

HOW MESOPOTAMIA BECAME IRAQ

by Sheila T. Harty, 2006

based on the book *PARIS 1919* by Margaret MacMillan

Most educated people know that the boundaries of the Middle East were drawn by the Allied Powers at the end of World War I — The Great War — The War to End All Wars. Still, the history needs retelling. I took my history lesson from the *New York Times* best-selling book *PARIS 1919* by Margaret MacMillan, Oxford-educated professor of history at University of Toronto. This talk is taken directly—sometimes verbatim—from Chapter 27, “Arab Independence.” In the Foreword, Richard Holbrooke, former Assistant Secretary of State under Clinton, wrote: “...[this book] is a study of flawed decisions with terrible consequences, many of which haunt us to this day.” In fact, a joke circulating in Paris during 1919 had the peacemakers busy preparing a “just and lasting war” (see footnote on last page).

No better way exists to begin this story than to quote the anecdote that starts the chapter on “Arab Independence.” Arnold Toynbee, then an adviser to the British delegation at the Peace Conference, had to deliver some papers to the British Prime Minister. David Lloyd George forgot Toynbee’s presence and began thinking out loud. “*Mesopotamia... yes... oil... irrigation... we must have Mesopotamia. Palestine... yes... the Holy Land... Zionism... we must have Palestine. Syria... hmmm... what is there in Syria? ...let the French have it.*” The arrogance of 19th century imperialists was their assumption that they could dispose of the Ottoman empire to suit themselves.¹

David Lloyd George and his long-time rival Georges Clemenceau, Prime Minister of France, met in London before going to Paris for the Peace Conference. In doing so, they were avoiding Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States.² They expected him to be an impediment to their division of the spoils. They believed “*the obstacle is America.*”³ Wilson’s “Fourteen Points,”⁴ with its groundbreaking concept of “self-determination,”⁵ was written in a spirit of hope and optimism for a “new world order”—a League of Nations—before disillusionment set in.⁶ Only one of Wilson’s Points dealt directly with the Ottoman Empire:

...the other nationalities, which are now under Turkish rule, should be assured an...absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.⁷

Despite such idealism, the Kurds still have no homeland 87 years later.⁸ Wilson himself admitted that his Fourteen Points were vague and unrealistic. Yet, these principles of statecraft were powerful for inspiring nationalism in the Muslim world after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, which only made peace harder for the Allied Powers to broker.⁹

That December 1918, Clemenceau and Lloyd George made a deal between themselves on a division of the Ottoman Empire’s vast Arab and Turkish territories, stretching east to west from the borders of Persia to

¹ Margaret MacMillan, Chapter 27, “Arab Independence,” *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2001), pp. 381, quoting Arnold Toynbee, *Acquaintances* (London, 1967), pp. 211-212.

² MacMillan, pp. 381.

³ Clemenceau disliked both Wilson and Lloyd George, saying: “*I find myself between Jesus Christ on the one hand and Napoleon Bonaparte on the other.*” MacMillan, pp. 33.

⁴ MacMillan, pp. 386, quoting Gaston Domergue, former French Minister of the Colonies, as quoted in H.W.V. Temperley, ed., *A History of the Peace Conference of Paris* (London, 1920-1924), vol. 1, pp. 439; and C.M. Andrew and A.S. Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas: The Climax of French Imperial Expansion, 1914-1924* (Stanford CA, 1981), pp. 149.

⁵ “*God himself was content with ten commandments. Wilson...inflicted fourteen...*” Clemenceau said. MacMillan, pp. 33.

⁶ Richard Holbrooke, Foreword to *Paris 1919*, MacMillan, pp. viii.

⁷ MacMillan, Chapter 1, “Woodrow Wilson Comes to Europe,” pp. 15.

⁸ Point XII, Proposed January 1918, part of Armistice of November 1918, MacMillan, Appendix, “Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points,” pp. 496.

⁹ The Kurds were left in three different governments: Ataturk’s in Turkey, Reza Shah’s in Persia, and Feisal’s in Iraq. For this history, see chapter 29, “Ataturk and the Breaking of the Sevres,” *Paris 1919*.

¹⁰ Holbrooke in MacMillan, pp. xxix.

the Mediterranean and north to south from the Black Sea to the Red Sea. From this vast region came the countries that we now call Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Turkey.¹¹ The thinking went like this: the “new world order” should not sanction annexation or colonization of the defeated territories; instead, some form of trusteeship should provide a supervisory government for those territories considered not yet ready to govern themselves.¹² The peacemakers envisioned either a “mandate” for a new state under the supervision of the League of Nations or under one of the major Allied Powers.¹³ Numerous arrangements were suggested and bartered back and forth with the usual self-interested compromises.

