

PITFALLS OF INSTANT DEMOCRACY

Analyzing the political situation in Iraq four years after the termination of Britain's League of Nations mandate in 1932, American author Henry Foster wrote enthusiastically about the "efficacy of the League's tutelary scheme," asserting that "the mandatory system under British liberal administration and world scrutiny has perfected and democratized the design and process." Foster also described the political system that had developed in Iraq under the mandate as "the first democratic society in the two rivers country."¹ Ironically, though, the first military coup in the Arab world took place in Iraq in October 1936, the very same year that Foster's claims were published.

What went wrong in postmandate Iraq? Were the British to blame for the collapse of the democratic system that they had purportedly introduced to Iraq and labored upon for years? Were the institutions that they had designed mere facades of Western democracy? Or was Iraqi society itself unwilling or insufficiently mature to uphold such values? Those who would bring democracy to a post-Saddam Iraq must address such questions, analyzing the root causes for the British failure and determining whether these problems could be tackled under worse conditions.

After all, it was Britain's idea to bring democracy to the new state that it had established after World War I. Although the British did not call their enterprise *mission civilizatrice*, as the French did, they were nevertheless motivated by lofty ideals of their own. Indeed, one of the principal causes of Britain's failure was the inherent clash between ideals and interests, vision and reality, with the latter usually having the upper hand.

In April 1917, two and a half years after beginning their campaign in Mesopotamia, the British entered Baghdad. Shortly thereafter, Lt. Gen. Sir Frederick Stanley Maude, the commander of the British forces, issued a proclamation stating that they had come as liberators, not as conquerors, and that they did not intend to impose “alien institutions” on the Iraqis: “The people of Baghdad shall flourish and enjoy their wealth and substance under institutions which are in consonance with their sacred laws and racial ideas.” After describing “twenty-six generations” of suffering under “strange tyrants,” the proclamation stated that Britain’s desire was to see the “Arab race . . . rise again to greatness and renown amongst the peoples of the earth.”²

Initially, the residents of Baghdad received their liberators with enthusiasm, but such sentiments evaporated quickly, leading to the “Great Iraqi Revolution” against the British in June 1920, shortly after the announcement of the League of Nations mandate. Although the announcement served as a trigger for the revolt, the deeper causes of Iraqi discontent were best summarized by a statement in a contemporary British newspaper article regarding Britain’s pre-1920 presence: “The Arabs have less liberty than they had under the Turks and they pay three times as much in taxes.”³

THE KING, THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY, AND THE CONSTITUTION

The traumatic experience of the 1920 revolt moved the British to seek a formula that would reconcile their interests in continuing to control Iraq with their promises of democratic governance for Iraqis. Their first step was to establish Faysal ibn Husayn as the new country’s ruler. Faysal’s father, Sharif Husayn ibn Ali, was considered by many to be a British puppet. Moreover, Faysal himself was not a native of Iraqi lands, unlike Sayyid Talib, the interior minister of the first Iraqi cabinet and, ostensibly, a more appropriate candidate for the throne. Despite these facts, the British expelled Talib from Iraq, and the Iraqi cabinet unanimously declared Faysal king in July 1921, “provided that his Highness’ government shall be a constitutional, representative and democratic government [*hukuma dusturiyya, niyabiyya, dimuqratiyya*], limited by law.”⁴

Not content with the cabinet’s consensual decision, the British then moved to magnify the semblance of representative rule by hold-

ing a referendum, the results of which indicated approximately 97 percent support for Faysal's ascension.⁵ Many described the referendum as a farce; as one British official explained in the House of Commons, "[W]e arranged [the results] and hope that it is all for the best, but for God's sake let us drop this sham of democratic government for orientals by themselves."⁶

