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# The American occupation of Iraq in the light of the British "imperial precedent" twenty years later

27-04-2023

## Authors

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**Summary :** This article aims to review the American occupation of Iraq (2003-2011) in light of the domination that the British had in this country in the aftermath of World War I. This article compares the strategy of the two powers to rebuild the Iraqi state and protect their interests, a process characterized by the same hegemonic aspiration and the same claim to build a state from above in a coercive context.

## Introduction

In Baghdad, a military-backed authoritarian regime is handling the country tightly and is posing a strategic threat to the main Western power operating in the region. A military expedition was launched after a campaign much harder and costly than expected. Baghdad was taken and a new political order was established under Western military and political control. However, at the very moment where it seems that the future of Iraq is being written abroad, an uprising breaks out among the army officers, on the streets of Baghdad and throughout the Shiite regions of the center and the south. Now the whole plan is in danger of failing<sup>1</sup>.

Published in January 2003, this article by Middle East specialist Charles Tripp clearly seems to anticipate the US intervention in Iraq launched by President George W. Bush on March 20<sup>th</sup> of the same year. However, the historian was in fact describing the course of the British occupation of "Mesopotamia<sup>2</sup>" during World War I. The author reminds us that Iraq had already been occupied by a Western power in the twentieth century, a repetition of history that highlights the same imperial ambition.

While this parallel with the British Empire would certainly have been rejected by the Bush Jr. administration, some actors in the public debate at the time found it perfectly valid and even encouraged the United States to assume it fully. Thus Niall Ferguson, author of books on the British Empire, which he attempted to popularize through documentaries in which he did not hesitate to put the lights on himself, declared that despite some regrettable abuses, the British Empire has had a positive impact on the world as a whole, providing it with liberal institutions and free trade, a heritage that is now to be defended by the United States. He believed that this heritage should now be carried and defended by the United States. The title of one of his books, *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, published in 2011 as the US was withdrawing from Iraq after an occupation that was disastrous in several aspects, perfectly illustrates his ideological stance, based on the superiority of Western values, in line with Samuel Huntington, who spoke of a "clash of civilizations".

Such statements are reminiscent of the civilizing mission at the heart of the British imperial project from the second half of the nineteenth century. Bringing civilization or democracy by force is the paradox at the heart of the imperial project in the past as it is today. However, both the English and the Americans were unsettled by the Iraqis' ability to resist these attempts to impose state projects on them from above and in a coercive context.

Thus, despite the contexts being different, we find in the American occupation of Iraq in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2003-2011) an echo of the British occupation of Iraq in the context of a League of Nations mandate after the First World War (1920-1932). However, one should also explore the differences of these two historical periods to identify their specificities while reflecting on the existence of a similar hegemonic ambition, dictated by political interests as well as a world view and a specific depiction of the Iraqi society.

### ***1 - The (un)declared goals of the two occupations and their military development***

The military operation launched by the United States on March 20, 2003, which led to the occupation of Iraq until 2011, is of great political, strategic and symbolic importance. It has been described as "...the most structuring event in the Western geopolitical imagination of the twenty-first century<sup>3</sup>." This characterization is explained by the consequences of the operation but also by the fallacious arguments put forward by the Bush administration to justify it: weapons of mass destruction were never found, the link between Saddam Hussein and the attacks of September 11, 2001, has never been established. The fact that the United Nations Security Council had not given its approval - it would later recognize the United States as an occupying power - added to the illegitimacy of the operation. The British occupation of Iraq during World War I did not seem, at the time, to carry the same symbolic significance: the landing of an Anglo-Indian

expeditionary force in Fao, in the south of the country, was only one of the multiple fronts of the war in the Middle East, and the simple logic of alliances warranted that the British Empire and the Ottoman Empire went to war in 1914.

### ***From the rhetoric of liberation to the reaffirmation of older ambitions***

Both occupations were marked by a common rhetoric, that of a military operation aimed at the liberation of Iraq. This is what General Frederick Stanley Maude solemnly declared after the British capture of Baghdad in March 1917, in an address full of Orientalist references, which had in fact been written by Mark Sykes. Through this proclamation, the British denounced Ottoman despotism and promised to help Iraq return to its former glory<sup>4</sup>. A bit less than a century later, the name of this US military operation, Operation Iraqi Freedom, took on this rhetoric of a war in the name of freedom. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 2003, General Tommy Franks held a solemn speech entitled « Freedom message to the Iraqi people », in which he promised that the Iraqi invasion was temporary and that it helped the Iraqis to form a government which would guarantee the interests and the rights of the Iraqi people<sup>5</sup>. He also announced in his speech the creation of the Coalition Provisional Authority, headed by Paul Bremer, which, because of the power he had, was often compared to a proconsul or a viceroy<sup>6</sup>.

