Constitutionalist

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Shi'is, and Karbala emerged as the focus of devotion, particularly for Persian Shi'i believers. Traditions attach blessing to its water and soil, and promise rewards to the believers to be gained from their pilgrimage to the city and from burial in its cemetery (Wadi al-Iman), which stands only second in sanctity to that of Najaf." See Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 19-20.

Revolution in Persia further stimulated more direct involvement in Persian political affairs by the Shi'i clergy in the shrine cities of Iraq. Prominent clerics in Persia and in Iraq's Middle Euphrates advocated for the formation of a Constituent National Assembly for Persia, composed of Shi'i clerics who would ensure the monarchy's actions and the national legislative process operated in accordance with Islamic laws. The intellectual debate over the nature of Islamic governance in Persia also took place in Iraq's shrine cities, where Persian students of Shi'ism and the clerics became divided between pro-constitutionalists and anti-constitutionalists.<sup>44</sup>

Like the Persian Revolution, the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 in the Ottoman Empire had major ripple effects that transformed political life in the shrine cities of the Middle Euphrates. The restoration of the Ottoman constitution by the Young Turks in Constantinople promoted freedom of political expression throughout the empire. In turn, books, journals, and newspapers not previously accessible arrived in the shrine cities of the Middle Euphrates from Turkey, Persia, Egypt, and India. Further, the restoration of the Ottoman constitution provided new secular educational opportunities for Shi'i communities. In 1909, public schools for boys opened in Kazimain, Najaf, and Hilla in the Middle Euphrates.<sup>45</sup> The new expressive opportunities provided by the Young Turk Revolution also enabled the Shi'i clerics in the shrine cities to spread their ideas about the design and functions of Islamic government, and the threat that Europeans posed to Islamic societies. As a result, the Shi'i clerics in the shrine cities emerged as a power political force in Iraq, which was demonstrated by their ability to mobilize opposition (within Iraqi and Persian

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<sup>44</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 51.

<sup>45</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 52-53.

society) to concessions made by the Persian government to Great Britain and Russia during 1908-1910.<sup>46</sup> Further, in Autumn 1911, Russian troops occupied northern Persia, and British troops occupied southern Persia in order to secure their economic interests there. In response, prominent Shi'i clerics in the shrine cities assembled the local tribes to undertake a military expedition against the British and Russian troops in Persia. The expedition never took place because its spiritual leader Muhammad Kazim Khurasani unexpectedly passed away. However, the Shi'i clerics began organizing another military expedition against the British when Anglo-Indian forces invaded southern Iraq in 1914.<sup>47</sup>

By January 1915, Shi'i clerics in the shrine cities had successfully organized many of the Shi'i tribes along the Euphrates River system to join the Ottoman armies against the British in southern Iraq. To the Shi'i clergy, the British invasion threatened the preservation of Islamic government, the capacity of political autonomy that the clergy had been able to live with as a territory of the Ottoman Empire, and the economic independence of the clergy due to the fact that the British intended to facilitate the flow of pilgrimage traffic and charities from Persia to the shrine cities.<sup>48</sup>

Nearly twenty thousand Shi'i Arab tribesmen led by *Sayyids* joined an Ottoman offensive against the British in southern Iraq in 1915. Sayyids were considered to be Shi'i descendants of the Prophet Muhammad who originated from the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, and Iran. ~~and~~ In Iraq, they resided among the settled tribes in the Middle Euphrates, often performing both religious and administrative functions. Some Sayyids were wealthy

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<sup>46</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 57.

<sup>47</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 60-61.

<sup>48</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 67.

landowners, while many fulfilled more ordinary occupations.<sup>49</sup> Regardless of their economic welfare, the Sayyids played a huge role in maintaining the spiritual and political connection between the Shi'i clerics in the shrine cities and the tribes in the countryside.

Despite the combined force of tribes from southern Iraq and the Ottoman regular army, the armies of British India defeated the counter-offensive.<sup>50</sup> However, the mobilization of the tribes by Shi'i clerics in Karbala and Najaf demonstrated the degree of political influence that the Shi'i clerics and Sayyids had on political feeling, particularly among the tribesmen in the Middle Euphrates and southern Iraq. The defeat of the tribal and Ottoman forces and the casualties suffered by the offensive set an additional precedent for anti-British sentiments among the Shi'i clergy in the shrine cities and the tribesmen in the Middle Euphrates. Further, despite the failure of the offensive, Great Britain would not attempt to occupy the Middle Euphrates for another two years, during which time the Shi'i clergy was able to strengthen its political influence in the region, while still under an Ottoman regime distracted by the conflict with Great Britain.<sup>51</sup>

### *The Tribes and the Ottomans*

The Shi'i Arab tribes formed the largest segment of the population in the Middle Euphrates. Most were nomadic and semi-nomadic agriculturalists and pastoralists. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the traditional tribal socio-political structure was based on a paternalistic hierarchy of military prowess, birth, and kinship. The tribe served as the only organized social group outside of the urban areas that could provide security to not only its

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<sup>49</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 37-38.

<sup>50</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 60-61.

<sup>51</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 61.

own tribesmen, but also non-tribal peasant communities in exchange for monetary tribute.<sup>52</sup> Further, tribal society was communal, a “system of mutual rights and obligations between the shaykhs and the tribesmen and equality of kinship among the tribesmen.” In conjunction with councils of elders, leading members of the tribe, and members of the Sheikh’s family, the Sheikhs were the leading authorities in their tribes. Each tribe collectively owned and protected the land, or *Dira*, on which they maintained their livestock and or cultivated cereal grains, fruits, and vegetables.<sup>53</sup> By the early twentieth century, the most predominant tribes in the Middle Euphrates included the Fatla, the Bani Hasan, and the Khaza’il confederation, all of which had sub-sections scattered across their respective areas.

In the mid-nineteenth century the Ottoman regime introduced legislation, the Ottoman Land Code of 1858, intended to reduce the power and influence of large confederations of tribes by encouraging them to transition from being nomads and semi-nomads to settled agriculturalists. Extended to Iraq in 1869, this policy also aimed at increasing agricultural production and tax revenue for the Empire.<sup>54</sup> By settling the tribes, the Ottoman state could more easily regulate and raise revenue collected from tribal society. At the same time however, the new land policy undermined the traditional cohesion between Sheikhs and their tribesmen, as well as between tribes within a confederation because the Ottomans attempted to negotiate land ownership and taxation with tribal communities settled on individual parcels of land rather than the leading Sheikhs of the tribe or a confederation.<sup>55</sup> As a result, many previously prominent and powerful Sheikhs declined as

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<sup>52</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 73.

<sup>53</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 25.

<sup>54</sup> Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 32.

<sup>55</sup> Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 33.



the central political authorities in their respective regions. Further, as the Ottomans settled previously nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes around the Middle Euphrates, they often settled them on lands claimed by other tribes, which often sparked inter-tribal conflicts.

For example, prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the Khaza'il tribe predominated over a large confederation of tribes in the Middle Euphrates. However, coupled with the drying up of the Hilla branch of the Euphrates River in the 1880s due to a drought, the Ottoman Land Code undermined a major underlying institution that was central to tribal cohesion in Iraq. The Khaza'il relied heavily on the Hilla branch of the Euphrates River for cultivation. When the Hilla branch dried up, the Khaza'il's agricultural livelihood suffered. At the same time, the Ottomans settled smaller tribes such as the Fatla on Khaza'il land, which sparked a series of inter-tribal conflicts over land ownership that carried on into the twentieth century. Additionally, the Ottomans also assassinated the leading Sheikh of the Khaza'il, Sheikh Dhirb, at Najaf, and his great-grandson in the Mosul province in the late nineteenth century with the intent of decentralizing the power of the prominent Khaza'il tribe.<sup>56</sup>

The Ottoman Land Code also introduced a new system of land titles, or *Tapu*, which required individuals to provide prescriptive rights to land to the Ottoman state and resulted in the sale of land not prescriptively claimed by auction to wealthy townsmen and tribal Sheikhs. This process not only displaced tribes without prescriptive rights recognized by the Ottoman state, but also transformed Sheikhs who applied for land titles into private owners, thus alienating their constituent tribesmen from their hereditary lands altogether, "and

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<sup>56</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 75.

rendering him a mere tenant or agricultural worker.”<sup>57</sup> As a result of the Ottoman Land Code, tribal confederations fragmented into smaller sections, and by the outset of the British invasion of Iraq in 1914 many confederations had shrunk into smaller sections, many of which were pitted against each other in the struggle for land, and by extension both agricultural and pastoral subsistence.<sup>58</sup>

### *The Tribes and the British*

In southern and central Iraq, securing the cooperation of the local tribal Sheikhs, the Sayyids, and their constituencies with British rule was one of the biggest challenges for British civil authorities. British tribal policy was, in practice, the reverse of the mid-nineteenth century Ottoman initiative. When the British began attempts to extend their authority from the cities to the rural tribal areas, British officers aimed to recover the power and influence of select Sheikhs whom the British then recognized as official agents of the Civil Administration. Sheikhs friendly to the British had to maintain order in their tribe, protect the British telegraph lines, and assist in collecting revenue for the Civil Administration. Further, as the largest employers of labor in Iraq during WWI, the Indian Army and Civil Administration recruited Arab labor primarily from the rural and tribal regions through Sheikhs, Sayyids, and *mallaks* (landowners who rented arable land out to peasants). British-friendly Sheikhs and British authorities often forced local peasants and tribesmen to perform labor for the construction of roads, railways, and the dredging of irrigation canals because these Indian Army initiatives required more laborers, and required them more quickly than the Government of British India could provide from the

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<sup>57</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 28-29.

<sup>58</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 250.

subcontinent.<sup>59</sup> The British compensated cooperative Sheikhs with modern weapons, cash loans to purchase seed for agricultural production, monthly cash allowances, and tax relief.<sup>60</sup>

The British tribal policy had a profound impact on the Middle Euphrates beginning in 1917 after the capture of Baghdad. Prior to the First World War, property, and arable land in particular, were on their way to becoming a predominant base of social stratification in Iraq and among the even some of the more rural tribal areas due to the Ottoman intervention in land ownership in the Middle Euphrates since the mid-eighteenth century, as well as the expanding imposition of European industrial enterprise.<sup>61</sup> The installation of a British government in Iraq during the First World War and its objective to create a new class of instruments of British authority through Sheikhs of larger tribes intensified the role of property as a foundation of inequality among tribal societies, and undermined the already deteriorating tribal structure based on birth, kinship, and military prowess. The empowering of select Sheikhs of larger, landed tribes alienated those Sheikhs and their tribesmen from one another. Further, British efforts to empower the Sheikhs of larger tribes alienated the Sheikhs of smaller, less landed and politically influential tribes, who did not benefit from British rule in the ways that more prominent Sheikhs did. Further, the distribution of agricultural loans to Sheikhs produced debts to British authorities that they could often not afford to pay back and then refused to because the debt far outweighed their own monetary and agricultural assets. The failure and refusal to pay off such debts often resulted in additional fines, the confiscation of the tribe's weapons, or arrests. Indeed, the first stage of

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<sup>59</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 224-225.

<sup>60</sup> Judith Yaphe, "The View from Basra," 25.

<sup>61</sup> Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, 6-9.

the rebellion in the summer of 1920 broke out at the town of Rumaitha after the British attempted to arrest a local Sheikh for his refusal to pay off an agricultural loan made to him by the Civil Administration.

### *Conclusion*

After Anglo-Indian forces captured Baghdad in March 1917, Great Britain imposed the Civil Administration on the Middle Euphrates region of Iraq in order to meet military ends, and to lay the administrative ground work for a potentially permanent British occupation of Iraq.<sup>62</sup> The Civil Administration organized the Middle Euphrates into three administrative divisions: Hilla, Shamiya, and Samawa. Further, the process of blending components of nation-state-building with efforts to utilize local resources and labor power faced a series of challenges including securing the cooperation of the local population with such objectives. Over the course of 1917-1920, this process would transform the social, political, and material landscape of the Middle Euphrates in ways that brought the British into conflict with various segments of local society who had been marginalized, including many tribal Sheikhs and their tribal constituencies, chief Sayyids, and Shi'i clerics.

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<sup>62</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The British Occupation of Mesopotamia," 349.

## Chapter 2: The British Occupation of the Middle Euphrates, 1917-1919

### *British Occupation and the Agrarian Political Economy of the Hilla Division, 1917-1919*

The Civil Administration imposed itself on the Hilla region in April 1917. Stretching roughly from the town of Musaiyib in the north near the Hindiya Barrage to the town of Diwaniya to the southeast, Hilla was predominantly composed of settled and semi-nomadic tribes who lived along the Euphrates River valley as agriculturalists and shepherds. The Hindiya Barrage controlled the flow of water between the Hilla and Hindiya branches of the Euphrates River. Located several kilometers upstream from the town of Hilla, the Hindiya Barrage was a dam designed by British civil engineer William Willcocks, who oversaw its construction for the Ottomans during 1911-1913 with the intention of achieving greater control over water distribution between the Hilla and Hindiya branches of the Euphrates River. The various openings in the barrage allowed the Ottomans to, for example, divert the much of the water supply down the Hindiya branch of the Euphrates, which needed to consistently provide water for rice cultivators in the summer so that they could harvest in the winter. The Ottomans would then divert more of the water supply down the Hilla branch during the winter so that the settled tribes there could plant wheat and barley to harvest in the spring and summer.<sup>63</sup>

The impact of the Hindiya Barrage on the Hilla region was such that many nomadic, pastoralist tribes increasingly sought a settled life as cultivators. On the other hand, the same changes in water distribution inevitably led to the deterioration of some arable land that previously received more water, and the settled tribes there left in search of more

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<sup>63</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 259.

cultivable land or turned to the nomadic life, relying on pastoralism for subsistence.<sup>64</sup> The Hilla and Hindiya branches of the Euphrates also provided drinking water for the towns, as well as for nomads and their livestock such as camels, which could be used both as a reliable form of transportation and a commodity with which to barter for goods in the towns.<sup>65</sup> The largest and most prominent tribes in the Hilla division included the Fatla and Bani Hasan. The Fatla and Bani Hasan, as well as less prominent tribes in the region were feebly interconnected and often in conflict with one another over the struggle for land due to the imposition of the Ottoman tribal policies in the mid to late nineteenth century, the horrific floods in the late nineteenth century that displaced settled tribes, and because of the changes in water distribution between the Hilla and Hindiya branches since the completion of the Hindiya Barrage in 1913.<sup>66</sup>

The urban centers in the Hilla division were Hilla and Karbala. Like many other cities in Iraq, at the beginning of the twentieth century the population of Hilla was roughly split into three social classes: the senior Ottoman administrative officials, many of Turkish origin, the wealthy landlords and merchants, and the lower class of petty traders, craftsmen, and unskilled laborers.<sup>67</sup> Karbala's social hierarchy was very similar to Hilla's, but with the addition of the Shi'i clergy and their constituent students at the religious schools. The Shi'i clergy in Karbala shared political influence in the city with the Ottoman officials and wealthy merchant and landed class. The wealthy merchants and landlords in Hilla often owned cultivatable land in the tribal areas because of the Ottoman Land Code, and simply leased

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<sup>64</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 250.

