

# Iraqi Society, 1914-1974

Professor Tareq Ismael, University of Calgary

Under Ottoman suzerainty, and up to the outbreak of the First World War, what is presently Iraq then consisted of three autonomous administrative provinces, or *Wilayats*: Basra in the south, Baghdad in the centre and Mosul in the north. The official boundaries of Iraq, similar to ancient Mesopotamia, were the product of a sketch on tracing paper in 1918 by a low level British diplomat, [Gertrude Bell](#), who was an assistant to [Sir Arnold Wilson](#), the first civil commissioner of the British Mandate. The integration of the three regions, and their centralized, direct administration gradually evolved from 1914, when Britain occupied Basra, took over Baghdad in 1917 and annexed Mosul in 1918. In 1920 the centralized administration acquired its permanent boundaries when the League of Nations awarded the Iraq Mandate to Britain. In June of the same year, opposition by armed tribes, with the ideological support of *Fatawas* issued by Shi'ite religious leadership, flared up first in the Euphrates region then engulfed the rest of the country. Although the British military succeeded in quelling the armed uprising in October 1920, it brought onto the political arena a web of interacting socio-economic formations. The uprising, apart from the huge human and financial cost to the British was indirectly instrumental in installing [Faisal Ibn Sharif Hussein](#), the overthrown King of Syria (1920) and son of the leader of the Arab revolt in Mecca four years earlier, as King in 1921, thus creating the Hashimite Kingdom of Iraq. Faisal was forced to steer a delicate course between the demands of the controlling British and the aspirations of Iraqis.

## The British in Iraq

Evidence from the de-classified British archives suggests that the British occupation of Basra, in 1914, had to do with the economic wealth and oil potential of Iraq, as well as its geopolitical position. The War Office, Admiralty, Foreign Office and Colonial Office had a fairly accurate assessment of Iraq's oil potential despite their public statements to the contrary. While the occupation of Baghdad stemmed from motives of the secret [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#) to control territories assigned to Britain, Britain's insistence on severing Mosul from Turkey and the French, and incorporating it into Iraq, originated from their need to control the flow of oil to the Royal Navy. While Sir Arthur [Hirtzel](#), political secretary at the India office, emphasized the geopolitical importance and economic wealth of Iraq, the British Admiralty poignantly underscored the role that Iraq could play in meeting the increasing demand for oil. From 1914 through 1921, the British occupation attempted, in pursuit of its objectives, to rule the people of Iraq directly through a centralized administration, one conceived in Britain and staffed mainly by non-Iraqis. Thus, an emerging modern bureaucratic state began to forge

the civil society of Iraq, which initially consisted of cleavages of pre-modern socio-economic and political formations: tribal chieftains of various power bases, notables, wealthy merchants, a hierarchy of semi-feudal lords, peasants, tradesmen, and most importantly, a powerful religious hierarchy. To this mix was later added an embryonic Iraqi army that, in 1925 consisted of 11,500 men, a number that over time would significantly increase.

Concerned with the immediacy of its goals in Iraq, Britain had foregone nation building in favour of the creation of a modern state. This apparently thoughtless act did not take into account the intrinsic incongruity between the formal functioning of the state administrative routine and the *modus operandi* of personal relationships of informal groupings that had survived for more than four centuries under the Ottomans. The state-played role in creating Iraqi society has been the dominant reason for Iraq's political instability. Apart from oil and the geo-strategic position of Iraq, the British, through the administrative organization, sought to exploit Iraq economically by developing effective instruments of communications, such as roads, waterways and the railway, improving irrigation by building and deepening canals and ports, and by land reclamation and effective taxation. The needs of Iraqis were different and were minimally satisfied by taxation. On the basis of daily living, peasants relied on the protection of tribal Sheiks, who acted most of the time as government agents in a semi feudal relationship with their tribesmen (the peasants). In addition, merchants had their problems with the legal system, which they perceived to be ineffective, and municipal authorities appealed for a defined boundary of their jurisdiction, grants-in-aid and the establishment of public health and education facilities. The presence of the foreign bases, forced labour in the construction industry, and the Anglo-Indian staff of the bureaucracy were unsettling. This was a catalyst for an emerging "otherness" of the Iraqis – distinct and different from the administration – which was articulated in "Arabness" and the growing fervour of nationalism, which found contributory nurture in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the exposure of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of the First World War, the Cairo Revolt of 1919, and the resolutions of the San Remo Conference in April 1920.