The next step on the twisted path to democracy was the election of a constituent assembly, which was to carry out three main tasks: (1) ratify the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty signed by the Iraqi cabinet in October 1922; (2) draft a constitution; and (3) enact the Electoral Law.⁷ The assembly elections themselves—which took two years to finalize because of strong antimandate and antitreaty opposition, especially among the Shi'is and their Ulama—represented another negative model of democracy. Anxious to see the treaty ratified, the British did everything possible to break the opposition and facilitate the election of yes-men. In August 1922, taking advantage of the king's illness, British high commissioner Sir Percy Cox assumed formal authority in Iraq and moved quickly to quash the opposition movement by arresting and deporting its leaders, suppressing its parties and press, and ordering an aerial bombardment of the antimandate shaykhs and their tribes.⁸ On September 11, 1923, Kinahan Cornwallis, the British advisor to (and the real power behind) the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, asked the British administrative inspectors in all Iraqi *liwa* (provinces) to telegraph him the names of candidates who they and the Iraqi provincial governors felt would vote for the treaty.⁹ On February 8, 1924, after considering the names, Cornwallis sent each provincial inspector and governor a list of proposed candidates for the 100-member constituent assembly.

In addition, the Iraqi newspaper *al-Istiqlal* maintained that rigging and other abuses took place during the elections themselves. For example, in the Shi'i district of Kazimayn, a Christian (Abd al-Jabbar al-Khayyat) and a Jew (Menahim Daniel) received more votes than the popular Shi'i leader Ja'far Abu al-Timman.¹⁰ Overall, seventy-four of the ninety-eight "proposed" candidates were elected to the assembly, leaving no doubt that the existing Iraqi government—and, behind it, the British—had interfered with the process.

Despite the fact that most of the delegates were believed to be supporters of British policy, the constituent assembly exhibited strong

opposition to the ratification of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty when it met on March 24, 1924. A quorum of only 69 out of 100 delegates participated in the meeting; of these, only 37 voted for the treaty, and only after Cox threatened to dissolve the assembly and issue orders to occupy the assembly building and its surroundings.¹¹

The assembly's second main task was ratification of the constitution, which one British member of an Iraqi court of first instance described as "a gift from the West."¹² Indeed, the constitution was drafted not by Iraqis but by a committee of three British advisors in the Iraqi Ministry of Justice who began working on it as early as autumn 1921, basing many of its terms on the existing constitutions of various other states, including Turkey, Persia, Australia, New Zealand, and Belgium.¹³ King Faysal I accepted this draft but referred it to a committee of three Iraqis: Rustum Haydar, his secretary; Naji al-Suwaydi, the minister of justice; and Sasun Hiskayl, the minister of finance. Interestingly, the committee's main objection to the first draft was that it allotted too much power to the crown. In fact, this argument became such a major point of contention that the colonial office, which had the last say on the constitution, was forced to settle the issue.

Ostensibly, the colonial office intervened in favor of the Iraqi people, but in reality, its decisions suited British interests. The Iraqi constitution that entered into force in March 1925 had all the trappings of a progressive, Western, liberal system of law.¹⁴ In practice, however, the document was ill suited to serving Iraqis' interests or representing their will; its purpose was to facilitate British rule through King Faysal I. At a time when constitutional monarchies around the world were reducing the power of the king, the Iraqi monarch was given overwhelming powers. Thus, the Iraqi parliament, ostensibly the supreme legislative power, could not perform any of its functions without the consent of the king. For example, no parliamentary law could pass without his approval. In addition, Article 26 stated that the king "opens parliament, adjourns, prorogues or dissolves it" and that he "shall have the right of issuing ordinances . . . having the force of Law,"¹⁵ including ordinances pertaining to treaty obligations. Moreover, governmental ministers were responsible to the king, not to the parliament, even though they had to be members of the legislature.

Overall, the constitution's empowerment of the king belied its claim that sovereignty "resides in the people." The Iraqis have called the mandate period "the abnormal situation" (*al-Wad' al-Shadhhdh*), and the first constitution certainly reflected that characterization.