<sup>65</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 22.

<sup>66</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 250.

<sup>67</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 35.

their land to Sheikhs or *Sarkals*, who would then hire local tribesmen with a hereditary connection to the land to cultivate. Further, prior to the First World War, the Ottoman regime maintained close administrative control of Hilla because of its proximity to Baghdad, and because the Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid owned a large portion of the land in the region.<sup>68</sup> When the British captured Baghdad in March 1917, many Ottoman officials fled the Hilla region, while some remained, later to be hired by the Civil Administration.

The presence of an Anglo-Indian force of around five hundred thousand combatants and noncombatants, as well as the blockades imposed by both the British and Ottomans on each other's territories in Iraq produced horrific food shortages and price increases in Hilla's urban centers. For example, in 1917-1918 the price of a taghar of wheat in English pounds increased from 8 to 100 in the city of Hilla alone.<sup>69</sup> Further, the area around Baghdad had been threatened with famine in early 1917 due the fact that the Ottomans cut off the flow of grain out of the northern province of Mosul, which traditionally supplied Baghdad.<sup>70</sup> In the spring of 1917 the High Commissioner of the Civil Administration Sir Percy Cox dispatched a handful of British officers and administrative clerks to the city of Hilla to set up a British administrative presence in the Middle Euphrates with the intention of extracting local foodstuffs, supplies, and labor power to combat the devastation caused by the war in central and northern Iraq.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 254.

<sup>69</sup> Major C.F. Mcpherson, "Administration Report, Hillah District, 1917," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 1, 1914-1918*, 455.

<sup>70</sup> Food shortages in the city of Mosul led to the deaths of nearly ten thousand of its residents by the time the Anglo-Indian armies captured it in November 1918. See Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 220.

<sup>71</sup> Ulrichsen, "The British Occupation of Mesopotamia," 351.

The town of Hilla was the center of grain distribution in the Middle Euphrates. Most of the rice, barley, and wheat produced by settled tribesmen in the rural areas was typically transported to Hilla to be sold in its markets. Because of this, the Civil Administration intended to facilitate a mass extraction of grain from the Hilla region in three central ways: by purchasing it in the towns, by recruiting local peasants and tribesmen to dredge and restore silted-up canals that could provide water from the Euphrates to expand cultivation, and by altering the distribution of water between the Hilla and Hindiya branches to allow for the cultivation of rice, wheat, and barley year-round rather than perennially. Also, by imposing itself on the region the Civil Administration could collect taxes on the possession and exchange of foodstuffs, livestock and other goods in the towns, as well as on crop yields to minimize the imperial expenditure on the occupation of Iraq.<sup>72</sup> The Civil Administration would rely heavily on the Sheikhs of the Fatla and Bani Hasan to cooperate with taxation efforts and the recruiting of their tribesmen to perform the labor necessary for the restoration of silted-up canals.

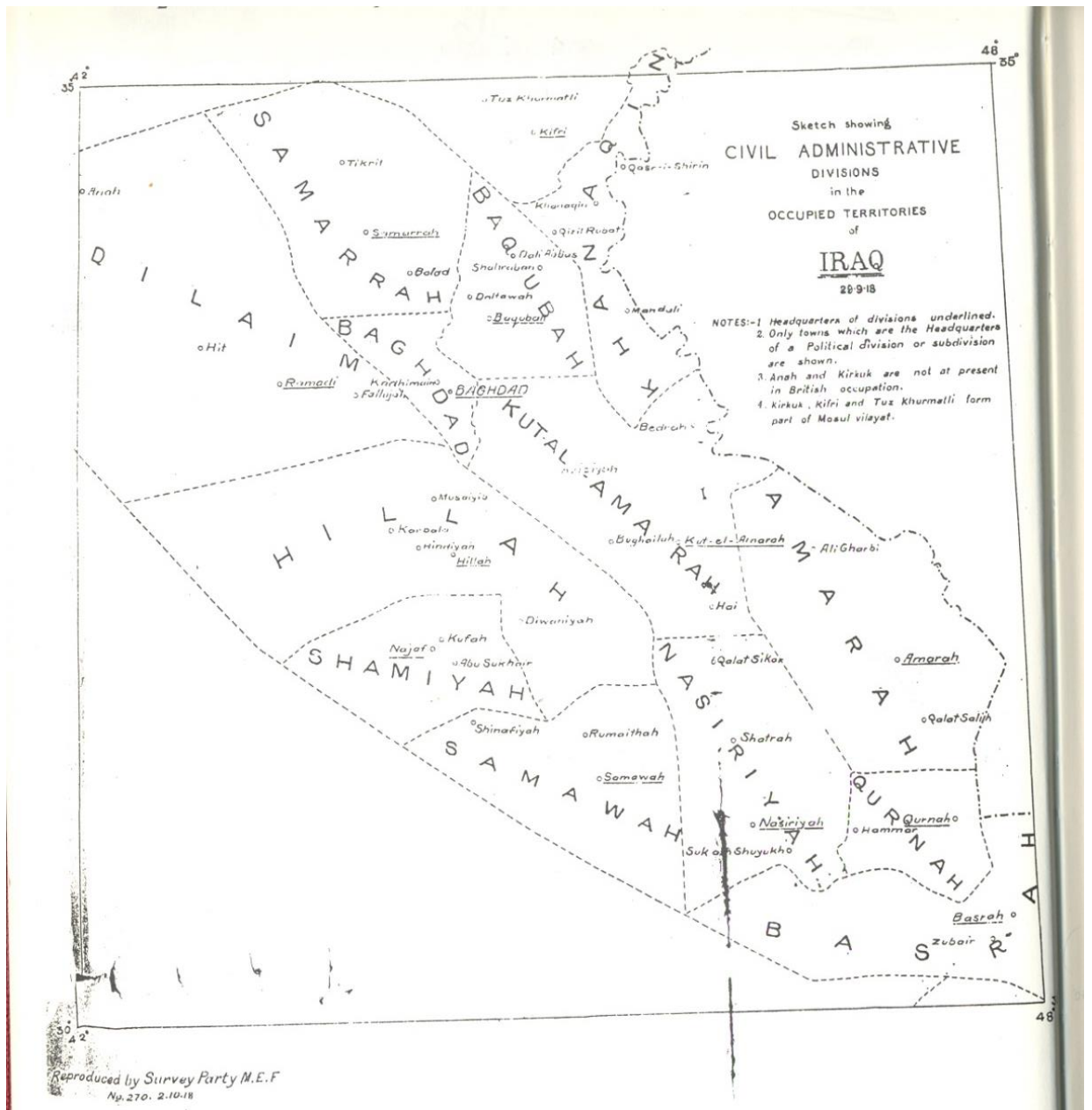
The imposition of the Civil Administration in the Hilla division produced disaffection among Sheikhs of smaller and less powerful tribes than the prominent Fatla and Bani Hasan, as well as among settled cultivating tribesmen, and the Shi'i clerics in Karbala over 1917-1919. By turning the Sheikhs of more prominent tribes into British government agents who would collect taxes from their tribesmen and from other tribes in exchange for cash allowances and tax relief for example, the Sheikhs of smaller tribal sections became marginalized. Also, by forcing tribesmen to perform labor for restoring canals with little or

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<sup>72</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 259.



no compensation, as well as by causing crop failures due to the interference in local irrigation practices, the Civil Administration impoverished many tribesmen. Finally, the Civil Administration displeased the Shi'i clerics in Karbala, many of who disapproved of a non-Muslim power governing a Muslim society and felt threatened by the rigorous efforts of British authorities to rule society in the Middle Euphrates far more directly than their Ottoman predecessors. Despite the satisfaction with British rule among the wealthy merchants and landlords in the towns, this significant web of local grievances in the Hilla division would mirror disaffection with British rule in the neighboring Shamiya and Samawa regions of the Middle Euphrates. There, the British would intensify their efforts at extracting local resources and labor power, as well as establishing their authority over local political affairs throughout 1917-1919.



<sup>73</sup> A map of Iraq outlining the boundaries of the British administrative divisions during mid-1918. Taken from *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 1, 1914-1918*.

*The Arrival of the Civil Administration in Hilla*

With only a handful of Assistant Political Officers and no military support, British PO Captain Goldsmith arrived at the town of Hilla in April 1917 to set up a British administrative presence for the division. Major C. F. Mcpherson succeeded Goldsmith at the end of the summer of the same year and produced the first reports on the political administration of the Hilla area. Captain Goldsmith attempted to establish a British political administration in the Hilla area through former Ottoman officials in the towns, and the Sheikhs of more prominent tribes, who had more land, more tribesmen, and wielded immense political authority the rural areas.<sup>74</sup>

Upon his arrival to the town, Goldsmith temporarily appointed a former *Mutasarrif* (Ottoman governor) of Hilla to act as his Assistant Political Officer. Further, Mcpherson recruited tribesmen through local Sheikhs to create a local police force to enforce the authority of the Civil Administration, collect taxes, and protect trade along the roads outside of the town. Goldsmith appointed a Sheikh of the Bani Hasan tribe, Amran Ibn Haji Sa'dun, to rule the nearby town of Hindiya until December of 1917 when a British officer replaced him to rule the town.<sup>75</sup> Throughout mid-1917, the interaction between the Civil Administration and the rural tribal areas was limited, but by 1918 British POs had successfully established relations with the Sheikhs of the larger tribes with the goal of turning them into government agents. In exchange for their political support and the collection of taxes from their tribesmen, the Sheikhs of the Fatla and Bani Hasan, for example, received monthly

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<sup>74</sup> Major C.F. Mcpherson, "Administration Report, Hillah District, 1917," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 1, 1914-1918*, 447-448.

<sup>75</sup> Major C.F. Mcpherson, "Administration Report, Hillah District, 1917," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 1, 1914-1918*, 447-448.

allowances from the Civil Administration, served as members of a tribal council overseen by Mcpherson, and were granted formal authority over the smaller tribes in the region.

However, Mcpherson's process of "divide and rule" through the Sheikhs of the Bani Hasan and Fatla struggled to establish control over every tribe. Some of the less prominent tribes, who didn't enjoy the political and economic benefits that the British offered the Fatla and Bani Hasan Sheikhs, ignored tax collection efforts, resisted Mcpherson's attempts to intervene in inter-tribal conflicts, and openly protested British rule.<sup>76</sup> This was not only because the Civil Administration subordinated the minor tribes to the more prominent Fatla and Bani Hasan, but also because the Civil Administration favored the wealthy merchants and landowners in the cities. Hilla's merchants and landlords welcomed the British, hoping for support against the minor tribes of the region, who rented land from them. During the First World War, the minor Sheikhs and Sarkals who served as middlemen between their constituent cultivating tribesmen and the wealthy absentee landlords (mallaks) in the towns, denied their landlords and the Ottoman regime any shares in their revenue from the cultivation of their land with the intention of achieving greater political and economic independence. When the Civil Administration imposed itself on the Hilla division, the POs established themselves as the formal authorities over all transactions between landlords and the Sheikhs and sarkals who rented the land. By maintaining a balance of favor between the mallaks and the sarkals the British POs avoided conflict with the mallaks in the city of Hilla, but also became an obstacle to the political and economic independence of the tribes who

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<sup>76</sup> Major C.F. Mcpherson, "Administration Report, Hillah District, 1917," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 1, 1914-1918*, 448-451.

were already reluctant to rent the land they occupied and to provide the landlord with a share of the revenue made from their gross agricultural produce.<sup>77</sup>

In 1918, the Civil Administration continued to expand its political administration in the Hilla region. By mid-1918, administrative districts within the former Baghdad *wilayet* (Ottoman province) were incorporated into a Hilla administrative division. In July, the Hilla division constituted the districts of Karbala, Diwaniya, Hindiya, Musaiyib, Dagharah, and Afaj.<sup>78</sup> Supporting the PO in the town of Hilla, there was an APO governing each of the 6 districts, with the addition of 3 officers in Karbala.<sup>79</sup> Additionally, due to an uprising by the masses in the neighboring city of Najaf in Autumn 1917, the Civil Administration requested several military garrisons be installed throughout the Middle Euphrates. The Civil Administration's presence expanded in the Hilla division because of the urgent demands of the Indian Army for food and supplies from the region.

#### *Taxation and Resistance in the Hilla Division*

With the assistance of the paramount Sheikhs and former Ottoman revenue officials, the Civil Administration imposed various new forms of taxation upon the local population in Hilla and interfered in local economy. For one, the Civil Administration demanded that the settled agriculturalist tribes present specific amounts of grain exclusively to the British at set prices. For example, in 1919, the PO of the Hilla division forced each tribe to provide a

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<sup>77</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 254.

<sup>78</sup> Captain Tyler, "Report on the Hilla Division, 1918," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 2, 1918*, 119.

<sup>79</sup> Captain Tyler, "Report on the Hilla Division, 1918," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 2, 1918*, 130.

fixed amount of grain exclusively to the British at Rs. 100 (Rupees) per ton; below 50% less than the current market price.<sup>80</sup>

Further, with the help of a locally recruited police force British officials taxed foodstuffs and supplies in the urban markets and taxed the tribes of settled agriculturalists based on estimations of their crop yields. The less prominent Ghanim and Bahaytha tribes protested the Civil Administration's taxation efforts. Like other tribes in the Hilla divisions, the Ghanim and Bahaytha were wheat and barley cultivators, and their tribesmen were employed by a Sheikh or sarkal under contract with an absentee landlord.<sup>81</sup> Under Ottoman rule, the official government share of *Miri* land, or land leased from the government on the condition of agricultural use, varied from district to district. However, because the Ottoman regime was not willing to expend the resources to strictly enforce the collection of its shares in the revenue of agricultural produce after its sale, the tribesmen rarely paid more than a small portion of the official rates. The Civil Administration lowered the official Ottoman rates, which, for example in the Hilla district amounted to 50-60% of the revenue from the sale of the tribe's agricultural produce. Thus, when the British reduced the official *Miri* share rates to 25% in the Diwaniya district where the tribesmen were accustomed to providing little more than 2%, the Sheikhs openly protested. The Bahaytha and Ghanim Sheikhs resisted in paying taxes to the local political officers throughout late 1918 and 1919. In response, the APO of the Diwaniya district arrested the Sheikhs.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Atiyyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 256.

<sup>81</sup> Atiyyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 254.

<sup>82</sup> Atiyyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 256.