Sykes-Picot Agreement

Ironically, Britain and France had already made their deal over the Ottoman Empire in the midst of the war “when promises were cheap and defeat was real.”¹⁴ Britain needed French support to divert resources from the Western Front for a new offensive against the Ottomans in Egypt.¹⁵ In return, the British offered a future disposition of the Ottoman Empire that was favorable to the French.¹⁶ This secret Sykes-Picot Agreement was named for the British and French representatives¹⁷ who divided up the Arab and Turkish territories between their two countries. France would get the Syrian coast, while Britain would take Mesopotamia from Baghdad south to Basra. Palestine, because of its religious significance, would have international administration.¹⁸ The remaining land would have local Arab chiefs: under French supervision from Mosul to Damascus; and under British supervision around the Persian Gulf.

The Arabian peninsula was not mentioned—and, thus, left as Independent Arab States—because no one valued all those miles of sand.¹⁹ Oil was not discovered under that sand until the 1930s. Still, in 1911, Churchill, while Lord of the Admiralty, had ordered the change of fuel in British ships from coal to oil. As Britain had no oil reserves itself, the prospect of oil in Mesopotamia was clearly a motive. Britain and France approved the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire stirred up old dreams and rivalries.²⁰ Besides the victors’ greed for territories was the competing superiority of the Franco and Anglo civilizations.²¹ Yet, when the war was over, the Sykes-Picot Agreement seemed an inadequate distribution of the spoils. Now the thinking went like this: France would have all of Syria, not just the coast, because their connection went back to the Crusades.²² (Only an imperialist could consider that a positive factor.) Syria, for the French lobby, meant the Greater Syria—from the Sinai in the southwest to Mosul in the northeast.²³ If France got all that, the British would have to consider some significant demands: their main concern was in protecting the Suez access to India.

The Balfour Declaration

Another promise made during the war would cause no end of trouble for the peacemakers.²⁴ The British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour told the Jews of the world that they could have a homeland in Palestine.²⁵ The Balfour Declaration was issued by the British in 1917, supported by the French, and later the Americans. The agreement, of course, did not mesh with promises already made to the Arabs.²⁶ Although the Declaration promised protection of nonJewish residents, Arabs were 4/5th of the population in Palestine.

¹¹ Israel, of course, came after World War II.

¹² MacMillan, Chapter 8, “Mandates,” pg. 98.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ MacMillan, pg. 383.

¹⁵ MacMillan, pg. 383.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and Georges Picot of France.

¹⁸ MacMillan, pg. 384.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ MacMillan, pg. 382.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² MacMillan, pg. 384.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ MacMillan, pg. 388.

²⁵ For more of this history up to 1922, see chapter 28, “Palestine,” *Paris 1919*.

²⁶ MacMillan, pg. 388.

In these thrusts and parries, the Allied Powers assumed that the defeated Ottoman Turks and Arabs would simply do what was decided.²⁷ When the British Secretary of State for India²⁸ objected, saying: "Let us not for Heaven's sake tell the Muslim what he ought to think; let us recognize what they do think." To which the British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour replied: "I am quite unable to see why Heaven or any other Power should object to our telling the Muslim what he ought to think."²⁹

Although the British and the French acted as if the Middle East was theirs to quarrel over, vague promises had also been made to Italy for access to ports on the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.³⁰ The United States, in contrast, took seriously the novel idea of consulting local populations about what they wanted.³¹ Yet, the British were confident that the Arabs would willingly choose British protection.³² Alas, Britain and France had summoned a spirit of nationalism to their aid during the war, which would not easily be tamed.³³

Hussein, Sharif of Mecca, and Feisal

In fact, the British had already promised Arab independence to Hussein, the Sharif of Mecca, a member of the Hashemite tribe and a descendent of the Prophet Mohammed. Britain's promise was made as an expediency of war in exchange for Hussein leading an Arab revolt for the British against the Turks. The only land exempted from that promise was around Baghdad and Basra and what was west of a line drawn from Aleppo south to Damascus. Hussein assumed that Arabs would rule even in the exempted land, although under British supervision; the British, of course, assumed differently.³⁴ The revolt, however, was successful and Sharif Hussein declared himself King of the Arabs.³⁵ Hussein felt pressed by his rival Ibn Saud, who was gathering the Arab tribes around himself. Ibn Saud, of course, was eventually successful more than a decade later, becoming the King of all Arabia—Saudi Arabia.³⁶ But, in 1915, the British weren't sure that the Arabs would ever rise up or that the Ottoman Empire would collapse or that the Allies would even win the war.³⁷