IRAQI 'DEMOCRACY' IN ACTION

According to the Electoral Law enacted in 1924, the Iraqi parliament was to consist of two houses: the Senate (*majlis al-A'yan*) and the Chamber of Deputies (*majlis al-nuwwab*). The king appointed the senators, while the Chamber of Deputies was to be an elected, representative body based on a ratio of one deputy for every 20,000 inhabitants, each serving a term of four years.¹⁶ (The right of suffrage was not universal, however; women were not entitled to vote.) Parliamentary elections were especially cumbersome and prone to executive interference because they involved a two-step, indirect process, much like that seen in the constituent assembly elections; primary electors chose secondary electors, who then assembled in their district headquarters and voted for deputies.¹⁷

The defects of the constitution and the Electoral Law were magnified immensely in real political life, turning Iraqi democracy into a mere facade, if not a farce. For example, Nuri al-Sa'id, one of the leading Iraqi politicians between 1920 and 1958, questioned whether it was possible for "a person, whatever his status in and his services for the country, [to] become a member of parliament unless the government nominates him." He even challenged those who doubted this speculation to resign from parliament and see whether they could get reelected if they were not included on the government's list.¹⁸ In a case in point that verged on the absurd, one man learned of his election to the Chamber of Deputies from a friend who had heard it on the radio:

'Are you kidding?' I said. But then I learned that I was elected a deputy for Ammara *liwa* without my knowledge. In fact, I had not approached anyone nor had I proposed my candidacy. In this way, I slept at night and got up in the morning becoming a deputy for Ammara *liwa*.¹⁹

The Iraqi poet al-Jawahiri had a similar experience. "I became overnight a deputy by order," he joked.²⁰

Another defect of nascent Iraqi democracy was the government's policy of exclusion or unfair representation for certain individuals or groups. The most glaring example was that of the Shi'is, who were under-represented in both the cabinet (a policy fostered by the British) and the parliament. Although Shi'is constituted nearly 55 percent of the population, their average representation in parliament ranged between 27 and 35 percent. In fact, Sunnis were often nominated as deputies in Shi'i areas. In one parliamentary session, for example, the purely Shi'i province of al-Kut was represented entirely by Sunni deputies. Similarly, Baghdad province once sent to parliament nine Sunni deputies, two Jews, one Christian, and no Shi'is. Diyala province fared even worse; it was never represented by a Shi'i deputy, even though two-thirds of its residents were Shi'is.²¹ In effect, then, the Shi'is were denied the only nonviolent mechanism by which they could change the balance of power in their favor.

The government also used more direct methods of preventing unwanted constituencies from participating in the parliament, such as sending opposition members to prison and forging election results. Kamil al-Chadirchi, head of the National Democratic Party, argued that these and other oppressive measures turned Iraq into a "police state" under parliamentary and constitutional guise.²²

The bankruptcy of the Iraqi democratic system was further illustrated by the fact that the parliament did not cast a single no-confidence vote against the cabinet during its entire existence, whereas prime ministers frequently asked the king to dissolve the parliament. Indeed, prime ministers so dominated the legislative branch that each session of parliament was identified by the name of the premier at the time (e.g., "Hikmat Sulayman's session"). In a 1941 report, the British expressed deep frustration with parliamentary life in Iraq, arguing that none of the deputies understood the meaning of their job; that none of the senators were chosen based on their political, social, or administrative experience; that none of the parliamentary elections had truly represented the will of the Iraqi people; and that parliament had become a plaything for politicians and military leaders.²³

Overall, the composition of the early Iraqi parliaments was a product of jockeying and co-optation rather than democratic elections. For example, the British continued to insist on substantial tribal representation in the legislature, and Iraqi deputies readily agreed to

this measure because they feared the tribal forces (*quwwat 'asha'iriyya*) and the weapons that they had accumulated.²⁴ Moreover, one administration gave parliamentary positions to almost all the country's journalists in order to forestall criticism from these quarters. Still another parliament—that of Hikmat Sulayman, which reached power following the first coup in 1936—was filled with military men and officials with leftist tendencies.²⁵

IN CAME THE GENERALS

The shortcomings of the Iraqi democratic system were both a symptom and a cause of some fifteen military coups (some successful) that overwhelmed the country from 1936 to 1968. The reasons for the emergence of the army as the arbiter of Iraq's fate were manifold, encompassing various social, political, ideological, and military factors.