*Labor Recruitment in the Hilla Division*

The Civil Administration also expanded its presence in the Hilla division to recruit additional tribesmen to dredge silted-up canals. By dredging silted-up canals, the total area of arable land and the subsequent cultivation of cash crops in the region would increase, and the Civil Administration could then purchase (or confiscate) the foodstuffs for the use of the army, and could tax the revenue from agricultural produce after its sale. The Civil Administration collaborated with British military authorities, British irrigation engineers, and local Sheikhs to recruit tribesmen to help dredge irrigation canals on the Hindiya branch of the Euphrates, with plans to expand agricultural production up to 15,000 acres beyond 1918. The dredging of silted-up canals and subsequent planting of new areas posed the greatest demand for labor power in the division, and often required settled cultivators to abandon their own fields to dredge canals, as demanded by their Sheikhs.<sup>83</sup> According to Captain Macpherson, by May of 1917, in the Hilla district, the British had tried to recruit tribesmen in exchange for wages to dredge the canals on the Hilla branch of the Euphrates to allow for the cultivation of fallow land. However, Macpherson indicated that it was difficult to persuade tribesmen to work because the Civil Administration did not offer them sufficient wages, and because such labor would have required them to abandon their ordinary occupations, families, and communities for extended periods of time. In addition, British irrigation engineers also worked to expand agricultural production in the region by attempting to subsidize semi-nomadic tribesmen and settled cultivators with money to purchase seeds for planting.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Captain Tyler, "Report on the Hilla Division, 1918," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 2, 1918*, 123.

<sup>84</sup> "Administration Report of the Baghdad Wilayat, 1917," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 2, 1918*, 453.

*British Interference in Local Irrigation Practices*

British interference in local irrigation practices and patterns had a harsh impact on some areas where cultivation already thrived. British irrigation engineers conceived that the former Ottoman method of letting all the water through the Hindiya branch in the summer for the planting of rice, and through the Hilla branch in the winter for the planting of wheat and barley, was inefficient, and could be improved by instituting a bi-weekly rotation system that would allow for more than a single annual rice, wheat, and barley harvest. However, this irrigation method proved detrimental to the rice harvest because rice cultivation required a very consistent and sufficient supply of water. The rice fields needed much more water throughout the summer than the bi-weekly rotation system could provide, which resulted in a significantly smaller rice harvest in 1917 than in previous years. Captain Tyler in the Hilla division noted at the end of 1918 that in one case,

Water was insufficient to save all crops irrigated by the canal. [A] Shaikhs' winter crops—an area of about 150 acres—almost entirely perished [...] The Assistant Political Officer took up the matter with the District Irrigation Officer, who personally interested himself in the case.

Though the APO claimed to have tried to compensate the Sheikh by getting more water to him for his summer crop, it perished.<sup>85</sup> Such crop failures due to British interference would have caused serious discontent with British rule amongst those affected settled agriculturalist communities.

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<sup>85</sup> Captain Tyler, "Report on the Hilla Division, 1918," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 2, 1918*, 124.



*Arnold Wilson's Plebiscite, and the Shi'i Clergy in Karbala*

While the British administration of the Hilla division struggled to preserve the loyalty, and to maintain peace among the tribes while it was intensifying tax collection, labor recruitment, and imposing its political authority over local society, the administration faced additional political challenges in the Shi'i shrine city of Karbala. Although the British wouldn't formally incorporate Karbala into the Hilla Division until mid-1918, Major Pulley arrived at the city of Karbala to establish a political administration in the city and the surrounding area in October 1917.<sup>86</sup> Since April 1917, when the local townspeople and Bani Hasan tribe drove out the oppressive Ottoman administration, local Shi'i clerics and leading townspeople governed the city. Pulley recognized this group's authority over local political affairs, but also appointed an executive to the committee who favored British rule. Pulley also paid the members of the committee in exchange for their political support. However, Pulley altered the duties of the committee, limiting them to "questions affecting the lighting, cleanliness, and general welfare of the town." Further, Pulley recruited townspeople from the neighborhoods of each municipal committee member to be police officers. Pulley charged these policemen with inspecting goods leaving and entering the city, assisting revenue officials in the collection of taxes, and forcing imprisoned criminals to perform unpaid labor, which included building and improving Karbala's roads.<sup>87</sup> Although it took control over the committee of local notables that assumed governance over Karbala in the absence of the

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<sup>86</sup> Major Pulley settled few tribal cases because his administration was based in the city of Karbala and because the most numerous tribe in the region, the Bani Hasan was under the authority of the British officer administering the Hindiya district. Major Pulley, "Karbala Administration Report, 1917" in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 1, 1914-1918*, 466-7.

<sup>87</sup> It is unclear from Pulley's writings who formed the Karbala Municipal Committee before the arrival of the British, and whom specifically he appointed as members upon his arrival to the city. Major Pulley, "Karbala Administration Report, 1917" in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 1, 1914-1918*, 467-469.

Ottomans, the Civil Administration had difficulties securing the cooperation of the influential Persian Shi'i clerics with British rule. Throughout 1917, knowing the value of the influence of the clerics, Pulley attempted to design the administration of the district to demonstrate the British "benevolent tolerance" of Islamic institutions and beliefs. Pulley appointed Muslims to staff his political office as clerks.<sup>88</sup> This gesture, along with the wealth and status that the Civil Administration brought to local merchants, resulted in widespread pro-British sentiments among the local notables in Karbala, including even Shi'i clerics.<sup>89</sup> However, since the British invasion of southern Iraq in 1914, there was also a strong layer of opposition to British rule in Karbala, headed by the city's most prominent Shi'i *mujtahid*, Mirza Muhammad Taqi Shirazi.

By late 1918, Sir Arnold Wilson had replaced Sir Percy Cox as head of the Civil Administration in Iraq and proposed a plebiscite in response to the pressure of debates among the rival British War Office, Foreign Office, and India Office in London over the future of Great Britain in Iraq. Wilson designed the plebiscite to confirm the opinions of "educated" men throughout Iraq, who favored British rule. These individuals included wealthy merchants in the cities, Shi'i clerics of Indian origin, and former Ottoman administrators who benefitted from doing business with and working for the British. The plebiscite revealed the vast extent to which British rule was welcomed by merchants, landowners, and politically influential figures throughout occupied Iraq. However, the plebiscite also revealed that opposition to British rule was growing among many Shi'i clerics in Karbala, as well as in Najaf. In January 1919, Shi'i clerics in Karbala led by *mujtahid* Shirazi declared their

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<sup>88</sup> Major Pulley, "Karbala Administration Report, 1917" in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 1, 1914-1918*, 468-9.

<sup>89</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 62.

advocacy for a Muslim king to rule Iraq supported by a constituent national assembly in the form of a petition in response to Arnold Wilson's plebiscite.<sup>90</sup> The principles of the anti-British political movement in Karbala had their roots in the pro-constitutionalist movement during the Persian Revolution.<sup>91</sup>

The Civil Administration refused to forward the petition by the Shi'i clerics and Sayyids in Karbala to London because a British official refused to accept it claiming it did not meet the deadline set for the submission of opinions on self-determination for Iraq. Nevertheless, the rejection of the petition by the British drove mujtahid Shirazi to issue a *fatwa* (an authoritative Islamic legal ruling) in January 1919, which declared governance over Islamic societies by anyone other than a Muslim king unlawful. The Karbala petition and the subsequent *fatwa* issued by mujtahid Shirazi impacted the nearby cities of Baghdad and Kazimain, where other similar petitions were signed by Shi'i and Sunni clerics advocating for the formation of a Pan-Arab nation-state headed by a Muslim king.<sup>92</sup> The petition and *fatwa* from Karbala, as well as the subsequent petitions from Baghdad and Kazimain demonstrated that opposition to British rule in Iraq was growing rapidly, and demonstrated the remarkable influence that the Shi'i clerics of Karbala had on political sentiments elsewhere in Iraq.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 64.

<sup>91</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 55.

<sup>92</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 64-65.

<sup>93</sup> Other international political events would have certainly had an impact on political feeling in Iraq. For example, Iraqis were aware of the politics of the Egyptian Revolution in 1919. Indeed, a bookstore in Najaf was dedicated to the circulation of Egyptian and Syrian newspapers. Abbas Kadhim points out that the same bookstore became the headquarters of the anti-British political movement in Najaf in 1920. Additionally, in 1920 intellectuals in Baghdad in support of the rebellion in the Middle Euphrates published a newspaper which highlighted the similarities between the "Iraqi revolution" and "its sisters, the Irish and Egyptian revolutions." Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 49-50.

The imposition of the Civil Administration in the Hilla Division produced a significant web of local grievances among various tribes and Shi'i clerics in the shrine cities of Karbala and Kazimain. Rigorous tax collection, labor recruitment, and interference in local irrigation practices led to discontent among smaller tribes of the division, who were simultaneously not awarded greater political authority or economic wealth for their cooperation with the Civil Administration. At the same time, by attempting to assume authority over local political affairs in Karbala, the Civil Administration was met with growing opposition led by influential Shi'i clerics in Karbala, who were deeply invested in preventing Great Britain from ruling over Muslim societies in Iraq, Persia, and abroad. This web of local grievances with British rule bore striking parallels to the accumulated frictions between the British and local society in the neighboring Shamiya and Samawa administrative divisions throughout 1917-1919.

*The Civil Administration, Rice Cultivation, and Political Autonomy in Shamiya, 1917-1919*

The Civil Administration imposed itself on the Shamiya region in Autumn 1917. Located just south of Hilla, Shamiya spanned along the valley of the western branch of the Euphrates River, the Hindiya, which split into two additional tributaries known as the Shamiya and Kufa. Shamiya was composed of mostly settled tribesmen who cultivated rice. Rice cultivation required organized labor power and administration for digging small junctions for distributing water, or *tubars*, and a drainage system, called *buzzal*.<sup>94</sup> Prior to the First World War, rice cultivation along the Hindiya flourished, and the Shamiya region attracted migrants seeking more permanent and sustainable agricultural occupations. For

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<sup>94</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 259.

example, tribesmen settled along the Hilla channel of the Euphrates migrated to Shamiya prior to the construction of the Hindiya Barrage because agricultural conditions there were better. The majority of the powerful Khaza'il tribe resided in the Shamiya region, but sections of the Fatla and Bani Hasan as well as smaller tribes resided in Shamiya as well. Unlike the adjacent Hilla division to the north, Shamiya was not as engulfed in inter-tribal conflicts over land ownership in the early twentieth century because the Ottoman regime was not willing to expend the time and resources to encourage the tribes to settle and provide or apply for prescriptive rights to their land as required by the Ottoman Land Code. As a result, the traditional tribal hierarchies of military prowess and still determined the patterns of land ownership, and the Khaza'il remained a unified confederation of tribes.<sup>95</sup>

Local Sayyids also owned large tracts of land cultivated by tribesmen throughout the Shamiya region. This was because the Shi'i clergy in Najaf had immense political influence over the Shi'i tribes in the Middle Euphrates since their gradual conversion to Shi'ism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The clergy awarded the Sayyids a higher place in the local social hierarchy because they were descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and helped the Sayyids to settle on cultivatable land, as well as to eventually marry into tribes with the intention of strengthening the political connection between the tribes and the Shi'i clergy in the cities. The Ottoman authorities also offered political support to the Sayyids, whom they hoped would help establish government control over the tribes. In many cases, the relationship between the tribal cultivators and the Sayyid was abusive, and the economic cleavage between them far greater than between many absentee landlords and peasants in

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<sup>95</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 257.

the neighboring Hilla division. However, some Sayyids who had owned cultivatable land for several generations had adopted traditional tribal practices and served their communities much like a traditional Sheikh, such as Sayyid Muhsin Abu Tabikh, who would play a significant role in leading thousands of tribesmen to rebel against the British in Shamiya in 1920.<sup>96</sup>

Shamiya's main urban centers were Kufa, Shamiya (or Um-Ba'rur), Abu Sukhair, and Najaf. These towns were centers of trade, but Najaf superseded them all in importance because it was the center of Shi'i education in Iraq and housed the most prominent Shi'i clerics of the time. Further, Najaf had close relations with the tribesmen of the Shamiya region such as the Khaza'il, some of whom lived within Najaf itself. Prior to the arrival of the British in 1917, Najaf and the surrounding towns had been in a state of independence from Ottoman rule for two years. In April 1915, the Ottomans dispatched a force to Najaf to capture Ottoman soldiers and tribesmen who deserted the army following the battle of Sh'aiba near the commercial port of Basra. Sh'aiba was a decisive battle in which the British defeated a large force of Ottoman regular army and tribesmen from the Middle Euphrates and southern Iraq. With the support of local leadership and tribesmen, the deserters in Najaf arose in rebellion against the Ottoman force and quickly expelled them.<sup>97</sup> Subsequently, Ottoman administrative authorities abandoned Najaf, and the heads of the four quarters, or *mahallas* of the city, a combination of Sheikhs and Sayyids, assumed control of Najaf. Although mahallas were not unique to Najaf, in the absence of a centralized government authority it was the most important organized social group that could provide security to

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<sup>96</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 258.

<sup>97</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 80.

urban residents, much like a tribe. According to Batatu, typically “the groups that belonged to different faiths, sects, or classes or that were of different ethnic or tribal origin tended to live in separate *mahallahs*.” The significance of the mahalla in Najaf can be understood by the fact that when Ottoman officials fled Najaf in 1915, the Buraq mahalla produced its own constitution.<sup>98</sup>

The Civil Administration initially sent only a handful of POs, APOs, and administrative clerks to Shamiya. Like the Hilla region to the north, Shamiya was significant to the British for its cities where the Civil Administration could purchase supplies, as well as foodstuffs like rice that were traditionally brought in from the agricultural areas to be sold for profit. The Civil Administration also sought to expand rice cultivation by forcing tribesmen to dredge additional irrigation canals and sought to intensify the collection of taxes. However, because the local population lived in a state of virtual political autonomy since 1915, the Civil Administration had difficulties attempting to step in and assume authority over local political affairs, and to intensify taxation and labor recruitment in a region which experienced immense economic dislocation due to the Anglo-Ottoman conflict. Also, the Civil Administration initially faced significant opposition from among the heads of the four quarters in Najaf, and eventually from the Shi'i clerics. Like the anti-British responses to Arnold Wilson's plebiscite in Karbala in 1918, by 1919 several influential clerics in Najaf declared their advocacy for the formation of an Arab state independent of foreign

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<sup>98</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 19-20.

interference, ruled by an Arab king, stretching from the Ottoman province of Mosul in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south.<sup>99</sup>

*The Arrival of the Civil Administration in Shamiya*

PO Captain Balfour arrived in Shamiya in Autumn 1917 and established an administrative outpost in Najaf which would serve as the headquarters of the Shamiya division and sub-district. Adjacent to the district of Karbala, the British administrative boundaries of the Shamiya division included the towns of Shamiya, Kufa, Abu Sukhair, Shinafiya, and Najaf. When British civil authorities arrived in the Shamiya region in 1917, they attempted to assume authority over local political affairs. Before the arrival of British civil authorities at the Shamiya division, the Civil Administration recognized several prominent Sheikhs as “[British] Government Agents,” responsible for running the affairs of their respective towns in the absence of Ottoman and British administrative authorities. For example, in the town of Shamiya, the two principal Sheikhs of the Khaza’il tribe administered local affairs. In Najaf, the British recognized the leaders of the four quarters of the city: Sayyid Mahdi ibn Syid Salman, Haji 'Atiyya Abu Qulal and Kadhum Subi of the Zugurt tribe, alongside Haji Sa'ad ibn Haji Radhi of the Shummurt tribe. However, when he and other civil authorities arrived at the division, Captain Balfour removed the Sheikhs and Sayyids from their seats as political authorities over their respective communities, and assigned them as advisers on “tribal matters,” public sanitation, and trade.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 63-64.