However, it is clear that in both cases, behind the idea of a collective emancipation, the occupation of Iraq has been an opportunity to reaffirm older political and strategic ambitions. Regarding the United States, Stephen Weirthem emphasizes the weight of the Cold War legacy in the desire of the entourage of Presidents Bush senior and junior to prevent the emergence of a rival power. For the researcher, the attacks of September 11, 2001, were as much a threat to US interests as an opportunity to reaffirm them by making Iraq an example of the US ability to deploy all its political and military power<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the war of 2003 was part of the American plan to build a "bigger" and "newer" Middle East in which democracy could establish itself on the long run and where American interests would be protected. As for the British, if they did not seek to provoke a conflict with the Ottoman Empire by using false pretexts, the war also provided them with the opportunity to control long-standing interests in a more direct and formal way. The British already controlled the oil resources of southern Persia, which, along with the rest of the Persian Gulf, constituted the sphere of influence of the Raj, an empire within an empire. The British also had commercial opportunities in Iraq and their consuls had been working to protect them since the late eighteenth century. The War thus momentarily ended what historians have called the informal Empire, that set of economic, financial and political interests that existed independently of any form of direct government or formal territorial control<sup>8</sup>

### ***Security issues: opposite directions***

From a strictly military point of view, the two powers seem to have gone on opposite directions in the process of territorial control: after a relatively easy advance along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, Anglo-Indian troops were besieged at Kout from December 1915 onwards and were forced to surrender in April 1916<sup>9</sup>. In 1918, the British finally controlled all of Iraq, but two years later they were faced with a large-scale uprising against their control of the country, which would take the form of a League of Nations mandate. They repressed this uprising very harshly and the following year created an Arab monarchy headed by Faysal, the third son of Hussein, king of the Hijaz and ally of the British since 1916. Aviation would now be the keystone of law enforcement in Iraq and would also ensure the security of its borders. The US, on the other hand, overthrew the Iraqi regime without encountering any major difficulties but then encountered armed resistance that never ceased until their withdrawal<sup>10</sup>. All observers agree that this security deficit is due to the low number of troops planned by the US authorities to maintain order in the country after the fall of the regime, despite the warnings of Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki, which were ignored by the Bush administration, which was interpreted as a triumphalist approach, a feeling of superiority and a form of arrogance<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, not only did the U.S. authorities believe that the occupation would be seen as a liberation, but they also anticipated a rapid transfer of power to Iraqis who had long lived in exile and who were perceived by the Bush administration as legitimate representatives of the Iraqis<sup>12</sup>.

Moreover, while the US authorities thought they could count on the resources of the Iraqi state to stabilize the situation after the fall of the regime, the collapse of the state and in particular of the various ministries and police forces prevented them from doing so<sup>13</sup>. It was thus in an extremely precarious security situation that the United States undertook the rebuilding the Iraqi state, condemning this project to fail from the start<sup>14</sup>.



Iraqis burning an American flag during a protest. Tens of thousands of the Shiite clergyman Muqtada al Sadr partisans, who led last year's uprisings against the American troops, have called on the American forces to retreat from Iraq. The protest started at Firdos Square

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## II - Two occupations in the name of the same state construction project

### *(Re)Building the Iraqi State*

The British controlled Iraq in the name of a state-building project under the mandate given to them in 1920. Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations described the mandate system as a form of trusteeship that constituted a sacred mission of civilization - the rhetoric of a form of imperialism intended to be liberal - but whose objective was to make these territories independent states. In addition, the proxy powers were accountable to the Council of the League of Nations through annual reports. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a similar process took place in the context of the US occupation, which did not only overthrow the regime but also caused the collapse of the entire state apparatus. It was left to the US authorities on the ground, and particularly to the CPA, to recreate political institutions, an army and a police force. However, in both cases, this process took place in the context of a military occupation and was always imposed from above, without any real involvement of Iraqi civil society.