During the mandate and the monarchy, the officers who had participated in the Great Arab Revolt with Faysal constituted the backbone of the Iraqi elite.²⁶ These officers viewed themselves as both the ruling elite and as “the intelligentsia in uniforms” who would cure the malaise of Iraqi society and politics.

The four years between independence in 1932 and the first coup in 1936 were crucial in catapulting the military to center stage. The army became the symbol of Iraqi patriotism by crushing various so-called “revolts” by Assyrians, Kurds, and Shi'is during this period, thus acquiring the legitimacy needed to involve itself in other political issues. For example, Gen. Bakr Sidqi, who engineered the first coup, was welcomed as a hero in Baghdad after carrying out massacres of Assyrians in 1933. The army's ascendancy was also attributable to the fact that it was the most organized and regimented body in the country. Consequently, at a time when Iraq's weak political parties were fading, the army was able to double its power within four years.²⁷ This expansion was facilitated by the lifting of the British veto on national conscription following the end of the mandate.

On the whole, relations between the Iraqi army (especially the officers) and the British were very tense. The British attempted to keep the Iraqi military as weak as possible by forbidding general conscription, limiting arms sales to Iraq, and curtailing the sovereignty of the state, particularly through the various Anglo-Iraqi Treaties.

Most antagonizing of all, the British nurtured military units consisting of Assyrians and tribal elements as a kind of rival force to the regular Iraqi army. By actively opposing these units, however, the Iraqi army signaled that it was capable of challenging British interests.²⁸ This stance won the army popularity that the politicians—especially those who cooperated with Britain—had long lost.

The army was also influenced by external factors. For example, the strong political role played by the armed forces in neighboring countries such as Turkey and Iran was not lost on the Iraqis. Moreover, the rise of fascism in Europe served as a model for imitation on the ideological level. The leading proponent of fascist ideology in Iraq was Sami Shawkat, who emphasized the development and use of force (*quwwa*) as a nation's most important activity—as a means of perfecting “the art of death” and turning Iraq into the Prussia of the Arabs.²⁹ The militarization of Iraqi society found expression in, among other things, the formation of the Futuwwa, a youth organization that was trained and indoctrinated along militarist and fascist lines.

Politically speaking, the death of King Faysal I in 1933, the critical first year of independence, left the country without a leading moderate figure to serve as an intermediary between Iraq and Britain, and between contending Iraqi domestic forces. The ascension of King Ghazi—young, inexperienced, and weak, but also ultranationalist and anti-British—further facilitated the military's involvement in politics, particularly because he had close ties with several army leaders. Moreover, some politicians, frustrated by their inability to alter the status quo through elections or parliamentary measures, supported the use of force against the government, either by inciting Shi'i tribes to rebellion or by conspiring with the army.

These and other circumstances led to Iraq's first military coup, in which military officers headed by General Sidqi joined with the leftist reformist group al-Ahali in toppling the government of Prime Minister Yasin al-Hashimi. Even as the coup was taking place, Nuri al-Sa'id approached the British and asked them to stop it. The British rejected the request, saying that it was a domestic Iraqi affair.³⁰ Nevertheless, al-Sa'id continued his efforts to engage them; in one case, he told a British official of the “unconstitutional situation” that had developed in Iraq,

complaining that “as long as Britain has the moral responsibility for bringing development and prosperity to Iraq, it must provide effective support for turning things back to normalcy.”³¹

Yet, the British continued to turn a blind eye to the “abnormal” situation and to the army’s trampling of the most basic tenets of democracy. More coups followed, including one engineered by none other than al-Sa‘id himself. The indifference or aloofness of the British would cost them dearly; in May 1941, a coup engineered by Rashid Ali al-Gailani targeted them directly. Only then, once conditions in Iraq had gotten completely out of hand, did the British deem it legitimate to interfere in the country’s domestic affairs.