<sup>100</sup> The towns of Abu Sukhair and Mushkab were being run by an associate of the Khaza’il tribe and in the latter, leadership from the Fatla tribe. Captain Balfour, “Shamiyah District. Administration Report, 1917” in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 1, 1914-1918*, 486.



*Food Shortages, Price Inflation, Taxation and Unrest in Najaf*

The marginalization of the heads of the four quarters of Najaf coincided with immense price inflation on foodstuffs and supplies due to the demands of the Indian Army and the famine around Baghdad. Further, the British imposed taxes on Najaf, which had lived tax-free in the absence of the Ottoman authorities since April 1915. The reintroduction of a house tax, water tax, a building tax, and a slaughter-house tax, among others impacted the city's poorest residents the most. The combination of poor socio-economic conditions produced by the war and British occupation, as well the British removal of the leaders of the four quarters of the city from administrative control led to a revolt in Najaf in November 1917.<sup>101</sup>

A Sheikh from the nomadic 'Aniza tribe seeking a large amount of grain for his tribe arrived at Najaf in early November 1917. The APO in Najaf, Hamid Khan, granted the Sheikh the purchase privately, but word spread, and the price of cereal grains increased enormously. Another immediate attempt by a Sheikh of the nomadic 'Amarat tribe to purchase and load grain onto around one thousand camels led to the townspeople attacking and the tribesmen and looting their encampments outside of the city. Captain Balfour traveled to Najaf to settle the dispute, but the town arose in protest again after Captain Balfour put pressure on one of the Sheikhs of the city's four mahallas to allow the 'Aniza tribe to purchase grain in Najaf's market. Subsequently townspeople among the protestors raided the British administrative office in Najaf. In response, Balfour and Khan ordered the four leaders of Najaf to secure the return of the loot from the British offices and from the encampments of the 'Aniza tribesmen. Sheikh Haji 'Atiyya Abu Qulal refused and incited

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<sup>101</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 229.

additional protest by his constituent tribesmen and the masses, and in nearby Kufa and Abu Sukhair, the local townspeople looted British administrative offices. In response to the uprisings in Najaf, Kufa, and Abu Sukhair, High Commissioner of the Civil Administration Sir Percy Cox established military garrisons at Hilla, Kifl, Kufa, and Abu Sukhair throughout December. In January 1918, Haji 'Atiyya Abu Qulal incited several of his tribesmen to fire upon an Anglo-Indian force training just beyond Najaf's walls. The Civil Administration retaliated by imposing a fine of 500 rifles and Rps. 50,000 to be collected from the townspeople, and by ceasing to issue monthly allowances to the leaders of the four quarters of Najaf.<sup>102</sup>

Additionally, Sir Percy Cox requested another Anglo-Indian battalion be sent to the Shamiya division to occupy Kufa. Captain Marshall arrived in Najaf in February to rescind the allowances to the paramount Sheikhs. Subsequently, on March 19, 1918, a group of men from the recently formed *Jam'iyat al Nahadha al Islamiya* (the Islamic Upheaval Society), disguised as policemen, assassinated Captain Marshall. In response, the British military blockaded Najaf, cutting off its supply of food and water before occupying it in May.<sup>103</sup> At the end of May, British civil and military authorities executed eleven men accused of planning Marshall's murder, and deported around one hundred suspected Najafi accomplices to India.<sup>104</sup>

The rebellion in Najaf failed in eradicating the British for several reasons, including the lack of political support from a mix of Shi'i clerics, Sayyids, and wealthy merchants who

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<sup>102</sup> Atiyyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 228-230. See also, Arnold T. Wilson, "Review of the Civil Administration of the Occupied Territories of Al 'Iraq, 1914-1918," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 1, 1914-1918*, 41-42.

<sup>103</sup> "Annual Administration Report, Shamiyah Division," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 2, 1918*, 69-70.

<sup>104</sup> Atiyyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 230.

were dissatisfied with the heads of Najaf's four quarters. The pro-British Shi'i clerics were mainly of Indian origin, and benefitted from British rule because the Civil Administration appointed them to help administer and facilitate monetary charities intended for them from India.<sup>105</sup> Further, the threat of starvation by the British blockade, as well as the opposition to the rebellion among Shi'i clerics in Najaf, including the leading mujtahid Sayyid Kadhim Yazdi discouraged the tribes of Shamiya outside the city from lending support to Najaf's residents.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, the clash between Najafi residents and the Civil Administration, as well as the Anglo-Indian militarization of the Shamiya division between late 1917 and early 1918 deepened local resentment towards the British. Further, Arnold Wilson's plebiscite revealed growing opposition to British rule in Najaf. Throughout 1919, leading Najafi Shi'i clerics and other local leaders expressed desires for the formation of an independent state stretching from southern Kurdistan in the former Ottoman Mosul province to the Persian Gulf. These demands echoed the propaganda of nationalist-minded intellectuals, ex-Ottoman military officers, and notables in Karbala and Baghdad, who simultaneously argued for the establishment of an Iraqi state modeled after the emergent state of Syria that was headed by ex-Ottoman military officers and Amir Faisal, son of the Sharif Husayn of Mecca. The petitions and continuing anti-British rhetoric by the Najafi mujtahids played a significant role in spreading anti-British sentiments to the tribes and even those Sheikhs who benefitted from British patronage throughout 1919 and early 1920.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 62.

<sup>106</sup> More significantly, the leading mujtahid in Najaf, Sayyid Kadhim Yazdi, expressed his opposition to the Najafi rebellion privately to the British. Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 231-2.

<sup>107</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 64-65.

*British Interference in Shamiya's Irrigation Patterns*

The Anglo-Indian militarization of the Shamiya division and the lack of political unity among the Najafi clerics, local tribes, and townspeople in the aftermath of the Najaf uprising enabled the Civil Administration to intensify the impact of its administrative machinery on local society. The British civil authorities continued to remit taxes from the prominent Khaza'il Sheikhs in exchange for the protection of telegraph lines, railways, and for their assistance in collecting taxes from the local population. Yet, disaffection with British rule eventually spread among various settled tribesmen throughout 1918 due to the British interference in the water distribution between the Hindiya and Hilla branches of the Euphrates. Like agricultural production in the Hilla division, the introduction of a bi-weekly rotation of the water supply between the Hilla and Hindiya branches of the Euphrates proved detrimental to Shamiya's rice cultivation in 1917-1919. Before the British occupied Shamiya in late 1917, a satisfactory rice yield for the division amounted to 90,000 tons. However, the production over late 1917 amounted to only 600 tons and improved to only 20,000 in 1918.<sup>108</sup> For example, the effect of the shift in water distribution resulted in one Sheikh's production of only an eighth of their normal annual rice yield. The PO of Shamiya noted, "The Shamiya population were and are naturally gravely suspicious of anything suggested by the Irrigation Department. Indeed, the peaceful individual might question the wisdom of a policy that deprived him in one year of 99 ½ his income."<sup>109</sup>

With the intention of setting up an administrative machinery to extract local resources for the use of the Indian Army and to combat famine in northern Iraq, the

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<sup>108</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 259.

<sup>109</sup> "Annual Administration Report, Shamiyah Division" in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 2, 1918*, 78-80.

imposition of the Civil Administration in the Shamiya region during 1917-1919 ignited a series of conflicts between the Civil Administration and tribal rice cultivators, townspeople, and Shi'i clerics in Karbala. The British attempts to assume political authority over local political affairs, impose taxes, and purchase foodstuffs despite widespread shortages clashed with Najaf's recognized heads of the city, who had lived tax-free and autonomous of foreign rule for two years prior. Although the Civil Administration initially received political support from the powerful Shi'i clergy in Najaf, pressure from nationalist-minded Shi'i clerics in Karbala led by the influential mujtahid Shirazi produced increasing opposition to British rule among the Shi'i clergy elsewhere in the Middle Euphrates throughout 1919. Further, though the Civil Administration was able to acquire an Anglo-Indian force to occupy the division and discourage any further local uprisings after the assassination of Captain Marshall, local resentment among the settled tribes grew due to interference in local irrigation practices, which made rice production suffer throughout 1917-1919. This web of grievances bore striking parallels to disaffection with British rule in the neighboring Hilla division and would also reflect local grievances in the southern Samawa administrative division as the Civil Administration intensified their efforts at establishing political predominance and extracting local resources and labor power.

*The Civil Administration and the Nomadic Tribes of Samawa, 1917-1919*

As a British administrative division, Samawa extended for about 120 miles along both east and west banks of the Euphrates River, bordering the divisions of Shamiya, Basra, Nasiriya, and Hilla. Initially, the administrative division included the districts of Rumaiitha, Samawa, and Shinafiya. The population of Samawa was mainly composed of tribes, most of

which collectively constituted sections of the Bani Huchaim confederation, and each of which had its own Sheikh or group of Sheikhs. The land was once widely cultivated but deteriorated in recent decades because of a lack of water due to the silting up of canals in the northern part of the Middle Euphrates.<sup>110</sup> As a result, the region's most important irrigation canal silted up, and without an organized force of labor power to dredge the canal and plant seed, agricultural production nearly ceased altogether. As a result, by the outset of the First World War most of the local tribes had become nomadic shepherds. Further, because they were constantly on the move they lived effectively beyond the control of the Ottoman regime, free from taxation and from the kind of government interference in land relations that undermined tribal traditions in the neighboring Shamiya region, but especially in the Hilla region since the mid to late nineteenth century.<sup>111</sup> Because of this, the task of establishing political authority over the tribes was immensely difficult for Great Britain's Civil Administration. In exchange for monthly cash allowances, the Civil Administration relied heavily on local Sheikhs for political support, assistance in imposing taxes on the local population, in reducing the number of firearms possessed by each tribe, and in forcing their tribesmen to perform labor for the construction of a railway between the towns of Samawa and Nasiriya. The Civil Administration had also hoped that by loaning tribesmen cash to purchase seed, the tribesmen would settle and begin cultivation. In turn, the Civil Administration attempted to tax the tribesmen based on estimations of their crop yields. However, this initiative drove many of the tribes and their Sheikhs into poverty because they could not afford to make returns on loans made to them by British authorities. During 1918-

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<sup>110</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 250.

<sup>111</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 251-252.

1919, several sections of the Bani Huchaim confederation resisted the intensification of the Civil Administration's taxation efforts, but often faced imprisonment and aerial bombings by the Royal Air Force. The conflict between the local tribes and the Civil Administration culminated in a massive rebellion by several sections of the Bani Huchaim confederation in late June 1920, which would spread north along the Euphrates River valley through the summer to the Shamiya and Hilla divisions.

### *The Sheikhs and Labor Recruitment*

British civil authorities arrived at the Samawa division in November 1917. Initially, the local Sheikhs cooperated with the Civil Administration. When the PO arrived in 1917 he paid monthly allowances to local Sheikhs in exchange for labor from their tribesmen and assistance with tax collection. The PO also formed municipalities with local councils under the authority of APOs. In 1918, Captain Lulin reported that the municipal councils were inexperienced, but useful, and primarily responsible for managing public sanitation works because of the vulnerability of the population to small-pox, cholera, pneumonia, and the Spanish Influenza.<sup>112</sup>

Although they initially offered political and monetary incentives to local Sheikhs, British civil authorities in Samawa had immense difficulties in transforming the Sheikhs into agents of the Civil Administration. The introduction of forced and poorly compensated labor for the building of railway lines between the towns of Nasiriya and Samawa created widespread discontent amongst the Sheikhs and their constituent tribesmen. Further, the

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<sup>112</sup> Captain Lulin, "Administration Report of the Samawah Division for the Year 1918," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 2, 1918*, 55-8.

British forced the Sheikhs to provide a certain number of tribesmen for labor. Atiyah notes that in late 1918 for example, around one thousand tribesmen from the Rumaitha district worked on the railway construction project daily. Forcing the tribesmen to perform labor for railway construction had several negative impacts on the tribesmen and their Sheikhs. For one, by being called away to help construct the railways, tribesmen couldn't tend to their own livestock or fields. Further, working conditions were abusive as the heat was unbearable, the British officers unsympathetic, and wages incredibly low (4 annas per day).<sup>113</sup> The PO of the Samawa division Captain Lulin noted in 1918 that forced labor created widespread discontent among the tribes in the Samawa division: "There is no doubt that this labour question has been a great cause of dissatisfaction amongst the tribes. It has caused discontent at a time when we particularly want to allay such a feeling."<sup>114</sup>

#### *Tax Collection and the Royal Air Force*

The imposition of taxes sparked outrage among the tribes as well, who had formerly paid very little in taxes to the Ottoman regime prior to the arrival of British authorities. For example, in May 1918, the Jarib tribe of the Bani Huchaim confederation refused to allow British authorities to estimate the yield of their crop production, which would enable the British to determine the amount owed to the government in cash after sale. In response to their refusal, British aircraft from the Royal Air Force bombed the villages of the Jarib.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, the Sufran tribe of the Bani Huchaim refused to allow the British APO to estimate their crop yields and tax them accordingly, which resulted in less than satisfactory revenue

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<sup>113</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 253.

<sup>114</sup> Captain Lulin, "Administration Report of the Samawah Division for the Year 1918," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 2, 1918*, 58.

<sup>115</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 252.



figures in the region for the Civil Administration. In September 1919, the APO demanded that the Sheikh of the Sufran present himself at the town of Samawa to answer for his non-cooperation with the Civil Administration. The Sheikh refused to present himself, and in October British aircraft from the Royal Air Force base south of the Middle Euphrates bombed the Sufran's villages of around 1,200 people. Subsequently, local British administrative personnel dispatched the recalcitrant Sheikh's brother to assume leadership of the Sufran and to impose a fine of 500 rifles on the tribesmen. However, when the pro-British Sheikh's accompanying policemen tried to do so, tribesmen of the Sufran killed two of them, and the remaining policemen fled. Due to a temporary lack of access to aircraft, the Civil Administration could not impose further demands upon the Sufran. As a result, tribes neighboring the Sufran, including the Barakat and the Antar, began to resist crop yield assessments, tax collection, and fines imposed by the Civil Administration. It wasn't until May 1920 that the Royal Air Force retaliated by bombing the Sufran villages for several days. The British bombers killed an estimated twenty men, women, and children, as well as around one hundred sheep.<sup>116</sup>

*The Consolidation of Samawa and Diwaniya, and the Disarming of the Tribes*

One of the central aims of the Civil Administration in Samawa was to disarm the tribes of their rifles. The British pursued this policy in the Samawa division because when the Civil Administration arrived, the confederation of tribes was more resistant to British attempts to govern local society than in the neighboring administrative divisions. The tribes of Samawa had lived almost completely politically autonomous of the Ottoman regime and avoided the

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<sup>116</sup> Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, 245.

imposition of the Anglo-Indian military machine during WWI. Because of this, the traditional tribal structure and customs determined patterns of everyday life. Tribal society was more cohesive in terms of the relationship between Sheikhs and tribesmen, and property had not yet emerged as a dominant base of social stratification with which the British could have exploited to turn Sheikhs into government agents.

