# U.S. Policy in Post-Saddam Iraq:

## Lessons from the British Experience

by **Michael Eisenstadt (/experts/michael-eisenstadt)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

On March 13, 2003, Washington Institute senior fellow Michael Eisenstadt, U.S. Air Force military fellow Eric Mathewson, and National Strategic Studies senior research professor Judith Yaphe introduced the Institute's forthcoming publication **U.S. Policy in Post-Saddam Iraq: Lessons from the British Experience (templateC04.php?CID=138)** . The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

It is day one of the Iraqi war. The Iraqi nation is in chaos. In the mosques, fatwa s (religious decrees) are issued against the invading Westerners. The Kurds revolt. At home, antiwar protesters are demonstrating in the streets: is the objective of this war regional stability, political change, or oil?

These were some of the challenges faced by Britain when its forces entered Iraq -- then part of the Ottoman Empire -- during World War I, inaugurating British rule that lasted until 1932 and a strong British influence that lasted until 1958. Britain's experience during World War I and its aftermath resonates today in the anticipation of a new Gulf war. Because the British occupation and administration of Iraq may well be the historical reference Iraqis themselves use, the United States and its allies would be well advised to learn from that history.

Never Presume an Easy Time

In World War I, it took British military forces three years to move from Basra to Baghdad. Contrary to expectations, the troops were not welcomed as liberators. Their arrival in Baghdad was marked by indifference, tribal unrest, and economic turmoil.

During the first years of occupation, British forces and supplies were stretched thin as the empire fought multiple fronts in the world war. They imposed forced labor on tens of thousands of Iraqi subjects and failed to provide food to hungry villages. The British removed the Ottoman yoke, but they replaced it with their own. This imperial arrogance only further cultivated simmering anti-Western sentiment among various groups in the newly formed country of Iraq.

The process of governing the new territory was further complicated by differing opinions in the British government about objectives and methods. Those differences alienated prospective Iraqi leaders and hindered the development

of effective political systems. The British military initially filled the void of indecision about how to govern the new territory until, ultimately, the British India Office took on the administration of Iraq. Under a League of Nations mandate that began in 1920, Britain began to install the formal institutions of democracy in the form of a constitutional monarchy, but these trappings lacked democratic content. In place of a genuine system of governance, the British were implementing an inflexible mechanism of control with few democratic roots.

Beware Unintended Consequences and Excessive Pride

Consistent with the rhetoric of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson about independence for the ex-Ottoman lands, the British during World War I had portrayed themselves as the liberators of Iraq, promising to replace Ottoman rule with independence. When Britain did not quickly grant independence to Iraq, opting instead for the League of Nations mandate, initial Iraqi indifference to British rule turned into active and often violent opposition, fueled by nationalism and hostility to non-Muslim governance. In 1920, the British faced a great revolt, suppressed at considerable cost, and anti-British sentiment continued throughout the long British involvement in Iraq. Accordingly, the constitutional monarchy established by the British never achieved the legitimacy needed to ensure long-term survival; it was ultimately swept away by a nationalist coup in 1958.

Under the mandate, a new Iraqi army was formed. The British kept it small, but paid little attention to the fiercely nationalist and anti-British tone being inculcated into the new officer corps. After Iraq's constitutional monarchy gained independence in 1932, the military soon asserted itself. Beginning with a 1936 coup, just three years after the death of King Faysal, Iraqi military forces began to assert control over the structures of government. Military officers comprised at least three quarters of the Iraqi parliament during this period and became the gatekeepers to power. In 1941, when Britain was at its lowest point in World War II, the Iraqi army surrounded a vital British air base in Iraq, and Britain had to reoccupy the country.

Pursue a Transformational Agenda

The system of governance that the British set up in Iraq did not work in the long term. Its democratic facade collapsed soon after independence, and the country was never effectively knit together. Moreover, the nationalist reaction to the British-dominated monarchy led to even worse governance under the Ba'ath Party. In the current context, Iraq can be stable and successful only if the United States pursues a transformational agenda:

• Loosen the grip of the strong Iraqi state. The British concentrated power in Baghdad, a phenomenon that has only strengthened over time. It will be important to encourage the decentralization of power and government in Iraq from the outset. The U.S.-led coalition should build up what administration there is in the provinces. It should also counter the excessive concentration of power in the hands of the executive and create political space for participatory politics in the central government.

• > Move toward power sharing. British policy, largely for expediency, reaffirmed the monopoly on power held by a small Sunni Arab oligarchy. This policy alienated most of the Iraqi population from the new state, thereby contributing to revolts against both the state and the British. Today, the Iraqi power structure is still centered around the Sunni Arab minority. The United States should strive to establish a broad-based representative government in which every Iraqi has a stake.

• > Let Iraqis create new leadership. Britain selected the new king for Iraq, and Faysal was therefore seen as a British tool despite his impeccable Arab credentials (a descendant of the prophet Mohammad and a member of the family that had ruled Mecca for centuries, he had been a leader of the Arab revolt against Ottoman rule). The acting coalition will need to allow Iraqis to choose their own leadership. U.S. and Western counterparts should work with new Iraqi leaders, but with a certain distance. There should also be a clear delineation between military and politics with no leadership overlap; the United States should help create an apolitical Iraqi officer corps.

• > Accommodate Iraqi nationalism. Nationalism has become deeply rooted in Iraqi society, fed by the experience with the British. The perceived 1991 American betrayal of the Iraqi people -- that is, the perceived failure to support the popular uprisings following the Gulf War -- has also made a lasting impact on the way Iraqis view the United States and the West. It will be crucial for Western forces to be clear about their objectives and to minimize their impact on Iraqi society. Troops should pull out as soon as their mission is completed.

The Legacy of Saddam Husayn

When coalition forces liberate Iraq, Saddam Husayn will have left a twenty-four-year-old footprint on the Iraqi nation and the Iraqi psyche. This is a variable that cannot be examined within the context of the British experience. While most of that legacy is worthy of rejection, some elements can be utilized, for instance, courage. Even loyalty to tribe can be called upon in the rebuilding and restoration of order.

The rebuilding of Iraq will be a long process. It will not be accomplished in ninety days or even a year. But it may be made easier if the United States can take some lessons from the British experience of the early twentieth century in shaping its own course of action.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Lauren Gottlieb.

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