The quelling of al-Gailani’s coup was followed by attempts to give new life to democratic institutions in Iraq. An amended constitution was introduced in 1943; three years later, the government proclaimed a new Electoral Law and permitted new parties to form. With a view to cutting the Gordian knot between ambitious politicians and no-less-ambitious generals, the amended constitution called for strengthening the king (and, behind him, the British) as well as empowering the parliament over the cabinet. Neither the politicians nor the generals approved of these measures, however, and the cycle of coups continued even after July 1958, when the king and his family were exterminated, the constitution and the parliament were annulled, and the last vestiges of British control over Iraq were effaced. The series of coups ended only after July 1968, when the Ba‘ath government began to deflect the army’s energies toward external aggression.

LESSONS OF THE PAST, MISTAKES OF THE FUTURE?

The failure of democracy in postmandate Iraq was a product of many different factors. Some of these factors were rooted in British policies and the weak foundation on which they erected Iraqi democracy. Even so, it must be mentioned that, during the mandate years and throughout the period leading up to the 1936 coup, Iraq enjoyed a modicum of representative governance; after the first coup, however, this wisp of democracy disappeared almost completely.³²

The failure was also rooted in the flawed interactions between the British and Iraqis, as well as in Iraqi society’s ill-preparedness for genuine democratic institutions and values. Most Iraqi political par-

ties were weak, and while the British attempted to contain the numerous nationalist and anti-British parties, they did little to encourage liberal parties and tendencies.³³ Although the eventual dissolution of most of these nationalist and anti-British parties was a natural consequence of the mandate's termination, successive Iraqi governments went beyond containment, choosing instead to force opposition elements (e.g., the Iraqi Communist Party; the National Democratic Party) underground. Similarly, media censorship steadily increased in Iraq after the mandate and monarchical eras ended and the Ba'ath assumed power.

At the root of all of these problems lay Iraq's inability to cultivate a middle class that could push for or carry out democratic policies. Inherent socioeconomic problems precluded the development of a strong middle class, and this factor was exacerbated by the British tendency to give more support to tribal shaykhs and feudal lords than to more liberal-minded constituencies. The related problem of Shi'i under-representation in the government was both a cause and a result of such failures. Finally, because democracy was imposed on Iraqis, it came to be identified with the British enemy; many argued that its values ran against the grain of Arab and Muslim norms.

Under the Ba'ath regime—which has been ruling Iraq for more than three decades, almost as long as the monarchy lasted—the structural problems of the past have been magnified, and new problems have been introduced. The middle class has all but disappeared. The army, although depoliticized, still holds the key to the survival of the regime. The Ba'ath Party has monopolized power to such an extent that no other party can function even clandestinely. “Free expression” and “freedom of the press” have become dirty words.

Hence, if the United States chooses to impose its own *mission civilizatrice* on Iraq, it will likely arouse even greater antagonism than the British did during the mandate period, particularly given the ill will generated by years of sanctions. Even if they arrive wearing the mantle of liberators, U.S. forces may well be seen as nothing but conquerors in the long run. In planning for “the first democracy” in the Arab world, Washington should be modest in its goals and realistic in its expectations. Most important, the United States should be respectful of Iraqis' desires, needs, and traditions, and heedful of their disposition toward the U.S. formula of instant democracy.