In early 1919, the Civil Administration incorporated the Diwaniya district of the Hilla division into the Samawa division to form a new Diwaniya division, which resulted in the Samawa division becoming its own sub-district. The central reason for doing so was to extend the close form of administrative control in Diwaniya to the Samawa division. Further, the Civil Administration had immense success in reducing the number of rifles held by the local tribes in the Diwaniya district, a policy which they hoped would have similar success in Samawa. In March 1919, with the support of the Sheikhs of the Diwaniya district the PO attempted to persuade the Sheikhs of the Bani Huchaim in the Samawa district to surrender their arms and dismantle their military forts. Because this was the first large-scale effort to disarm any tribes in the Samawa district, the British offered economic incentives to Sheikhs for collecting arms for the British. Major Daly noted in 1919:

This being the first movement of its kind, sanction was accorded to expenditure of Rs. 35,000 as compensation. The Arab who sells his rifle, according to tribal etiquette, loses caste, and therefore the sum was distributed to Shaikhs and Sarkals who collected the arms, as a reward for their obedience and not the inconsiderable labour involved. The cost to the Government, therefore, was roughly, Rs. 1-5 per rifle not an expensive rate for the results obtained.

The British reportedly collected over 10,000 rifles in 1919.<sup>117</sup> However, throughout the year several Sheikhs refused to give up their firearms, and in response took an oath amongst

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<sup>117</sup> Captain Daly, "Administration Report for Diwaniyah, 1919," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 4, 1919*, 321.

themselves to resist any further disarmament efforts by British authorities. The collaboration between the Sheikhs also prompted several Sheikhs to disengage their tribesmen from performing labor for British railway construction. In response, the local PO arrested the Sheikhs, and requested the Royal Air Force bomb their tribes before the tribesmen could attack the town of Rumaitha. The bombing of the tribes outside of Rumaitha led to the surrender of several thousand rifles in the Rumaitha district alone.<sup>118</sup>

The imposition of the Civil Administration in the Samawa region produced a significant aggregate conflict with local tribal society over the course of 1917-1919. The Civil Administration's efforts at turning the local Sheikhs into government agents failed to outweigh the resistance produced by the introduction of crop yield assessments, taxation, forced labor, and the confiscation of rifles. The support of the Royal Air Force enabled the Civil Administration to intensify its policies during 1917-1919. Yet, in the wake of escalating anti-British political groups in the urban areas of the Middle Euphrates, peaceful political demonstrations, localized conflicts with other disaffected communities in the Middle Euphrates throughout the first half of 1920, a tribal revolt broke out against the British at the town of Rumaitha on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1920 when British civil authorities arrested a local Sheikh for his refusal to pay off an agricultural loan. The rebellion spread to the tribes of the Shamiya and Hilla administrative divisions throughout the summer, and paved the way for nationalist-minded Sheikhs, Sayyids, and Shi'i clergy in Hilla and Shamiya divisions to establish a local government independent of British interference.

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<sup>118</sup> Captain Daly, "Administration Report for Diwaniyah, 1919," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 4, 1919*, 320.

### Chapter 3: The Great Rebellion in the Middle Euphrates, 1920

#### *Introduction*

In April 1920, the principal allied powers during the First World War met at San Remo, Italy to determine the political future of the former Ottoman territories stretching from the Arabian Peninsula to the Persian Gulf. In early May, word reached Iraq that the newly established League of Nations awarded Great Britain a mandate to rule Iraq while preparing it for self-rule.<sup>119</sup> The awarding of the mandate to Great Britain exacerbated existing discontent with British rule among various segments of local society in the Middle Euphrates, including Sheikhs, Sayyids, Shi'i clerics. The mandate led to political demonstrations protesting British rule in Hilla, Najaf, Karbala and other towns in the Middle Euphrates. Sheikhs, chief Sayyids, and Shi'i clerics in Karbala, Najaf and the Shamiya region organized an armed rebellion against the British and made plans for the creation of an Iraqi state independent of foreign rule.<sup>120</sup> Meanwhile, on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1920, a tribal revolt broke out against the British at the town of Rumaitha in the Diwaniya division (formerly Samawa) when British civil authorities arrested a local Sheikh for his refusal to pay off an agricultural loan. The uprising at Rumaitha was a result of the abusive treatment of local society by British civil and military authorities since the outset of the occupation of Samawa in Autumn 1917. Soon after the Rumaitha uprising, the tribes of the Shamiya and Hilla divisions revolted

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<sup>119</sup> One of the first steps towards implementing the mandate was to prepare local Arabs to eventually run the nascent Iraqi state. Yaphe, "The View from Basra," 29.

<sup>120</sup> The thesis acknowledges the role of intellectuals, notables, and expatriate Ottoman military officers in Baghdad and Syria in the provocation of anti-British political upheaval throughout Iraq, but remains focused on the actors and events in the Middle Euphrates during the rebellion. Indeed, expatriate officers in Syria and urban intellectuals and notables in Baghdad played a part in the development of nationalist consciousness in British-occupied Iraq, and "contributed to the ideological framing of the revolution and provided some of the tribes with valuable awareness and a sense of nationalist direction." However, none of those intellectuals and notables in Baghdad, and few if any expatriate officers in Syria participated in the conflict in the Middle Euphrates. See Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 6.

against the British. Although the spiritual and political leadership of the rebellion resided in Najaf and Karbala, the fighting took place in the tribal areas and smaller towns. The spread of the rebellion throughout the Middle Euphrates and to other parts of Iraq was a result of the cruel retaliatory tactics by the British for the rebellion at Rumaitha. The spread of the rebellion was also a result of the oppressive policies of the Civil Administration in the Middle Euphrates since 1917. The Civil Administration's forced labor practices, interference in local irrigation patterns, tax collection, and the process of displacing local leaders and assuming authority over local political affairs during 1917-1920 set the stage for the rebellion and the political upheaval in Najaf and Karbala. As Gertrude Bell correctly said of the rebellion at Rumaitha and the spread of the conflict, "the ice broke at the thinnest place."<sup>121</sup>

In the third week of July, tribes in the Shamiya and Hilla divisions of the Middle Euphrates revolted against the British. The rebellion also spread briefly to the Upper Euphrates around Falluja, the Diyala administrative division east of Baghdad, and to the Lower Euphrates, but only for a limited time.<sup>122</sup> As many as around 130,000 tribesmen participated in the fighting at one time, which lasted roughly from June to the end of November.<sup>123</sup> The rebellion succeeded in eradicating many of the British civil authorities

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<sup>121</sup> Gertrude Bell to her father, 12 September 1920; in Elizabeth Burgoyne, *Gertrude Bell: From Her Personal Papers*, vol. 2, 1914-1926 (United Kingdom: Ernest Benn, 1961): 163.

<sup>122</sup> This thesis acknowledges the spread of the rebellion to other parts of Iraq, but remains focused on the rebellion in the Middle Euphrates because the design of British rule in the Middle Euphrates since the end of the First World War was specific to the landscape, and thus produced a unique set of conditions which created anti-British sentiments and led to a massive tribal rebellion. The spread of the rebellion to the Upper Euphrates for example occurred almost by coincidence, when Sheikh Dari of the Zoba tribe killed the local Political Officer Colonel Leachman, who was widely considered to be the British officer most cruel to the local population during the First World War and post-war occupation. Abbas Kadhim writes that "The killing of Leachman was in line with the tribal honor tradition. He abused the shaykh of the Zoba tribe and lost his life for it. At his trial, Dari and his lawyers never spoke about the revolution or mentioned any reasons for the killing other than Leachman's abuse." Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 80.

<sup>123</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 72.

from the Middle Euphrates, which meant the suspension of tax collection, direct administrative control, and forced labor practices among others. Further, because of the flight of the civil administrators and successive military victories over the British, rebel leadership in Shamiya and Hilla installed a provisional independent government in Karbala to rule the areas liberated from the British. As well, local governments were established in Najaf and Abu Sukhair.<sup>124</sup>

The Civil Administration and Anglo-Indian military garrisons under General Aylmer L. Haldane were unprepared for the rebellion. The speedy reduction of military strength in the Mesopotamian theater after the armistice with Turkey in 1918 left the Indian armies of occupation too unprepared for any potential military conflict that might arise, including with Turkey, the Bolsheviks in Persia, and local society. Further, most remaining Indian infantry in Iraq after the armistice were untrained and spread thinly across the countryside. In June 1920, Anglo-Indian forces in Iraq amounted to approximately 60,000 troops, of whom 26,000 were non-combatants.<sup>125</sup> On July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1920, only 500 British and 2500 Indian troops could respond to the revolt at Rumaitha, to which only one battalion could reach in twenty-four hours. The British ultimately succeeded in defeating the rebellion with additional infantry battalions from India and the Royal Air Force.<sup>126</sup> The rebellion was not executed cohesively because those tribes that did revolt did so at different times, though they usually had similar motivations for doing so. In late July, the rebel tribes launched an offensive north towards the cities of Hilla and Baghdad that lacked an effective military tactic as well as an

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<sup>124</sup> Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, 336.

<sup>125</sup> Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia*, 64.

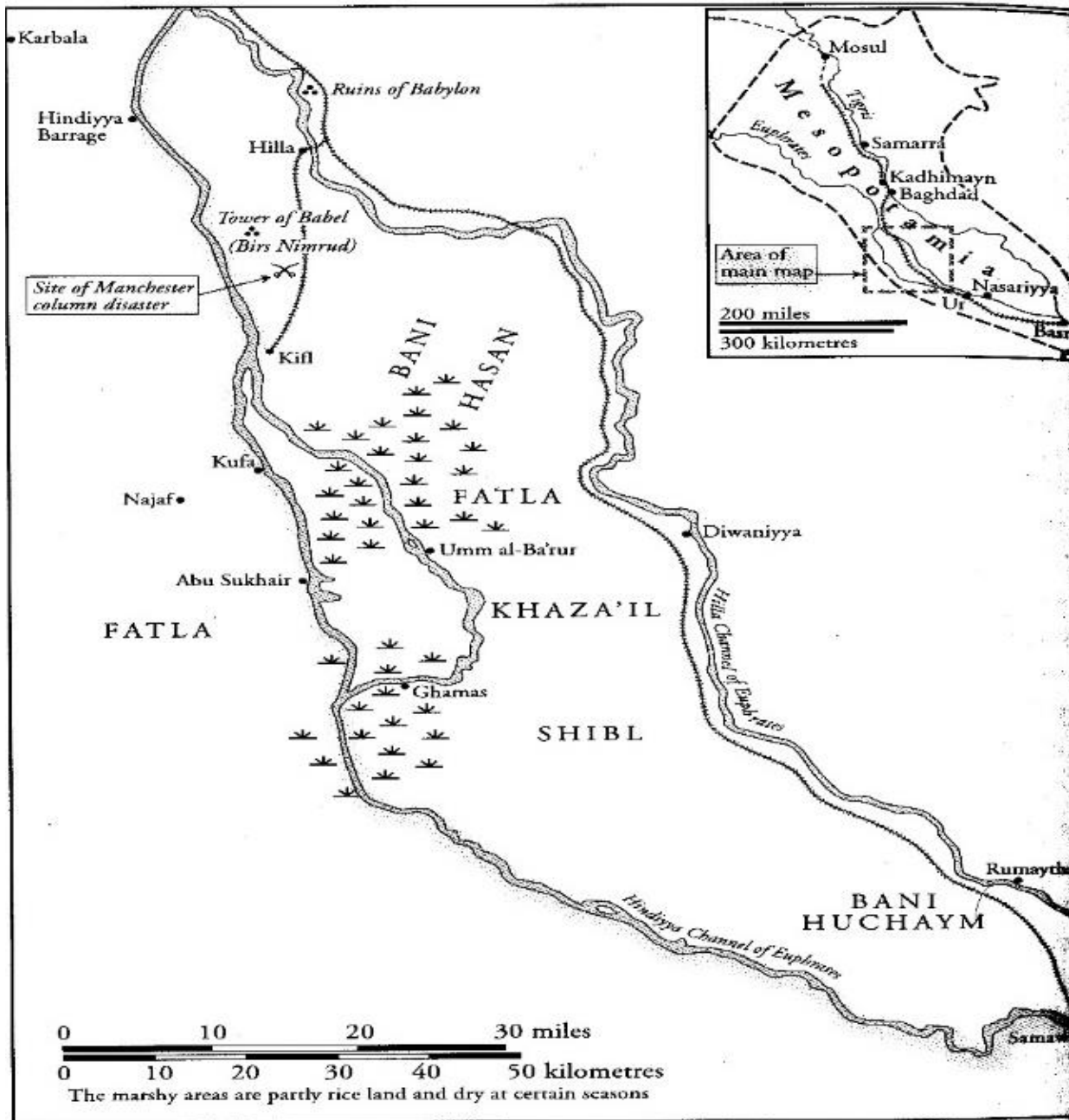
<sup>126</sup> Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia*, 12, 20, 72.

adequate supply of food and water. Further, the amassing of Royal Air Force squadrons and infantry battalions on the Lower Euphrates turned the conflict in favor of the British.<sup>127</sup>

When many of the rebel tribes and the shrine cities had surrendered by the end of October, British civil and military authorities were left to govern the Middle Euphrates while high-ranking British officials under Sir Percy Cox formed a new central Iraqi government in Baghdad. British officials in Baghdad would not appoint Arab governors with British advisers to rule the new administrative provinces in the Middle Euphrates until 1922. When Indian battalions retook control of the Middle Euphrates and the other rebel areas throughout September and October of 1920, British civil and military authorities resumed tax collection, and imposed fines on tribes and urban populations in cash and in weapons for their participation in the rebellion. The tribes felt the impact of the British retaliation the most, as British infantry and Royal Air Force squadrons persistently bombed them, burning their homes, their land, and killing their livestock.

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<sup>127</sup> In August, the British Secretary of War Winston Churchill ordered the dispatch of infantry battalions from India to Basra. By the third week of September, the infantry reinforcements from India, in addition to cavalry and Royal Air Force squadrons were assembling at the town of Nasiriya in the Muntafiq division south of the Rumaiitha garrison. Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, 371.



THE MIDDLE EUPHRATES REGION, EPICENTRE OF THE 1920 REVOLUTION, SHOWING THE PRINCIPAL TRIBAL AREAS

<sup>128</sup> Taken from Ian Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates: The British Occupation of Iraq and the Great Arab Revolt* (London: Saqi Books, 2014), 254.