### *About Expertise*

As soon as we question this process of state-building, the question of the expertise and capacity of the representatives of the occupying authorities to mobilize relevant knowledge about Iraqi history and society arises. In 1914, the Chief Political Officer of the British-Indian Expeditionary Force, Percy Cox, had a long experience of the region: trained in the Indian colonial administration, he had been stationed on the Somali coast, in Aden and Muscat before becoming the British Resident in the Persian Gulf in Bushire. The expeditionary corps he commanded included many Arabists from the Indian civil and military administration. Percy Cox subsequently became the first British High Commissioner in Iraq under the mandate. Gertrude Bell, who arrived in Basra in 1916 after a long experience in the Middle East through her travels, which had brought her in contact with the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of Iraq, assisted him in this task. She was, until her death in 1926, the main interlocutor of the Iraqi political actors with whom she was in close contact and about whom she wrote very regular intelligence reports.

If this mastery of the Arabic language and this knowledge of Iraq did not in itself prevent a biased reading of Iraqi history or prejudices towards its society, it constituted at least a starting point for the British, confident in their administrative experience and in their ability to communicate with their interlocutors. This expertise, however relative and biased, seems to have been lacking among the American troops<sup>15</sup>, an ignorance that continued when the Americans became responsible for the administration of the country. Larry Diamond, who served as an advisor to the CPA from January to April 2004, points out that while experts on Iraqi society did exist, they never had access to the first circles of the institution. Nevertheless, its members were given ministerial responsibilities and were sometimes entrusted with the administration of entire provinces and cities. They did not understand the reasons for the unpopularity of the occupation, nor did they realize that it had a colonial flavor or that U.S. foreign policy had long been a source of resentment<sup>16</sup>.

The American administration also often ignored experts whose recommendations did not go the way their ideology did. Thus, Paul Brinkley, an important member of the American Ministry of Defense, suggested investments to revitalize small public companies which, during Saddam's reign, employed up to half a million Iraqis. Brinkley thought in fact that the economic and social misery caused by the state collapse nurtured defiance and fed the tanks of those who armed themselves against the Americans. He was critical against the neoliberal policy of the American administration, based on a near total importation which destroyed, according to him, the agricultural and industrial production of the country. However, his plan was not followed by neoconservatives who rejected the idea of supporting and protecting the public industry, as it went against neoliberal principles. 17

### *The Confessionalization of Political Issues*

Despite their different experiences, the two powers took decisions in the direction of a greater confessionalization of political issues, in order to guarantee their short-term interests. Hoping to take advantage of the experience of the Arab elite that had constituted a relay of Ottoman power in Iraq, the British chose to create an Arab and Sunni monarchy. The Iraqi government that was set up under the mandate was also dominated by Arabs who were also Sunnis, while the Shiites and Kurds were excluded from the machinery of power or kept on the sidelines. On the military side, the Iraqi army was also led by Arab and Sunni officers, such as Jafar al-Askari, the first Iraqi Minister of Defense, while the Royal Air Force was the keystone of the country's law enforcement and defense. Toby Dodge notes that for many Iraqis, particularly in rural areas, the only experience of statehood was that of aerial repression, often against tribal leaders unwilling to pay taxes or accept the borders of the new state. If, according to Max Weber, the State is supposed to have a monopoly on legitimate violence, it cannot be legitimized by the sole use of coercion, to the exclusion of its other attributes, such as rendering a certain number of services to its citizens<sup>18</sup>. After the fall of the Iraqi regime in 2003, the US authorities took the decision to disband the Iraqi army, thus banning many Sunni officers, a strategy that was completely contrary to that of the British. The U.S. subsequently encouraged the creation of a new Iraqi army by recruiting from among the Shiites and Kurds, who were seen as victims of Basij rule, while the Sunnis, frustrated at having been pushed out of power, joined the resistance to the US occupation.

The most significant turnaround was the role of the Shiites. In 1920, the Shiite clergy had been strongly involved against the mandate and in 1922, its representatives had issued fatwas forbidding the faithful to participate in the elections that were to elect the members of the Constituent Assembly desired by the British, thus standing up against their attempts to legitimize their power in Iraq<sup>19</sup>. The British portrayed a retrograde Shiite clergy that interfered illegitimately in political affairs. In their eyes, Shiite Islam was somehow more Islamic than Sunni Islam<sup>20</sup>, the latter being described as more enlightened, more in line with the discourse of modernity carried by the British under the mandate. However, some colonial administrators were familiar with Shia Islam. Gertrude Bell had travelled to Persia before the First world War. She learned Farsi and even translated poems of Hafez, a mystical Persian having lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, before the war, the Shiite clergyman was highly involved in the constitutional revolution of 1909 in Persia, which aimed to limit the sovereign's power, liberal and constitutional ideals which the British should have been sensitive about given their own history and the values they were supposed to represent as mandatory force. However, the opposition of the Shiite clergyman to their political project for Iraq swept this knowledge and anchored the British in an antagonist posture toward the clergyman. In 2003, Paul Bremer's "de-Baathification" process amounted to purging the army and the administration of members who had belonged to the former regime's party, without assessing their actual participation in the crimes committed by the regime. However, this decision mainly affected the Sunnis and contributed to their resentment<sup>21</sup>, their political marginalization being a major historical break. The American administration chose to rely on the Shiites, who constituted the majority of the population, as well as on the Kurds, both communities being perceived through their status as victims of the former regime. While the American point of view, regarding such decisions dictated by a logic of justice, they weren't any less confessional. They found themselves reinforced and institutionalized with a policy of quotas which put forth the sectarian or communitarian identity above competence. The same logic in Lebanon