## The Council of State

The immediate result of the uprising in 1920 was the British recognition that the façade of indigenous governance was necessary to achieve its goals. Hence, the formation of the Council of State which was headed by the Naqib of Baghdad, Abd al-Rahaman al-Kilani, along with eight members that represented certain limited interests within the socio-economic strata. The Council ushered in a politicization of the tribes, clans, and the wealthy and notable people, along with the corollary of corrupt politics. The formation of government, more often than not, was based on expediency rather than genuine representation, which in turn generated an oligarchy of self-serving politicians who

would concede anything to further their self-interests, hence the 1922 Agreement, the 1925 Oil Concession (which availed Iraq royalties of four shilling per ton for 75 years), as well as the 1926 and 1930 Agreements. In all such ventures the politicians served Britain's interests in Iraq, thus providing the opposition forces with further ammunition against the Hashimite regime. However, despite the formation of political parties, labour associations, political societies, and the publishing of newspapers, the opposition forces were fragmented. There had never been a hegemonic stratum with a clear national agenda ready to assume the leadership of a cohesive opposition.

In 1932 Britain gave its support to Iraq for a seat in the League of Nations, after ensuring that its interests would be protected in the [1930 Treaty](#). In 1933 the Iraqi army entered the national arena when it harshly put down the Assyrian uprising. This gave the army popularity, and it became a source of national pride. At the time, the army, on the whole, consisted of the members of the less privileged families, as the wealthy were always reluctant to send their sons to become soldiers or officers. Hence the army enjoyed neither a strong socio-economic constituency nor political influence. Weeks after the revolt King Faisal died, and his less astute son, Ghazi, was declared King of Iraq. Ghazi did not conceal his [anti-British sentiments](#), but, he occupied himself with hobbies and pleasures, leaving the political arena to politicians. In 1936 a [military coup d'état](#) – led by the acting Chief of Staff, General Bakr Sedki – took place. While Sedki delivered the formal reigns of government to the rising nationalist opposition, he continued to work behind the scenes. A large number of nationalists resigned a few months later and soon the coup ended. Sedki was assassinated and the restoration of self-serving politicians gave way to military involvement in Iraqi politics. On 4 April 1939 Ghazi died in an automobile accident. Britain, with its Iraqi supporters, led by [Nouri Al Said](#) (the veteran pro-British politician), was able to re-engineer the country and install Ghazi's four-year-old son, Faisal, as King and his brother-in-law and cousin, Abdul Ilah Ibn Ali, an unknown clerk in the Iraqi Embassy in London, as a Regent and Crown Prince. [Abdul Ilah](#), along with Al Said, ruled the country on behalf of the child monarch until the end of the Hashimite Kingdom.

The outbreak of the Second World War led Britain to exercise unilateral and extra-legal security measures. Consequently, dissatisfied nationalist army officers forced the appointment of a nationalist Prime Minister, [Rashid Ali al-Gailani](#), which drove the Crown Prince and his cohort of pro-British politicians to flee the country or withdraw from the political arena. This led Britain to re-take Iraq in May 1941, reinstate the old political elite, and purge the army. Democratic change at the end of the war, promised by the Crown Prince and the political leadership, never materialized and a short-lived period of controlled party activities ensued, leaving out communists and leftists, who were prominent in the social formation of the country and the main voice of social change. When re-negotiation of the 1930 treaty in 1947 reaffirmed British interests, [mass demonstrations broke out](#) (January 1948), forcing the government to pull back and retreat. An iron fist policy throughout the early 1950s, until

the coup d'etat of 14 July 1958, created widespread resentment which was expended in periodic mass protests and demonstrations as well as in the proliferation of opposition groups, various professional associations, and social organizations. All of which contributed to the foundation in 1957 of the umbrella organization *Jabhat al-Itihad al Watani* ([National Union Front](#)), which coordinated the activities of all political opposition forces in the country from then on. A few months earlier an army secret society was formed, modelled after the Nasser group in Egypt.