*The Arrest of Sha'lan Abu al-Chon and the Revolt at Rumaitha*

The event that set off the large-scale tribal rebellion throughout the Middle Euphrates occurred at the town of Rumaitha, in the Diwaniya division in late June 1920. On June 25<sup>th</sup>, Lieutenant Hyatt, the APO in Rumaitha, reported to his superior PO Major Daly that the Sheikh of the Dhawalim section of the Bani Huchaim confederation, Sha'lan Abu al-Chon, failed to pay back the British Rs. 800 (Rupees) for a loan intended to finance cultivation. Daly ordered Hyatt to arrest Sheikh Sha'lan, but upon detaining him, several of his tribesmen broke him out of jail and killed the Arab guards employed by the British.<sup>129</sup> On July 1<sup>st</sup>, the Dhawalim tribesmen destroyed junctions in the railway lines to the near south and north of Rumaitha. Throughout early July, several thousand additional tribesmen from the Bani Huchaim confederation joined the Dhawalim in fighting the British.<sup>130</sup>

In the first two weeks of July, the tribes in the Diwaniya division drove British civil and military personnel to barricade themselves at the garrison in the Rumaitha sub-district. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, after the arrival of few Indian reinforcements, the Rumaitha garrison amounted to only 4 British officers, 300 Indian soldiers, and around 200 Indian non-combatants, all of whom were under the leadership of an APO and Captain Bragg of the 99<sup>th</sup> Infantry.<sup>131</sup> The rebel tribes besieged the garrison for sixteen days and succeeded in cutting off its flow of food and supplies. The siege inflicted around one hundred and fifty British and Indian casualties before a large Anglo-Indian military column under Brigadier General Coningham

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<sup>129</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 69-70.

<sup>130</sup> Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia*, 73-75.

<sup>131</sup> Sir Arnold T. Wilson, *Mesopotamia, 1917-1920: Clash of Loyalties, a Personal and Historical Record* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930): 278.

arrived from Baghdad to relieve the garrison on July 20th.<sup>132</sup> The reinforcements lifted the siege, but also evacuated the authorities of the Civil Administration north to the town of Diwaniya because of persistent attacks by the rebel tribes. The Anglo-Indian military columns, British civil and military officers, and Indian non-combatants reached the town of Diwaniya on July 25<sup>th</sup> after suffering additional casualties from attacks by rebel tribes along the way.<sup>133</sup> The evacuation of the Rumaitha garrison was a significant victory for the tribes and also revealed the vulnerability of the Civil Administration, “whose Political Officers, scattered over a wide area, had only diplomacy, promises and money to bargain with.”<sup>134</sup>

The siege of Rumaitha isolated British civil authorities to the military garrison. Additionally, other APOs and military personnel in nearby towns and sub-districts of Diwaniya remained cut off from Anglo-Indian reinforcements, sometimes with only the fragile support of a small force of locally recruited Arab levies, gendarmerie, and police. Captain Priestly-Evans at the town of Khan Jadwal northwest of the town of Diwaniya was cut off by rebel tribes and killed in late July. Also, PO Captain Webb remained isolated after the Rumaitha siege with a small force of Arab levies at ‘Afaj, a small-town east of Diwaniya. Though rebel tribes surrounded ‘Afaj, Webb eventually joined the columns retreating from Rumaitha to Diwaniya and later, the city of Hilla.<sup>135</sup> By late August, the tribes had driven the British out of the region surrounding the towns of Diwaniya, Samawa, and Rumaitha on the Middle and Lower Euphrates for over a month. Only the British garrison at the town of

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<sup>132</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 73-74.

<sup>133</sup> Wilson, *Mesopotamia, 1917-1920*, 278.

<sup>134</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 341.

<sup>135</sup> Wilson, *Mesopotamia, 1917-1920*, 281.

Samawa remained, though it was under daily siege by rebel tribes and nearly out of food and supplies by the second week of September.<sup>136</sup>

While the siege of Rumaitha was underway, cruel retaliatory tactics by the British incited further hostilities among additional tribes in the Diwaniya division. When an Anglo-Indian force approached a village near the town of Samawa to investigate reported attacks on the local marketplace by the Abu Hassan tribe, the soldiers began to attack the local populace and burn the tribe's village. During the attack, over fifteen hundred tribesmen arrived to protect the village, and drove off the Anglo-Indian force. The atrocities committed upon the village outside of Samawa are significant because they had the effect of not only provoking hundreds more tribesmen in the region around Samawa and Rumaitha, but they also helped provoke the Sheikhs of the prominent Fatla and Khaza'il tribes in the Shamiya and Hilla divisions to revolt against the British.<sup>137</sup>

*Political Upheaval in Shamiya and Hilla, and the Spread of the Rebellion*

Although the rebellion remained isolated to Rumaitha for two weeks, disaffected tribal Sheikhs, chief Sayyids, and Shi'i clerics and Shamiya and Hilla had been organizing a revolt against the British since the announcement of the British Mandate in early May. The awarding of the mandate to Great Britain to rule Iraq intensified anti-British sentiments among the Shi'i clerics in Najaf, many of who had called for an independent Islamic government for the former Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul since as early as 1918. Peaceful political demonstrations by lower-class townspeople protesting British

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<sup>136</sup> Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, 365.

<sup>137</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 73.

rule had occurred in Najaf and Karbala throughout 1919 and early 1920. Similarly, in May 1920 near the city of Hilla, several smaller tribes along the Hindiya branch of the Euphrates launched an anti-British propaganda campaign in response to the British policy of strengthening the political and economic power of the more paramount sheikhs. The leading Sheikh of the Bani Hasan, Amran al-Hajj Sa'dun, who formerly ruled the town of Hindiya as an agent of the Civil Administration, reported the inflammatory propaganda of the tribes to the local British PO. However, in late May the Shi'i clerics in Karbala led by mujtahid Shirazi put pressure on the Hindiya Sheikhs to sign a petition declaring their support for an exclusively Arab Islamic government to rule Iraq, independent from British interference.<sup>138</sup> Sheikh Amran al-Hajj Sa'dun signed the petition, which demonstrated that the Shi'i clerical establishment in Karbala had immense political influence over the local tribes, and that the necessity of an Islamic government for Iraq was more important to even those Sheikhs that benefitted politically and economically from British rule. The smaller tribes who led the anti-British propaganda campaign signed the same petition and declared their solidarity with the Shi'i clerics in Karbala.

Mujtahid Shirazi and his followers encouraged anti-British political demonstrations in Najaf and Karbala. For example, sometime between May and June, mujtahid Shirazi distributed a noteworthy announcement to encourage protests and the anti-British meetings being held in Baghdad, and in the towns and cities of the Middle Euphrates:

You brethren in Baghdad and Kazimayn have agreed to hold meetings and to attend peaceful demonstrations [...] It is obligatory upon you and upon all Muslims to conform with your brethren in this noble principle. Beware of violating peace [and] of disagreements and quarrels amongst you for this will inflict damage upon your

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<sup>138</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 71.

goals and [will result in] the loss of your rights; the time for their attainment by you has now come.<sup>139</sup>

Following the encouraging of anti-British protests throughout the Middle Euphrates, Shi'i emissaries from Karbala traveled throughout the region calling on the tribes to revolt. Letters were also sent to Sheikhs near Najaf and in the Diwaniya division, including Sheikh Sha'lan of the Dhawalim, urging them to prepare for a rebellion. However, the message to the Dhawalim arrived the day after Sheikh Sha'lan and his tribesmen revolted.<sup>140</sup> Both the uprising in Diwaniya and the political upheaval in Shamiya put immense pressure on local British POs in Shamiya and Hilla to respond to the demands of the tribes seeking independence from the British. Civil Commissioner Arnold Wilson recalled of July 1920:

Each of these Political Officers was, at the moment, worth a battalion of troops. If they could hold on, and maintain the façade of Civil Administration in their respective districts, while the army dealt with the areas in open revolt, there was every reason to believe that we could prevent a general rising until the arrival of reinforcements now on their way from India. They all knew of the murder of Captain Barlow and Lieutenant Stuart at Tel 'Afar; the majority were similarly circumstanced, that is to say that no troops were available within fifty miles.<sup>141</sup>

Despite Wilson's hopes, if the Civil Administration ignored or failed to meet the demands of the recalcitrant Sheikhs, Sayyids, and Shi'i clerics in the Middle Euphrates, the spreading of the rebellion to Shamiya and Hilla proved to be irreversible. On July 9<sup>th</sup>, the British military and civil authorities withdrew from Najaf.<sup>142</sup> Apprehensive of the armed

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<sup>139</sup> Mujtahid Shirazi translated and quoted in Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 69-71.

<sup>140</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 70.

<sup>141</sup> Wilson, *Mesopotamia, 1917-1920*, 281. Captain Barlow and Lieutenant Stuart were political officers near the town of Tel 'Afar in the Mosul region, where in late May a force of expatriate military officers from Syria supported by some local townspeople attacked the British position there. Only a few British officers aided by Arab levies were present. Captain Stuart was killed along with his assistant officers on June 4<sup>th</sup>. Captain Barlow, who had been allegedly captured by the expatriate officers on the previous evening, escaped and was killed just outside of the town. Subsequently, the expatriate officers led an ambush on two British armored cars sent from the city of Mosul to respond to the reports for help sent by the late Captain Barlow. See Wilson, *Mesopotamia, 1917-1920*, 273.

<sup>142</sup> Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, 336.

rising of the tribes in the Shamiya division, the few remaining British authorities there met with local Sheikhs to discourage them from rising against them. The Sheikhs of the Khaza'il offered conditions to APO Captain J.S. Mann and Major Norbury, and if accepted, the Sheikhs would refrain from rebelling. In one instance, several Sheikhs of the Khaza'il tribe in the Shamiya sub-district offered Captain Mann the following conditions for not rising against the British,

1. Complete independence for "Iraq"
2. The cessation of hostilities in Rumaytha and its surrounding areas.
3. The removal of British Political Officers and forces from the Euphrates.
4. The release of the son of the Chief Mujtahid [Shirazi] and other prisoners from Karbala and Hilla.<sup>143</sup>

Despite his willingness to meet the demands of the Sheikhs, Captain Mann was not the high-ranking British authority that could negotiate such terms. Further, when the Khaza'il Sheikhs heard of the brutal retaliation by the British against the tribes around Rumaitha, the Sheikhs completely rescinded their terms.<sup>144</sup> On July 11, the Sheikhs of the Fatla and Khaza'il mobilized their tribesmen to siege the British garrison at Abu Sukhair, located between the towns of Najaf and Shamiya. The siege of Abu Sukhair put pressure on other sections of the paramount Khaza'il tribe to revolt. As a result of friendly negotiations between Captain Mann and the Sheikhs of the Khaza'il, the Khaza'il and the minor tribes besieging Abu Sukhair permitted the garrison to retire to the nearby town of Kufa and join the larger British garrison there under the condition that there would be no aggression by

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<sup>143</sup> Quoted from Atiyyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 342. Muhammad Ridha, son of mujtahid Shirazi, was arrested by the British in Karbala along with eleven other men in the third week of June for encouraging mass anti-British demonstrations in the mosques of Al-'Abas and al-Husayn. See Atiyyah, 335.

<sup>144</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 88-89.

the tribes and the British until terms were reached for the creation of an Iraqi state independent of British interference.<sup>145</sup>

Yet, the British garrison at Abu Sukhair violated the agreement. When the Anglo-Indian force arrived at Kufa, they fortified the garrison and prepared for a counter-attack. In response, rebel tribes under the leadership of a prominent Sayyid, 'Alwan al-Yasiri, besieged Kufa on July 20<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile, Sheikh 'Abd al-Wahid Al Sikar of the Fatla led an attack on the nearby town of Kifl, the success of which would open the path to the city of Hilla, to where Anglo-Indian civil and military personnel in the south were preparing to retreat.<sup>146</sup> By July 23<sup>rd</sup>, the tribesmen captured the towns of Kifl and Hindiya, and British personnel had voluntarily evacuated Najaf and Karbala.<sup>147</sup> By the end of July, the rebellion had already spread throughout the Hilla division, and Anglo-Indian personnel throughout the Shamiya and Diwaniya divisions had begun retreating to the city of Hilla. The evacuation of the Civil Administration's authorities from Shamiya paved the way for anti-British Shi'i clerics, Sayyids, and Sheikhs under the leadership of mujtahid Shirazi in Karbala to form a provisional government, independent of British interference, to rule the Middle Euphrates and the surrounding territories as the tribes liberated them from the British.

The political upheaval and outbreak of hostilities between British actors and the tribes in Shamiya mirrored events in the Hilla division. Near the conclusion of the siege of the Rumaitha garrison in late July, the minor tribes and the paramount Bani Hasan who signed the petition declaring their support for an independent Arab Islamic government to

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<sup>145</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 342. See also Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 75.

<sup>146</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 75.

<sup>147</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921*, 342.

rule Iraq revolted against the British. The Bani Hasan then participated in one of the most significant victories over the British military during the rebellion. The rout of the Manchester column, which was dispatched from Hilla to protect the railway line south at Kifl, set up the minor tribes of the Hilla region, the Bani Hasan, Fatla, and Khaza'il to launch an attack on British forces at the city of Hilla, which was the only British military garrison standing between the rebels and Baghdad. General Aylmer L. Haldane, the commander of all Anglo-Indian military forces in Iraq, had already planned for the evacuation of British civil and military personnel from the Diwaniya and Shamiya divisions to Hilla when the revolt spread to Shamiya in late July. Haldane recalled:

I was prepared to sacrifice practically everything at Diwaniyah except those supplies which would be necessary for the force during its march to Hillah, and the ammunition, which could not be left behind. My anxiety to avoid the least delay was natural, and was due not only to the necessity for concentrating in Hillah, but to the danger which the troops might run through the marked predilection which the insurgents were showing everywhere for the destruction of railways.<sup>148</sup>

*The Formation of an Independent Government in Karbala and Najaf*

Coupled with the rout of the Manchester column, the withdrawal of British personnel to Hilla set up the rebellion's spiritual and political leadership in the shrine cities to form a provisional government for the Middle Euphrates and the peripheral areas liberated from British rule. Just days after the rout of the Manchester column, on July 26<sup>th</sup>, mujtahid Shirazi formed two councils in Karbala: The Council of Scholars (al-Majlis al-'Ilmi) and the National Council (al-Majlis al-Milli). Kadhim notes:

The first council was made up of five religious scholars with a mandate to provide religious promotion for the revolution and to adjudicate disputes among the people, since there was no other authority in place. The second council was made up of

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<sup>148</sup> Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia*, 128.



seventeen notables whose task was to administer the affairs of the territory under its jurisdiction.<sup>149</sup>

Similarly, when the British withdrew from Najaf on July 9<sup>th</sup>, a Higher Religious Committee took responsibility for the city's political affairs. Fifteen members sat on the committee and were led by the senior mujtahid of Najaf, Sheikh al-Shari'a Isfahani. The Higher Religious Committee was also responsible for several other subordinate committees set up in the city, such as the City Council which was responsible for collecting taxes, managing the city's security, public health, and sanitation.<sup>150</sup>

However, on August 13<sup>th</sup> mujtahid Shirazi passed away, leaving the two councils in Karbala leaderless. The councils dissolved, and the Sheikh al-Shari'a Isfahani in Najaf became the spiritual leader of the rebellion.<sup>151</sup> Further, a group of Sheikhs and Sayyids who led the rebel tribes toward Hilla sought to recover the nationalist ambitions of mujtahid Shirazi's government in Karbala by appointing Sayyid Muhsin Abu Tabikh, a prominent landowner in the Shamiya region, the governor of the territories liberated from the British. Sayyid Tabikh joined in local struggles against the British in April 1915, after the Ottoman regime and Shi'i clergy called upon the tribes to join the Ottoman ranks in defending Islamic society from the British invasion. At the battle of Sha'aiba, Sayyid Tabikh was wounded, and the Ottoman and tribal forces withdrew, marking the last time the Ottomans would rule the southern Basra province. Tabikh, like so many other wealthy landowners, benefitted politically from British patronage. Tabikh lived under the jurisdiction of Captain J.S. Mann, who was known throughout the Middle Euphrates to be among the least cruel British governors.