has been applied in Iraq, with a Shiite Prime minister, a Kurdish President and a Sunni Speaker of Parliament.

### ***Predation and co-option and confrontation***

Along with the confessionalization of political issues, the other common feature of the two occupations is the transformation of the state into an object of predation. From the time of the mandate, the new Iraqi state became the essential cog in a clientelist system, with positions of responsibility or seats in the Iraqi Assembly serving to reward the loyalty of various political actors to the new regime. Similarly, the management of the Iraqi state by a Shia-dominated government in the aftermath of the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime was based on clientelist networks rather than on a redistribution of wealth within Iraqi society as a whole<sup>22</sup>.

The co-option of tribe leaders is part of this specific type of clientelist process in the British era as well as in the US occupation. Influenced by their view of rural Iraq as having been preserved from Ottoman despotism and to be protected from the harmful influence of city dwellers and the excesses of modernization<sup>23</sup>, the British decided to appoint some tribal chiefs as political intermediaries, entrusting them with vast administrative powers as well as land. A parallel legal system was now applied to their constituents. This policy was a way for the British to offload administration and law enforcement onto these sheikhs, but also to ensure their loyalty. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, the US also tried to get closer to the tribal leaders, especially in the Sunni triangle, hoping that privileged links with these representatives would help them curb armed resistance against them. These tribal chiefs, banned from some of their resources and from their power following the arrival of Al-Qaeda members in Iraq that wanted to locally implant themselves, had to cooperate with the Americans. It was expected of these tribal chiefs to ensure infrastructure protection, and most importantly the pipelines. Once again, they played the role of intermediaries, especially in receiving aid for the reconstruction of the country. However, this strategy did not always bear fruit, as the US authorities sometimes had difficulty understanding the complexity of the allegiance links operating within these tribes<sup>24</sup>.

Finally, another common trait concerning the state formation practiced by both the British and the Americans is the cooperation between political actors which had undeniable links with Iraq. Furthermore, the relationship between the two Western powers and these local political actors was characterized by distrust even during their cooperation. During the mandate, King Faysal, from the Hijaz and who owed his power to the British, used his power to limit the British domination by encouraging the opposition to the 1922 treaty or by secretly militating against its ratification two years later. Careful for his personal credibility and the Iraqi sovereignty, he often sought to build his own alliances and to counter the British who in turn often described him as ungrateful and disappointing. In 2003, the American administration often relied on some Iraqi exiled from families opposing the Baathist regime living in the United Kingdom or the United States. One of them, Ahmed Chalabi, was close to the neoconservatives and encouraged the occupation by providing false information about the weapons of mass destruction. After the fall of the regime, Chalabi occupied many ministerial positions and was in charge of the de-Baathification process. However, other than the fact his social base and thus the legitimacy of former exiled was fragile, the question of their allegiance to the United States quickly started to cause issues, since Chalabi was later on quickly convicted of serving Iranian interests.

## **III - A hasty transfer of power contrasting with the announced ambitions**

After an occupation of about ten years in both cases, the British and Americans prepared for a power transfer before withdrawing from Iraq, without any real promise of a long-term commitment. In 1924, the British organized elections for a Constituent Assembly, which ratified the 1922 Anglo-Iraqi treaty that established British domination of Iraqi politics through the prominent role of the High Commissioner. The country now had a constitution. King Faysal wanted the British to withdraw in 1928, but they feared that the League of Nations would not consider Iraq's progress sufficient. They proposed Iraq's application four years later, in 1932. In the meantime, they ensured that their interests would be protected