## The 1958 Coup

The [coup d'etat](#), which General Abd al-Karim [Qassim](#) led with the help of his subordinate and friend, Colonel Abdul al-[Salam Arif](#), in July 1958, installed him as Prime Minister, and Arif as his Deputy and Minister of the Interior. The coup had its roots both in the domestic environment and the regional and international contexts. The wide acceptance of the military coup, and the political support for the [United Arab Republic](#) (UAR), transformed it into a popular revolution, which Qassim used to effect rapid socio-economic reform. On the socio-political front, the revolution had to tackle the heterogeneous agendas of no less than nine political parties, in addition to the professional and youth organizations. Qassim was quick to introduce land reform, lay out the basis for modern infrastructure, initiate industrial projects and issue Public Law No. 80, which recovered 99.5 per cent of oil land that had been conceded to the British. Strategically, he contracted Soviet military equipment and withdrew from the Baghdad Pact, thus mitigating the Anglo-American power basis in the Middle East, and setting the course for a collision with both the US and Britain. On the question of the UAR, Qassim advocated solidarity but not immediate unity, while Arif called for a merger. Accordingly, public opinion was split.

Both Qassim and his friend and partner in the revolution, Colonel Arif, hailed from very humble backgrounds, and neither had a politically feasible plan to transform the country's indigenous institutions. Nonetheless, they strove to achieve monopoly of power by any means. To build a popular base for his regime, Qassim attempted to forge a state-sponsored bourgeoisie to counterbalance the popular base of the political parties and their irreconcilable agendas, and to simultaneously mitigate the power of pre-modern socio-economic forces. However, a vacuum was created in the process, which allowed the frustration of dissatisfied political groups to capitalize of Qassim's weakness and rally all forces that found his reforms and foreign policy too radical. Qassim's reluctance to respond to Arab nationalist demands and his refusal to accept the left platform, along with his attempt to have a centrist stance, contributed to his declining popularity among the citizenry, as well as the army. Qassim's claim to Kuwait's oil-rich territory in June 1961 isolated him from other Arab governments.

Furthermore, his burgeoning plans to nationalize Western corporate interests, particularly oil, heightened Western antagonism towards him and his regime.

## The 1968 Coup and the rise of the Ba'th Party

The [Ba'th Party](#) and a coalition of nationalists, supported by the US, were later able to assume power through [military coup](#), on 8 February 1963, which ended the Qassim regime. At the time of the coup, the Ba'th consisted of no more than 1,000 members. However, with CIA guidance, the new junta massacred over 5,000 active members of various ideological persuasions, particularly communists and leftists. Ali Salih al-Sa'di, the Secretary General of the Ba'th Party of Iraq and the new Deputy Prime Minister openly declared, "We came on the CIA train." The coup set up a [National Revolutionary Command Council](#) – composed mainly of the Ba'th leadership – and installed Arif as a figurehead president. However, real power remained with Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, a Ba'thist military recruit. As the Ba'th was aware of the army as a political power, it shortly after the coup set up a paramilitary National Guard, much to the resentment of the army. The task of the National Guard was to counter potential army dissidence and purge the civilian population of political opposition when force was deemed necessary. Because the Ba'th was divided between radicals and moderates, Arif seized on this weakness with the help of the military and ousted the Ba'th from power, appointing instead his close and trusted associates, including his brother Abd al-Rahman Arif, to fill all top military posts. At the domestic level, President Arif conducted large-scale nationalization of business corporations, probably in preparation for a union with the UAR, which never materialized.

After Arif died in a helicopter crash in April 1966, his regime stumbled on the Kurdish issue and the military defeat of 1967, which led to an [army coup](#) and the return of the Ba'th in July 1968. [Saddam Hussain](#), a Ba'thist functionary and member of al-Bakr's clan in Tikrit, gradually emerged as the real power in the Ba'th Party. A modality of power sharing between al-Bakr and Saddam divided executive responsibilities in such a way as to concentrate all the organs of power within the Ba'th. The regime was particularly noted for its ruthless oppression, yet enjoyed Western support despite [oil nationalization](#) in 1972, which was followed by the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and the spiraling of oil prices. The manifold increase in Iraqi oil revenue availed the Ba'th regime an opportunity to employ the society in many state-owned economic sectors. Thus, another script for the replay of state-created society commenced.

**Citation:**

Tareq Ismael, 'Iraqi Society 1914-1974', *The Middle East Online Series 2: Iraq 1914-1974*, Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, Reading, 2006

© *Middle East Online: Iraq*, Cengage Learning, 2006