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<sup>149</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 88-89.

<sup>150</sup> Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, 338.

<sup>151</sup> Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, 338-9.

Nevertheless, Tabikh's enthusiasm for independence from foreign rule and empathy for the abuse his local communities suffered under both Ottoman and British rule fueled his participation in the rebellion. Sayyid Tabikh recalled the establishment of the independent government in Karbala:

The notables attending the meeting decided to establish a temporary national government, and they chose me from among themselves for this task. In spite of my desire to stay among my brothers in the battlefield, I honored their decision and accepted this dignified assignment and asked permission to leave for Karbala and assume my responsibilities [...] The celebration took place in the city hall in the midst of crowds that exceeded tens of thousands, and I raised the first Iraqi flag on the building that I chose to be the headquarters for the government.<sup>152</sup>

The appointment of Tabikh to head a national Iraqi government in Karbala was significant because it demonstrated that the political leadership of the rebellion in the Middle Euphrates was determined to foster and promote a sense of national political community among societies in Iraq. Indeed, it is unclear as to how far Sayyid Tabikh and his fellow rebel leadership, as well as the government in Najaf, went to seek approval of their appointments, and to what regions and communities, such as the Kurds in the former Mosul province, the governments would extend to if the British were driven out of Iraq. However, Tabikh's appointment was provisional, and at least initially, was supported by the late mujtahid Shirazi's followers in Najaf, as well as local society in the liberated areas and in other parts of Iraq. Though his appointment was short-lived because the siege of Hilla was unsuccessful, and because additional Anglo-Indian battalions from India were advancing from Basra to the Middle Euphrates, Tabikh's constituent War Council extended his authority to several of the

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<sup>152</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 89.

liberated areas in the Middle Euphrates region including the towns of Karbala, Twairij, Najaf, Abu Sukhair, and Tabikh's hometown of Ghammas.<sup>153</sup>

*British Victories, "Water Domination," and the Dissolution of the Government in Karbala*

By the middle of October 1920, the rebellion in the Middle Euphrates had begun to crumble, and Anglo-Indian forces had undertaken a cruel and punitive campaign against the tribes. The siege of Hilla in late July never succeeded due to strategic mistakes on the part of the tribes, the resilience of the Anglo-Indian garrison there, and the lack of sufficient supplies and water for the tribes and for the towns liberated from the British. The British garrison at Hilla was then able to dispatch forces south towards Karbala in late August, destroying villages along the way where rebels were suspected to have lived.<sup>154</sup> Further, the British cut off the commercial flow of supplies to the rebel areas, and attempted to deprive the major cities of water using the Hindiya Barrage. General Haldane recalled the significance of the Barrage in subduing the rebels:

The Arabs south and north of Hillah would soon, through our possession of the barrage, begin to feel the inconvenience of the policy of water domination, the rice crops of the considerable Shamiyah tribes could be deprived of irrigation and be ruined; while the Bani Hassan and Jarjiyah canals, which water the land west and east respectively of the Hindiyah branch, were blocked at the same central point. Along the railway line, too, the General Officer Commanding the 17<sup>th</sup> Division arrange that all canals, except the Khan Mahawil, were closed where they were commanded by the line of blockhouses on the railway, and the water was where possible diverted down the line. Thus all the country east of the railway, except that watered by the last-mentioned canal, whence supplies were being brought in by the inhabitants, was deprived of water.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 93-94.

<sup>154</sup> Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia*, 148.

<sup>155</sup> Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia*, 148-150.

Additionally, Haldane ordered the capture of the Husainiya canal, which provided water for Karbala. On August 14<sup>th</sup>, the British dug holes in the canal to slow the flow of water to Karbala, which impacted its vegetable crop and limited the townspeople's access to drinking water and water for livestock.<sup>156</sup> Sir Arnold Wilson implied the significance of the capture of the Barrage, stating that "By the end of August the military situation was well in hand; we controlled the canal-system, and were able to prevent the spread of anarchy."<sup>157</sup>

As well, the commercial blockading of the Middle Euphrates by the British during the rebellion forced the region to rely on itself for food, which was too scarce in the event of an extended conflict with the British. Sayyid Tabikh recalled of late July 1920: "We began to prepare for a ruthless war against the British, especially with the shortage of ammunition and food that we had left. We became dependent on what we received from Najaf and our own homes."<sup>158</sup> By the middle of October, Anglo-Indian forces from the Hilla garrison had subdued Karbala and Najaf, and several rebel leaders, including Sayyid Tabikh, fled Iraq.<sup>159</sup> The rebellion in the south of the Middle Euphrates in Diwaniya failed due to the amassing of additional Anglo-Indian battalions from India at Nasiriya and the persistent bombing missions carried out by the Royal Air Force on the tribes. The Anglo-Indian battalions at

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<sup>156</sup> Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia*, 147.

<sup>157</sup> Wilson, *Mesopotamia, 1917-1920*, 282. Scholars have contested the significance of the Hindiya Barrage during the rebellion. Some argue that General Haldane exaggerated the technical ability of the Hindiya Barrage and the British military to thirst the rebels into submission. However, the fact that the British manipulation of the Barrage prior to 1920 resulted accidentally in both the flooding and draught of arable land through depriving them of their usual irrigation routines suggests that the British could have made agricultural production suffer if the rebels were able to maintain control of the Middle Euphrates. More significantly, the Hindiya Barrage remained a military garrison after the end of the rebellion to discourage the tribes from revolting in the future. See Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia*, 148-150. During the formation of the national Iraqi army in 1921, the first infantry unit to be formed immediately relieved the British military garrison at the Barrage. See Sir Percy Cox, "Report on Iraq Administration: October, 1920—March, 1922," in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 7, 1920-1924*, 245-248.

<sup>158</sup> Quote taken from Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 79.

<sup>159</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 85.

Nasiriya departed for the Samawa garrison on October 1<sup>st</sup>, and on October 13<sup>th</sup> they drove off the tribesmen surrounding Samawa and occupied the town.<sup>160</sup>

The recapture of the entire Diwaniya division throughout October and early November was devastating to the local population, including not only the rebel tribesmen, but also the women, children, and the agricultural landscape. Indeed, the British retaliation for the rebellion mirrored the policies of the British towards recalcitrant tribal villages prior to 1920. The Royal Air Force bombed many rural tribal villages into submission, which was one of the driving motivations behind the rebellion among the Bani Huchaim confederation in the first place. A Royal Air Force pilot described in 1925 the British retaliation in the Diwaniya division:

At Diwaniyya a half for a week was made to carry out punitive expeditions in the Daghara and Afej regions. These were spectacular operations. The column would leave Diwaniyya at about 0200 hours. Aeroplanes leaving the base so that they would arrive over the column when its outposts were a quarter of a mile from the village to be attacked, would swoop down on it, drop 30 or 25lb bombs and pour hundreds of rounds of small arms ammunition into it. Panic-stricken, the inhabitants fled and in a minute the column would enter the village without a shot being fired. The usual procedure then was to drive towards Diwaniyya all the flocks and herds, setting fire to all that was left.<sup>161</sup>

Further, the outcome of the rebellion left the Middle Euphrates and Iraq more broadly in a profound state of political disarray. The rebel leadership and the government formed in Karbala under Sayyid Tabikh collapsed, while Sir Percy Cox and high-ranking British officials in Baghdad began executing plans to form an Iraqi nation-state with an Arab monarchy, a constitution, and a treaty legitimizing British authority over Iraqi political affairs. Great

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<sup>160</sup> Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, 371.

<sup>161</sup> Gordon Pirie, "Some Experiences of No. 6 Squadron in the Iraq Insurrection 1920," *Air Publication*, no. 1152, June 1925, RAF Museum Archive, Hendon. Taken from Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, 391.

Britain would install a centralized government in Baghdad composed of Sunni Ottoman-trained military officials. The nascent national government formed in 1921-1922 would exclude the dissident Shi'i clergy, Sheikhs, and Sayyids that participated in the rebellion from the national political process. Further, the political solidarity among the Shi'i clerics in Karbala and the dissident Sheikhs collapsed.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Nakash indicates that Middle Euphrates tribes accused the Persians mujtahids of “battening on the wealth of Iraq and leading the people astray during the revolt.” Because of this conflict, some of the less prominent Arab mujtahids were able to improve their positions of influence and power in the Middle Euphrates during the Mandate period. Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 76.

## Conclusion: The Aftermath of the Rebellion and the Legacy for the Modern State

### *The Middle Euphrates and the Aftermath of the Rebellion*

The outcome of the 1920 rebellion left the Middle Euphrates in a profound state of political disarray. In early October 1920, the mass advance of Anglo-Indian battalions from the city of Hilla and Nasiriya on the Middle Euphrates led to the dissolution of the provisional government headed by Sayyid Tabikh in Karbala and the gradual re-imposition of the Civil Administration. Many of the rebellion's leadership who survived the British retaliation fled the region, including Sayyid Tabikh.<sup>163</sup> The vengeful disposition of British military officials because of the rebellion, including General Haldane, led to a cruel and punitive campaign against tribes throughout the Middle Euphrates region, some of whom continued to resist the British occupation through early 1921. While Anglo-Indian forces subdued the tribes and occupied the towns throughout the Middle Euphrates, British officials in London made plans to modify Britain's role in Iraq to reduce the imperial expenditure that the rebellion incurred. Great Britain also intended to gradually turn over the governance of Iraq to Iraqi Arabs while also protecting Britain's strategic imperial interests in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.<sup>164</sup>

The rebellion had a profound impact on the Civil Administration of Iraq and the design of Iraq's political system under the British Mandate. The rebellion resulted in the temporary suspension of the oppressive policies of the Civil Administration and put immense pressure on Great Britain to reconsider its administrative apparatus in Iraq. Sir

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<sup>163</sup> Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, 385.

<sup>164</sup> Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 16.

Percy Cox returned to Basra on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1920 to replace Sir Arnold Wilson as High Commissioner because of the blame Wilson, his subordinate civil administrators, and the India Office received from policymakers in London for the rebellion and popular unrest in Iraq since the conclusion of the First World War.<sup>165</sup> Cox formed a provisional Arab government based in Baghdad made up of local dignitaries and intellectuals friendly to the British, including the Naqib of Baghdad, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Gaylani, who headed the Arab Council of State at its inception on November 11, 1920.<sup>166</sup> However, the provisional government was merely a façade of Arab self-rule for Iraq, as British officials “advised” the Naqib and his constituent cabinet, whose authority over Iraqi political affairs was limited to the city of Baghdad. Simultaneously, other parts of Iraq including the Middle Euphrates remained subject to a brutal Anglo-Indian military occupation.

In March 1921, high-ranking British and Arab officials in the Middle East met in Cairo to negotiate the future political, financial, and military arrangements for the mandated territories awarded to Great Britain by the League of Nations in early 1920.<sup>167</sup> At the Cairo Conference, Great Britain outlined the institutions and structure of the nascent Iraqi state, which included “the monarchy, in the person of Faisal, the third son of the Sharif of Mecca; the [Anglo-Iraqi] treaty, the legal basis for Britain’s rule; and the constitution, designed to integrate elements of the population under a democratic formula.”<sup>168</sup> The British installed Faisal because he belonged to the family of the Sharif of Mecca, well-known throughout the Arabian Peninsula and the former Arab Ottoman territories. Faisal was tolerant, at least

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<sup>165</sup> Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 19.

<sup>166</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 35.

<sup>167</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 40.

<sup>168</sup> Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 19-20.



publicly, of non-Sunni religious communities, which for the British made him acceptable to the Shi'i clergy in the Middle Euphrates. Further, because Faisal had no popular constituency in Iraq, and was thus subject to British interests and control, the British could encourage and use him to create a faction against anti-British radicals, particularly among the Shi'i clerical establishment.<sup>169</sup> Finally, his albeit brief reign as King of Syria helped build his reputation as a leader. Supported by his fellow Ottoman-educated military, civil, and law officers, Faisal was installed as King of Iraq on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1921.<sup>170</sup>

In the aftermath of the rebellion leading up to the installation of Faisal as King of Iraq, British civil authorities re-imposed the machinery of the Civil Administration on the Middle Euphrates, including the confiscation of arms, the collection of taxes, and the imposing of monetary fines on tribes for their participation in the rebellion. Additionally, the British expanded the role of the Royal Air Force in Iraq to discourage further armed resistance to British rule, and to reduce the military expenditure which the suppression of the rebellion incurred. The defeat of the rebellion also resulted in the exclusion of the anti-British Shi'i clerics, chief Sayyids, and Sheikhs who participated in the political upheaval and rebellion in the Middle Euphrates from the new national Iraqi political process.

#### *The Occupation and Disarmament of Najaf and Karbala*

When the British took control of the Middle Euphrates throughout the autumn of 1920, military and civil authorities reassumed governance over the region. British authorities focused on capturing rebel leadership, recovering British and Indian prisoners of

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<sup>169</sup> Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 19-20.

<sup>170</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 36-37.

war, imposing fines, confiscating weapons, and re-instituting components of state-building pursued by the Civil Administration since 1917. British military officers attempted to punish, disarm, and pacify rebel elements of the Middle Euphrates quickly because all the troops that arrived from India to quell the rebellion had to be on their way back to India by March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1921. Upon the surrender of Karbala in middle October, the British demanded the custody of seventeen men considered responsible for the rebellion and political upheaval in the towns and shrine cities, including namely Sayyid Tabikh. Similarly, when Najaf surrendered in the third week of October, the British demanded five notables responsible for the rebellion. The British also demanded the delivery of a combination of over one hundred imprisoned British and Indian soldiers and officers.<sup>171</sup> Combined with the escape of many Sheikhs and Sayyids that participated in the rebellion from the region, the capture of the remaining rebel leaders had the effect of dissolving the coalition government headed by Sayyid Tabikh.

