

Version 1.0 | Last updated 16 April 2018

# Mesopotamia, British Mandate for

By [Burcu Kurt](#)

**British mandate Mesopotamia marks the beginning of the formation of modern Iraq. The mandate period terminated when Iraq was accepted as a member of the League of Nations as an independent state on 3 October 1932.**

## Table of Contents

[1 Introduction](#)

[2 The Mosul Region](#)

[3 British Rule](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

## Introduction

When the British gradually captured Mesopotamia in World War I, they adopted a stringent policy regarding the future of the region. The future and boundaries of Mesopotamia were determined after long disputes that continued within the [British government](#) until the 1920s. Although only the provinces of Baghdad and Basra were included in the first stage (and even in the [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#)), following the occupation of Baghdad in 1917 a completely different perspective began to develop for the future of Mesopotamia. Hereafter, the province of Mosul, a region rich in petrol and grain, was included within the borders of Iraq and under British rule to sustain Baghdad and Basra. The region was occupied immediately after the Armistice of Mudros.

## The Mosul Region

British policy led not only to ongoing controversy among the people of Mesopotamia but also to problems in relations with the newly established Republic of Turkey. Two questionable plebiscites

were organized in 1919 and 1921 regarding the unification of the former Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul as one state under the kingship of Faysal I, King of Iraq (1885-1931) to legitimize British dominance in the Middle East without consideration of the opinions of local populations, mainly Kurds, Turks, Arabs, and Yazidis. On the other hand, the new Turkish state's annulment of the Sèvres Treaty led to a debate on the status of Mosul, which later became an issue at the Lausanne Conference. Desiring to annex Mosul, Turkey requested a new and true plebiscite while Britain rejected this idea, arguing that the Kurdish population was ignorant and lacked a rational opinion. Bilateral discussions between Turkey and Britain failed to reach a diplomatic agreement both during the Lausanne Conference and in the following nine months. Thus, the Mosul question was submitted to the League of Nations in 1924. The League formed a Frontier Commission in 1925 to determine the fate of the region. Regarding the Commission's pro-British report, Mosul was awarded to Iraq on the condition that the British mandate would be extended to a twenty-five year period and certain guarantees be given to the Kurdish population. Mosul was subsequently incorporated into Iraqi territory under an agreement signed in June 1926 between Turkey, Britain, and Iraq.

## British Rule

The Treaty of Versailles determined that the territories belonging to the defeated Central Powers were to be transferred under the mandate of the League of Nations. However, at the San Remo Conference Britain was awarded the mandate government to be established in Mesopotamia. Due to Britain's ignorance of local demands and the impact of Iraq being officially left to the British mandate, in 1920 a large-scale pro-independence insurrection broke out in the country. The uprising emerged from a collaboration of the Sharifians, Shia mujtahids, tribal sheikhs of the mid-Euphrates, and ex-civil servants in coalition with the Sunni-Shiite sects and spread to most Iraqi lands. As a result of the uprising, military control was terminated, and Percy Zachariah Cox (1864-1937) replaced Arnold Talbot Wilson (1884-1940) as first High Commissioner under the mandate. The British government began to assess the financial and moral cost of remaining in Iraq. In order to restrain the nationalist movement, Britain decided to sign an alliance agreement with the Iraqi state in formation.

Accordingly, the country entered a process of forming a provisional Arab government and gradually integrating Iraqis in the administration of Iraq. Meanwhile, disputes emerged regarding candidates for the future ruler of Iraq. Due to his acceptability for all Iraqis and openness to British suggestion, Faysal I, the son of Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz (c.1853-1931), was the prime candidate. At the Cairo Conference in 1921, Britain offered support for his candidacy. A few months later on 23 August 1921, Faysal was crowned with approval of the Council of State.

The years following Faysal's enthronement passed with disputes and crises between the king and the British over the distribution of authority. One of the main reasons for this was the preparation of the mandate agreement that would shape the relationship between Britain and Iraq. The structure of the agreement which undermined Iraq's independence created unrest among many groups, in particular the Shiite community and nationalists. The result was an outbreak of opposition demonstrations. Both the Council of Minister and Faysal were reluctant to sign. Under pressure from

Britain, Faysal formed a new cabinet, which approved the agreement on 10 October 1922. By creating a dual structure within the administration, the mandate agreement generated a system where the Iraqis appeared to rule, but in reality Britain maintained control over the country.

Following the approval of the agreement, preparations of the Organic Law began. In June 1924, Iraqi and British authorities reached an agreement on the final text which formed a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral parliament with limited authority. The Constituent Assembly elections faced severe protests by the Shiite community. Realizing that Mosul could only be incorporated into the Iraqi territory if an alliance was formed with Britain, and taking into consideration that if Mosul was not included in the Iraqi territory a majority of the population would consist of Shiites, Faysal intervened in the matter. The Constituent Assembly assumed its duties on 4 March 1923 and, facing British pressure, signed the agreement in June 1924. In 1929, Britain declared it would unconditionally support Iraq's membership in the League of Nations in 1932. In 1930, a treaty of alliance to shape the post-independence British-Iraqi relations was signed. Under this treaty, Britain gained the right to retain military bases and continued to use its political-economic influence in Iraq. The British mandate in Iraq came to an end, and Iraq was accepted as a member of the League of Nations as an independent state.

Burcu Kurt, Istanbul Technical University

Section Editors: [Alexandre Toumarkine](#); [Erol Ülker](#); [Pinar Üre](#)

### **Selected Bibliography**

Dundar, Fuat: **'Statisquo'. British use of statistics in the Iraqi Kurdish question (1919-1932)**, Waltham 2012: Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University.

Ireland, Philip Willard: **Iraq. A study in political development**, London 1937: J. Cape.

Longrigg, Stephen Hemsley: **Iraq 1900 to 1950. A political, social, and economic history**, London; New York 1971: Oxford University Press.

Silverfarb, Daniel: **Britain's informal empire in the Middle East. A case study of Iraq, 1929-1941**, New York; Oxford 1986: Oxford University Press.

Sluglett, Peter: **Britain in Iraq, 1914-1932**, London 1976: Ithaca Press.

Tripp, Charles: **A history of Iraq**, Cambridge 2000: Cambridge University Press.

## Citation

Kurt, Burcu: Mesopotamia, British Mandate for , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.11242](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11242).

## License

This text is licensed under: [CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/de/).