by a new Anglo-Iraqi treaty. Negotiated in 1930, it guaranteed the maintenance of two Royal Air Force bases as well as British advisers in all Iraqi ministries. Economically, the British had secured their stake in Iraqi oil since one fifth of the Iraq Petroleum Company was held by British capital. The oil factor should also be taken into account in the arbitration sought by the British on the status of Kurdistan, as the province of Mosul had been claimed by Turkey after the war. In 1926, however, the League of Nations confirmed that the province was indeed part of Iraq, thus allowing the British to benefit from the oil discovered in Kirkuk. In addition, the Kurdish population, mostly Sunni, was also a counterweight to the Shiite majority, which the British distrusted. Thus, by the end of the 1920s, the priority was no longer on building the Iraqi state, and the second High Commissioner, Henry Dobbs, considered that project to have failed, the threat of aerial repression being, in his view, the only reason why the country did not break up.<sup>25</sup> This informal withdrawal thus allowed the British to continue to exert a certain influence while freeing themselves from the supervision of the Council of the League of Nations<sup>26</sup>. Thus, Iraq joined this institution as an independent state in 1932, although the Iraqi state was not able to assume security within its borders without the Royal Air Force. As for Iraqi society, it continued to be strongly marked by several identities, confessional, ethnic or tribal, without an Iraqi national feeling being able to truly transcend them.

The US withdrawal was tainted by the notion that the occupation had served primarily economic interests. The fact that Vice President Dick Cheney had been the CEO of Halliburton, an oil construction and engineering company that received the first bids for the reconstruction of Iraq, highlighted the oil factor in the 2003 intervention. While the primacy of this factor is debated, it is clear that it played a very important role. For the Bush junior administration, it was not only necessary to secure the United States' oil supply but also to ensure that it did not depend on hostile regimes for these supplies<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, the considerable sums invested by the United States in the reconstruction of Iraq largely benefited private US companies specialized in logistics or engineering. A 2013 report by Stuart Bowen, head of the Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, noted that the process had been marked by fraud, waste of public funds and a lack of follow-up on some contracts.

*On the political level, the transfer of sovereignty took place quickly, in June 2004, when Paul Bremer, head of the CPA, handed over power to Iyad Allawi, the new Iraqi Prime Minister. A Provisional Iraqi Governing Council, composed of the various political parties that had emerged since the fall of the regime, was to ensure the transition. This provisional council drew up a provisional constitution (Transitional Administrative Law) which was to serve as the basis for the country's future institutions. The aim was to reflect on the balance of power and the nature of the Iraqi state. The question of the status of Kurdistan within Iraq was raised but the U.S., like the British before them, supported the territorial integrity of Iraq, opposing the idea of an independent Kurdistan<sup>28</sup>. In any case, the Iraqi Provisional Governing Council failed to organize a truly national debate from which a consensus could have emerged. Its members, often from the Iraqi diaspora, suffered from a lack of legitimacy and struggled to mobilize a real social base<sup>29</sup>. Elections were held for a Constituent Assembly in January 2005, allowing a Transitional Iraqi Government to take office before the new constitution was approved by referendum in October 2005. However, the influence of the United States continued, and that of Iran, supporting the Shiites who were now in the majority in the state apparatus and in the government, asserted itself. Thus, as in 1932, Iraqi sovereignty was in fact severely limited by the continuing influence of one or more outside powers and remains so to this day<sup>30</sup>. Even after 2005, American consultants stayed in their ministerial positions, having conceived a law on foreign investments to attract capitals to Iraq. Thus, the political and economic influence of the United States continued and so was that of Iran, supporting the Shiites now constituting a majority in the state system and in the government. Just like in 1932, Iraqi sovereignty was in reality highly limited by the persistence of one of many foreign powers, and still is today<sup>31</sup>*

## Conclusion

Finally, a comparison of the two occupations shows the same failure to build a strong link between the state and Iraqi civil

society. This process was biased from the outset by the exogenous nature of the power responsible for setting it up, in the context of military occupation, and by the obvious desire to give priority to strategic and economic interests. Despite the specific political choices made by the British and the Americans, and their different vision of the Iraqi political actors, it is indeed the same hegemonic ambition that was expressed from one century to the next.

While both occupations were met with different forms of resistance, the American occupation was perhaps unique in that it created a movement of mistrust of governments within Western societies. In the United Kingdom, a country that was one of the closest allies of the Bush junior administration under Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Chilcot report brought to light the lies and approximations used to justify the war. Some consider that these events encouraged populism and led to events such as the vote for Brexit or the election of Donald Trump<sup>32</sup>.