NOTES

1. Henry A. Foster, *The Making of Modern Iraq* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1936), p. 270.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 60–61.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
4. Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, *Tā'rikh al-'Iraq al-Siyasi al-Hadith*, vol. 3 (Sidon, Lebanon: Matba'at al-'Urfan, 1957), p. 9 (translation by author).
5. *Ibid.*; Foster, *The Making of Modern Iraq*, p. 95. The antimandate movement demanded that the king be elected by a constituent assembly, but to no avail.
6. Foster, *The Making of Modern Iraq*, p. 95. Saddam Husayn imitated these electoral methods in referendums carried out in 1995 and 2002, with similar results.
7. Al-Hasani, *Tā'rikh al-'Iraq*, p. 18.
8. M. M. al-Adhami, "The Elections for the Constituent Assembly in Iraq, 1922–4," in *The Integration of Modern Iraq*, ed. Abbas Kelidar (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), pp. 16–17. The British insisted that tribes be permitted to participate in the elections, despite the Iraqi cabinet's opposition to this measure.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.
11. Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, *Al-'Iraq fi zill al-Mu'ahadat* (Sidon, Lebanon: Matba'at al-'Urfan, 1958), pp. 96–101.
12. C. A. Hooper, *The Constitutional Law of Iraq* (Baghdad: MacKenzie and MacKenzie, 1928), p. 15.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16; Majid Khadduri, *Independent Iraq* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 15.
14. For a full text of the constitution, see *British and Foreign State Papers*, vol. 123 (London: British Foreign Office, 1931), pp. 383–402.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Khadduri, *Independent Iraq*, pp. 22–23. Initially, the number of representatives in the Chamber of Deputies was 88; this number was increased to 108 in 1935, 118 in 1943, and 132 in 1950. By law, the Senate was to be one-fourth the size of the Chamber of Deputies.
17. Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985), p. 39.
18. Al-Hasani, *Tā'rikh al-'Iraq*, p. 234 (translation by author).
19. Hasan al-Alawi, *Al-Shi'a wal-Dawla al-Qawmiyya fi al-'Iraq 1914–1990*, 2nd ed. (n.p., 1990), p. 194 (translation by author).

20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., pp. 194–197.
22. Kamil al-Chadirchi, *Mudhakkirat Kamil al-Chadirchi* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a lil-Tiba'a wal-Nashr, 1970), pp. 143, 432, 457.
23. Al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-'Iraq*, p. 235. The cynic might note that the report was issued only after the Iraqi government refused to implement treaty obligations to Britain.
24. Al-Chadirchi, *Mudhakkirat Kamil*, p. 215.
25. Al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-'Iraq*, pp. 249–252. It should be mentioned that the Electoral Law forbade military men to take part in elections.
26. Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 319–361.
27. Paul P. J. Hemphill, “The Formation of the Iraqi Army, 1921–1933,” in *The Integration of Modern Iraq*, ed. Abbas Kelidar (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), p. 97.
28. The Assyrian and tribal units were known as Levies. The regular army treated them quite harshly; in the previously mentioned 1933 massacres, for example, General Sidqi's forces slaughtered the dependents of Assyrian fighters.
29. Sami Shawkat, *Hadhibi Ahdafuna* (Baghdad: n.p., 1939), pp. 3–5.
30. Su'ad Ra'uf Shir Muhammad, *Nuri al-Sa'id wa Dawrubu fi al-Siyasa al-'Iraqiyya 1932–1945* (Baghdad: al-Maktaba al-Wataniyya, 1988), p. 73.
31. Ibid., p. 35 (translation by author).
32. Al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-'Iraq*, pp. 144, 256. Even in the wake of the Sidqi coup, the opposition was not entirely silenced. One anecdote may give the flavor of that period. After Sidqi took power, a deputy submitted a proposal for the erection of a statue in Sidqi's honor in the most famous square in Baghdad. Yet, strong opposition in parliament prevented this measure from passing. It is highly unlikely that such an episode could occur today, in Saddam Husayn's parliament.
33. Khadduri, *Independent Iraq*, p. 10.