The disarmament of the cities and the tribes in the Middle Euphrates was another task on the list of priorities for the British military officers. General Haldane estimates that there were around 300,000 modern rifles in Iraq at the end of the summer in 1920, of which the rebel tribes had around fifty or sixty thousand. When Karbala surrendered to the British in middle October, the British demanded the delivery of a combination of 4,000 Ottoman and British rifles, as well as 400,000 rounds of ammunition. Because the city could not provide the demanded rifles (because it actually had less than 4,000 rifles), the British demanded the cash equivalent.<sup>172</sup> Further, British civil and military officers imposed deadlines on the tribes

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<sup>171</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 85.

<sup>172</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 85.

for surrendering rifles, and when they were not met the officers would impose additional fines. Some POs complained to Anglo-Indian military authorities that by imposing so many fines, the Anglo-Indian army of occupation risked impoverishing too many people, which would have merely sustained anti-British sentiments. However, the pleas of Political Officers did not move Haldane.<sup>9</sup>

*The Return of the Civil Administration and the Formation of the Iraqi Army*

If British military officers focused on capturing the rebel leadership in the cities and punishing the tribes in the Middle Euphrates for the rebellion, the British officers of the Civil Administration focused on re-instituting components of state-building, including the improvement of agricultural production, tax collection, and the re-opening of commercial traffic. The rebellion, which weakened general British administrative control in the Middle Euphrates sustained a heavy blow to British efforts at collecting taxes. According to Sir Percy Cox, the expenditure of the Civil Administration far outweighed the revenue collected in Iraq throughout the 1920-21 fiscal year. The expenditure in 1920-1921 amounted to 1,092 lakhs (a lakh is equivalent to one hundred thousand rupees) while the revenue collected amounted to 1,059 lakhs.<sup>173</sup> The deficit between receipts and expenditure was in part a result of the rebellion in the Middle Euphrates. For one, the rebellion resulted in the destruction of crops due to the reduction of the water supply by the British in certain areas, as well as the destruction of “government” property. Damage done to the railways, the stoppage of

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<sup>173</sup> Sir Percy Cox, “Report on Iraq Administration: October, 1920—March, 1922,” in *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 7, 1920-1924*, 227-230.

commercial traffic, and the inability of the Civil Administration to collect taxes in the areas in open rebellion had a similar impact on the British fiscal administration.<sup>174</sup>

When British officials in Baghdad started to build an Arab government for Iraq, they intended to redirect revenue collected throughout the administrative divisions to fund the new Iraqi ministries in Baghdad, and especially the formation of an Iraqi national army. This would take months. In January 1921, only a skeleton of an army leadership council existed because the revenue collected in Iraq by the British could not meet the demands of quickly forming a national army, which by June 1921 had recruiting offices in the cities of Nasiriya, Hilla, Karbala, Najaf, and Hindiya.<sup>175</sup> An Army Council, made up of former Ottoman military officers in Syria loyal to Faisal, was formed in Baghdad in January 1921.<sup>176</sup> The British and the Minister of Defense dispatched recruiting officers to form recruiting centers throughout Iraq in June 1921.<sup>177</sup> The recruiting centers were charged with enlisting men between the ages of 18 and 40. The promise of monetary allowances, daily meals, and clothing among other amenities attracted many volunteers to the army from the Middle Euphrates. The 1<sup>st</sup> Iraq Infantry formed on July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1921 and immediately relieved the garrison at the Hindiya Barrage. Other infantry, cavalry, and transport divisions formed in Baghdad throughout late 1921 and early 1922. However, a significant number of recruits deserted the army of 1921-1922, and the number of volunteers gradually declined.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Sir Percy Cox, "Report on Iraq Administration: October, 1920—March, 1922," 227-230.

<sup>175</sup> Sir Percy Cox, "Report on Iraq Administration: October, 1920—March, 1922," 201.

<sup>176</sup> Sir Percy Cox, "Report on Iraq Administration: October, 1920—March, 1922," 245.

<sup>177</sup> Sir Percy Cox, "Report on Iraq Administration: October, 1920—March, 1922," *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 7, 1920-1924*, 249.

<sup>178</sup> It is unclear from Percy Cox's account why there were so many army desertions. Sir Percy Cox, "Report on Iraq Administration: October, 1920—March, 1922," *IAR 1914-1932: vol. 7, 1920-1924*, 245-248.

*The Role of the Royal Air Force in Iraq*

The accelerated return of Anglo-Indian troops back to the subcontinent, the lack of a national army, and weak local police forces led to the expanded role of the British Royal Air Force in Iraq. While Sir Percy Cox set up the Arab Council of State in Baghdad in October and November of 1920, the British chief of air staff persuaded Winston Churchill, then Great Britain's Secretary of State for War and Secretary of State for Air, to secure the authority of the nascent Iraqi state over the countryside using the Royal Air Force. The rebellion in the Middle Euphrates demonstrated that using the Royal Air Force was a far cheaper (and faster) method of policing the countryside than maintaining infantry garrisons. Further, without yet any national Iraqi army nor strong local police forces, the Royal Air Force was by far the most effective tool for controlling the countryside. At the Cairo Conference in March 1921, British officials confirmed the new air control arrangement, and subsequently deployed eight aircraft squadrons with six armored-car companies to control Iraq while arrangements were being made in Baghdad to create a national army.<sup>179</sup>

Throughout the very early 1920s, the R.A.F. continued to enforce the political authority of the new *Mutasarrifs* (governors) of the administrative divisions and their British advisers, and served to discourage any further rebellions amongst the tribes. John Glubb, an irrigation engineer and later, intelligence officer to the Royal Air Force stationed in Iraq noted the devastating impact of the Royal Air Force on the landscape of the Middle and Lower Euphrates in 1922. Recalling the moment when he went to introduce himself to the

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<sup>179</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 40.

*Mutasarrif* and his British adviser in the Muntafiq division on the Lower Euphrates in 1922, Glubb said:

Just as I was introducing myself, a violent scuffle was heard outside the door and an indignant Arab burst into the office. It appeared that aircraft had been sent to drop bombs on some dissident tribal group, but had by mistake dropped them on this man's village, a shaikh who had always been scrupulously loyal to the authorities. An old woman and a cow had been killed. Only very small twenty-pound bombs had been used, which did virtually no damage. Nevertheless, this seemed to be an excellent example of how air control should NOT be exercised. Fortunately I had not yet assumed responsibility. I retired modestly into a corner of the office and said nothing.<sup>180</sup>

Similarly, R.A.F. squadron leader Arthur Harris recalled:

The Arab and Kurd...now know what real bombing means, in casualties and damage; they know that within 45 minutes a full-sized village...can be wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured by four or five machines which offer them no real target, no opportunity for glory as warriors, no effective means of escape.<sup>181</sup>

*The Middle Euphrates and the Formation of the Iraqi State*

While British officials were building a new Arab government in Baghdad at the end of 1920 and preparing for the ascension of an Arab monarch to rule Iraq, the Middle Euphrates was left in a state of political disarray. Those local recalcitrant Sheikhs, Sayyids, and Shi'i clerics who did not flee at the rebellion's end, nor die during it, were left without organized leadership, and were excluded from the nascent national political process. During the process of selecting an Arab monarch and constituent cabinet to rule Iraq, the British did not include Shi'i leadership from the Middle Euphrates nor did they intend to include them nor the recalcitrant Sheikhs and chief Sayyids in the future national political process. British officials in London and Iraq learned from the rebellion that the Shi'i clergy had immense

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<sup>180</sup> John Glubb, *Arabian Adventures: Ten Years of Joyful Service* (London: Cassel Ltd., 1978): 45.

<sup>181</sup> Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009): 253.

political influence and could mobilize the tribes against the British administrative apparatus. Fortunately for the British, the defeat of the rebellion sustained a heavy blow to the political prowess of the Shi'i clergy, whose unity with the recalcitrant tribes the Middle Euphrates collapsed in the rebellion's aftermath.<sup>182</sup> Some rebel leadership fled, including Sayyid Tabikh, who took his family and some of his accomplices to the Arabian Peninsula, arriving in Medina in April 1921.<sup>183</sup> Those rebel Sheikhs that remained in Iraq after the rebellion turned to the senior mujtahid in Najaf, the Sheikh al-Sharia, to negotiate with the British. However, he died in December, leaving the tribes and Shi'i clergy without a recognized leader. The clergy in the shrine cities were unable to recognize a new grand mujtahid, which led to a struggle for Shi'i religious leadership in Najaf for several years.<sup>184</sup>

The political disarray in the Middle Euphrates and the political cleavages between it and the nascent Iraqi state in Baghdad post-rebellion extended into the 1920s. In the aftermath of the rebellion, the alliance between recalcitrant tribesmen and the senior Persian clerics in Karbala fragmented. The tribes of the Middle Euphrates blamed the Persian mujtahids for exploiting the wealth of local society and manipulating it into rejecting British rule in order to enhance their own political status in Iraq. Further, despite his nomination as king of Iraq, Faisal felt threatened by the political influence of the Shi'i clerical establishment in the Middle Euphrates given their rise leading up to 1920 and their mere conditional support of his nomination as king. Faisal sought to especially eradicate the power of the Persian mujtahids in the Middle Euphrates, who urged Faisal during 1921-1922 to save Iraq

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<sup>182</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 76-77.

<sup>183</sup> Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, 385.

<sup>184</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 76.

from British control. The proposed Anglo-Iraqi treaty of 1922, which outlined that Iraq would be self-governed with British control of Iraqi military and foreign affairs, led to a propaganda campaign and series of *fatwas* declared by leading mujtahids in Karbala.<sup>185</sup>

In conjunction with British civil authorities the national government hosted elections across Iraq in 1921 for provincial governors and representatives for the King's Constituent Assembly. Voters (only men above the age of 21) in the provinces were urged by government officials in Baghdad to vote for candidates more likely to ratify the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty. Because of this, anti-British Shi'i clerics in the Middle Euphrates promoted a series of *fatwas* denouncing the election process. The *fatwas* had an immense impact on the election cycle, delaying them for months as election committees in Karbala and Ba'quba, for example, resigned because townspeople raided the election offices. The *fatwas* were supplemented by the fact that the Sheikhs of the prominent tribes in Iraq were discontented with the limited number of seats the British and government in Baghdad offered them in the Iraqi state's Constituent Assembly. However, despite the delays it imposed on the elections of provincial governors in 1922, the pressure of the *fatwas* and their support throughout Iraq even beyond the Middle Euphrates did not exert enough pressure on Faisal and the government to break with the British. Faisal's approval of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty in 1922 led to outrage among the influential Shi'i clerical opposition in Karbala. Subsequently, throughout 1923 Faisal aimed to force the leading mujtahids to abandon the country, and to suppress anti-government rhetoric throughout the Iraqi provinces before the agreement with the British was ratified in 1924.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 79-80.

<sup>186</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 80-81.



## *Conclusion*

Following the capture of Baghdad from the Ottomans in 1917, Great Britain's shortage of food and supplies for its Anglo-Indian forces in Iraq and the local population around Baghdad prompted British civil and military authorities to extract these resources from within Iraq. Great Britain's administrative apparatus in Iraq, the Civil Administration, imposed itself on the Middle Euphrates region, a flatland spanning central and southern Iraq watered by the Hilla and Hindiya channels of the Euphrates River. The Middle Euphrates was mainly composed of Shi'i tribes of shepherds and cultivators. Its major urban areas, Najaf and Karbala, were centers of Shi'i scholarship and education, and home to Shi'i clergymen who had in recent decades emerged as influential figures in the Iraqi and Persian political arenas. With the intention of forcefully diverting the region's resources to meet military ends, the Civil Administration attempted to fill the administrative vacuum left by the former Ottoman regime and displaced the region's traditional leadership. Further, British civil authorities imposed taxes on the local population to fund the operations of the Civil Administration and forcefully recruited labor from the tribes for the construction of railroads and the expansion of local irrigation systems to expand cultivation.

However, the process of blending components of state-building with efforts to extract local resources and labor power brought the Civil Administration into conflict with Shi'i clergy, Sayyids, tribal Sheikhs and their tribesmen. The brutal conflict between Great Britain and the Ottomans interrupted commercial traffic and caused profound food shortages and rises in prices, which led to uprisings against British civil authorities by tribesmen and townspeople in Najaf and its periphery in late 1917 and early 1918. Further, by attempting

to assume authority over local political affairs in the Middle Euphrates, the Civil Administration undermined the political autonomy and influence of Shi'i clerics in the shrine cities, many of who had been invested in preventing non-Muslim powers such as Great Britain from interfering in Islamic societies since before the twentieth century. The intensification of tax collection, forced labor recruitment, and interference in local irrigation practices also produced widespread disaffection among the tribes, many of which refused the demands of the Civil Administration and in turn suffered severe consequences at the hands of the British aircraft. In the aftermath of the announcement of the British Mandate in early 1920, the accumulated frictions between Great Britain's Civil Administration and local actors culminated in a massive armed rebellion and political upheaval in the Middle Euphrates.

In June of 1920, a tribal revolt broke out against the British at the town of Rumaitha in the Middle Euphrates when the Civil Administration arrested a Sheikh for his refusal to pay off a loan made to him by British authorities. Within two weeks the tribal uprising at Rumaitha in the Diwaniya division spread north to the Hilla and Shamiya divisions. There, rebel Sheikhs, Sayyids, and Shi'i clerics in Najaf and Karbala were already planning a tribal rebellion due to the exploitative policies of the Civil Administration, and their failure to meet local demands for the establishment of an independent Arab Islamic state to rule Iraq. The rebellion involved tens of thousands of tribesmen and weakened the control of the Civil Administration over the Middle Euphrates for several months. Further, rebel leadership in Shamiya formed a provisional coalition of councils to rule the liberated areas. However, the arrival of additional Anglo-Indian military battalions from British India and the devastating power of the Royal Air Force enabled the British to retake control of much of the Middle

Euphrates by the end of November 1920. The British retaliation for the rebellion had an especially cruel and devastating impact on the tribes.

The rebellion convinced British officials that the overbearing administrative machinery headed by the India Office was no longer possible. Instead, Great Britain implemented the model of the British Mandate, which the League of Nations awarded to Great Britain in April 1920. The British Mandate required Great Britain to create an Iraqi nation-state with a constitution and a treaty codifying British authority over Iraq's internal and foreign political affairs. Great Britain was also charged with building a local Arab government headed by a King to eventually lead Iraq as an independent state. Great Britain mostly recruited the representatives of the new Iraqi government from among former Ottoman military officers, many of Iraqi origin, who collaborated with the British during the Hashemite Revolt of 1916. Great Britain designed Iraq's government to not only serve British geopolitical interests in the Middle East, but also to exclude much of the local population in the Middle Euphrates from participating in the national political process. The outcome of the rebellion and Iraq's new political system left the Middle Euphrates in a state of political disarray and set the stage for future contestations over the legitimacy and design of Iraq's political system under the British Mandate and after.

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