Sharif Hussein's four sons fought alongside him against the Turks, but the one who stood out was Feisal, who had a fair-haired, blue-eyed British liaison officer by his side—T.E. Lawrence, of course. Lawrence held out to Feisal a hope for the throne of an independent Syria—the Greater Syria that included Lebanon and Palestine.³⁸ Lawrence, in Arab dress, accompanied Feisal to the Peace Conference. However, they met blatant hostility from the French, who suspected that the British were using Feisal to weaken their case for a Syrian mandate.³⁹ Although Prime Minister Clemenceau met with them, Feisal was told that he had no official standing at the Peace Conference and should not have made the trip.

Rebuffed, Feisal went on to London, where he received a better welcome but was told that he might have to accept a French mandate for Syria.⁴⁰ The British also wanted Feisal to agree that Palestine was not part of Syria, as the Arabs maintained, and to sign an agreement with the Zionists recognizing their presence. Feisal signed the agreement, reluctantly, feeling that he needed British support against French hostility.⁴¹ The validity of the document has been debated ever since.⁴²

²⁷ MacMillan, Chapter 28, "The End of the Ottomans," pg. 380.

²⁸ Edwin Montague.

²⁹ MacMillan, pg. 380, quoting from A. Ryan, *The Last of the Dragomans* (London, 1951), pg. 130; P.B. Kinross, *Ataturk: A Biography of Mustafa Kemal, Father of Modern Turkey* (London, 1964), pg. 241; and P.C. Helmreich, *From Paris to Sewer: The Partition of the Ottoman Empire at the Peace Conference of 1919-1920* (Columbus OH, 1974), pg. 335.

³⁰ MacMillan, pg. 386.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² MacMillan, pg. 387.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ MacMillan, pg. 388, citing R. Lacey, *The Kingdom* (New York, 1981), pg. 83; and M. Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Near East, 1792-1923* (London, 1987), pp. 281-186.

³⁵ MacMillan, pg. 388.

³⁶ In 1926, Ibn Saud named himself King of Hejaz and Nejd; in 1932, he proclaimed Hejaz and Nejd as the United Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

³⁷ MacMillan, pg. 388.

³⁸ MacMillan, pg. 389.

³⁹ MacMillan, pg. 390.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

At the Peace Conference, Lawrence stayed at Feisal's side as escort and translator. Feisal did finally get to address the Supreme Council.⁴³ In white robes embroidered with gold and with a long curved saber, Feisal spoke in Arabic while Lawrence translated. Many of those attending conjectured that Lawrence extemporized while Feisal recited the Qur'an.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Feisal stated the Arabs' desire for self-determination. While he might accept the exemption of Palestine and Lebanon, the rest of the Arab world should have its independence. He invited the British and the French to live up to their promises. Woodrow Wilson asked Feisal which country's mandate was he willing to accept. Feisal stressed that Arabs wanted unity and independence but, if a mandate was necessary, he would prefer the United States.⁴⁵ However, when Feisal and Lawrence later met with Wilson, he was reserved and noncommittal.

The British and the French continued haggling, neither sure what was in their best interests to demand. Lloyd George urged Clemenceau to accept Feisal as ruler of Syria, but Clemenceau had been warned that the Arabs would violently oppose French occupation.⁴⁶ Wilson tried to broker a compromise by suggesting a scientific basis for a settlement—that they send a fact-finding mission to ask the Arabs what they wanted. Neither enthusiastic, Lloyd George and Clemenceau stalled at appointing a representative fact-finder, calling the idea "dreadful."⁴⁷ In exasperation, Wilson sent his own fact-finders to the Middle East.

The Fights over Mesopotamia

Lloyd George and Clemenceau continued to fight over the Ottoman territories, almost coming to blows and often maintaining petulant silences and distances.⁴⁸ The focus of their vehement dogfights was now all of Mesopotamia. British troops were already in occupation, British officials from India were already administering, and British ships were already up and down the Tigris, but Clemenceau had begun to realize there was oil.⁴⁹ No one knew for certain that Mesopotamia had oil in any quantity, but black sludge was seeping from the ground in Baghdad and swamps in Mosul were belching gas and catching fire.⁵⁰ Since Clemenceau had already given up Mosul in the North, he was now insisting that France have a compensatory share of whatever was in the ground. Lloyd George and Clemenceau's eventual deal was that France would have a quarter of the oil plus Syria for Britain's land access of two pipelines from Mosul to the Mediterranean.⁵¹ They also agreed that the Americans should get none.⁵²

In these dealings, they began to refer to the area as a single unit—stretching from Mosul in the North to Basra in the South with Baghdad in the middle.⁵³ These cities defined the three Ottoman provinces. Yet, neither Britain nor France seemed to consider that these provinces did not cohere as a unit. The provinces differed in history, religion, and geography. There was no Mesopotamian people. Basra had links with India, Baghdad with Persia, and Mosul with Turkey and Syria.⁵⁴ While these cities were cosmopolitan, the regions surrounding them were tribal and led by religious factions: half Shia Muslim, a quarter Sunni Muslim, the rest Jews and Christians. Those were only the religious divisions: half were also Arab, the rest were Kurds and Persians. There was no shared nationalism.⁵⁵

⁴³ On February 6, 1919, the Supreme Council of the Peace Conference consisted of the Prime Ministers and Foreign Secretaries of Britain, France, Italy, and the United States.

⁴⁴ MacMillan, pg. 391.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ MacMillan, pg. 394.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ MacMillan, pg. 395.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ MacMillan, pg. 396.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ MacMillan, pg. 397.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ MacMillan, pg. 398.

The Only Woman

Meanwhile, the Muslim world was stirring—in India (under Gandhi), in Egypt, and in Turkey. The British Oriental Secretary, Gertrude Bell, was one imperialist who recognized this.⁵⁶ Oxford-educated, aristocratic, and single, she had traveled throughout the Middle East and was fluent in Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, and Persian. Lawrence and Feisal were her friends. Though Bell had initially been an imperialist, she changed her views and supported Arab independence.⁵⁷ Bell was convinced that the fate of Mesopotamia was linked to Syria and hoped that the French would accept Feisal as king of an independent Syria.⁵⁸

Lloyd George had been putting off the peace settlement of the Ottoman Empire. While everyone waited for the final terms, the Kurds and the Persians continued resenting Arab domination, while tribal chiefs resented British officials and Shia Muslims resented Sunnis.⁵⁹ What moved Lloyd George forward was an economic urgency from increasing costs of maintaining a British and Indian army throughout the Ottoman territories as well as Egypt.⁶⁰ Rumors of Feisal trying to organize a common front with Egyptian and Turkish nationalists against the British added political urgency.⁶¹ On hearing that, Lloyd George pulled his troops out of Syria and let French troops move in and take the mandate.⁶² The Americans protested weakly about self-determination.⁶³

The Greater Syria

Woodrow Wilson's fact-finding mission to consult the Arabs had found that the majority of Arabs throughout Palestine and Syria wanted independence for Syria—but the Greater Syria, including Palestine and Lebanon.⁶⁴ Feisal returned to Syria only to find great unrest among the Arabs. He was urged by them to demand independence of Syria, even if that meant war with France.⁶⁵ Back at Oxford, Lawrence watched helplessly as Britain abandoned his old friend.⁶⁶ In March 1920, the Syrian Congress proclaimed Feisal as King of Syria—Greater Syria, from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates.⁶⁷ Emboldened, another Congress proclaimed Feisal's brother, Abdullah, King of an independent Mesopotamia. The Congress also demanded that the British get out.⁶⁸

In the interim, Lebanese Christians were agitating; wanting neither Feisal nor the French, they declared themselves independent.⁶⁹ Arab radicals accused Feisal of being too compliant with the French, but the French High Commissioner in Damascus⁷⁰ sent Feisal an ultimatum to accept the French mandate for Syria unconditionally.⁷¹ When French troops overran a small and poorly armed Arab force, Feisal and his family fled to Palestine, then to Italy. To bring Syria under control, the French shrank it.⁷² They rewarded the Lebanese Christians with greatly expanded borders, including the ports of Tyre, Sidon, Beirut, and Tripoli, which defined the coast of Lebanon.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ MacMillan, pg. 400, citing J. Wallach, *Desert Queen: the Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell: Adventurer, Adviser to Kings, Ally of Lawrence of Arabia* (New York, 1996), pg. 207; J. Marlowe, *Late Victorian: The Life of Sir Arnold Talbot Wilson* [to whom Gertrude Bell was Oriental Secretary] (London, 1967), pg. 112; P. Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq, 1914-1932* (London, 1976), pg. 22; H.V.E. Winstone, *Gertrude Bell* (London, 1980), pp. 195, 198, 202; and M. Zamir, "Feisal and the Lebanese Question, 1918-1920," *Middle Eastern Studies* (27/3), 1991, pp. 408-09.

⁵⁸ MacMillan, pg. 400.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ MacMillan, pg. 405.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ MacMillan, pg. 406.

⁶⁵ MacMillan, pg. 407.

⁶⁶ MacMillan, pg. 406, citing J. Nevakivi, *Britain, France, and the Arab Middle East, 1914-1920* (London, 1969), pg. 199; and J. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T.E. Lawrence* (London, 1989), pg. 621.

⁶⁷ MacMillan, pg. 407.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, citing Andrew and Kanyan-Forstner, pp. 201-02, 215; Marlowe, pp. 212-13; and Z.N. Zeine, *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism with a Background Study of Arab-Turkish Relations in the Near East* (Beirut, 1966), pp. 120, n.6, 146-47.

⁶⁹ MacMillan, pg. 407.

⁷⁰ General Henri Gourand.

⁷¹ MacMillan, pg. 407.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Division of Spoils

By 1920, the Arabs had lost Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Mesopotamia. Now rebellions broke out up and down the Euphrates River valley from Basra to Baghdad to Mosul and north into the Kurdish mountains.⁷⁷ Gertrude Bell was convinced of Arab self-government and was warning the British authorities of the consequences if Arab expectations for self-rule were not met.⁷⁸ Arab unrest was blamed by others on outside agitators and Wilson's Fourteen Points,⁷⁹ but the British blamed the Arabs and sent in troops to burn their villages and sent in aircraft to bomb their towns.⁸⁰

The British were now wondering if Mesopotamia was worth the trouble. Lloyd George and Churchill, then Colonial Secretary, wanted to keep it⁸¹—as if they had it! Bell urged the practical and less expensive solution of finding a pliable Arab ruler for the region.⁸² Conveniently, they had Feisal to whom they owed something.⁸³ The British stage-managed his election, producing a vote of 96 percent in favor of Feisal as King.⁸⁴ Gertrude Bell drew the boundaries of the new state—as she alone had personal knowledge of all the land. She also orchestrated Feisal's coronation and designed his flag⁸⁵ over what was henceforth called Iraq—a term used as far back as the traditions of Mohammed to refer to the “shores” between the two rivers.⁸⁶

An Independent Iraq

In April 1920, at the San Remo Conference on the west coast of Italy, the terms of the treaty with the Ottoman Empire were finally approved. By 1921, not only was Feisal King of the new state of Iraq, but his brother Abdullah was also King of the new state of Transjordan.⁸⁷ At first, Feisal accepted British supervision, usually through Bell's consultation, but he soon grew confident with experience and chafed under the British mandate.⁸⁸ He pushed for independence of his new country. Not until 1932 did Iraq join the League of Nations as an independent state. Feisal died the following year.

The Arab world has never forgotten the political games of perfidy and betrayal by Britain and France against the Arabs.⁸⁹ Clearly, the peace settlement of the Middle East only brought a “*just and lasting war.*”⁹⁰

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⁷⁷ MacMillan, pg. 408.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Namely, Arnold Wilson, to whom Gertrude Bell, his former Oriental Secretary, was no longer speaking. MacMillan, pg. 408, citing J. Marlowe, pp. 162, 204, 215.

⁸⁰ MacMillan, pg. 408.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ MacMillan, pg. 407, citing Zeine, pp. 136-37.

⁸⁶ Thomas Patrick Hughes, editor, *Dictionary of Islam* (Kazi Publications, 1886), pg. 215.

⁸⁷ MacMillan, pg. 408.

⁸⁸ MacMillan, pg. 409.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ MacMillan, pg. 273, citing I. Aldrovandi Marescotti, *Guerra Diplomatica* (Milan, 1936), pg. 407; and S. Bonsal, *Suitors and Suppliants* (New York, 1946), pg. 179.



Mesopotamia

Ottoman Empire (1300 to 1920)

(defined by dotted line)

Middle East (after World War I)

(defined by orange line ——— Iraq in purple line ———)