

# One Iraq Or Three?

GROWING VIOLENCE IN BAGHDAD PROMPTS MANY TO QUESTION WHETHER IRAQ CAN SURVIVE or should be divided among its Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. The first questions to ask ought to be historical: Is modern Iraq built on a solid foundation or is it largely a patchwork cobbled together by European grandees nearly a century ago? What precedents exist for a divided Iraq? Our two contributors advance contrasting visions of Iraq's past and future maps.

## Lines in the Sand

BY F. S. NAIDEN

BEFORE WORLD WAR I BROUGHT AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY to the mapmaker's art, seeing a nation whole was not as simple as looking at a picture. It was an act of imagination. And few countries were the subject of more imaginings than Iraq. The Ottoman Turks saw it as a stop on the route to the Persian Gulf and thus to India. Earlier, the Romans and Macedonians had imagined it the same way. Alexander the Great made the trip to India, and the Roman emperor Trajan followed him 450 years later, in AD 117, though he was forced to turn back after reaching the Persian Gulf. But others would follow. Much of the

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world ended up as a way station to India, or the idea of India—the West Indies, the East Indies, the Indian Ocean.

Now imagine a modern Alexander or Trajan. He knows where India is and he has conquered most of it. He must now administer it. India is British, and Iraq is about to be administered as part of India. It is the fall of 1914, the early days of World War I, and Britain's Indian army has landed in the south of Iraq, on the shores of the Persian Gulf. Its 50,000 men do not intend to seize the country. They only want to prevent Britain's enemies or even Britain's allies from using it as a backdoor to India. Iraq, on the other hand, is not even a name on a map. India will give it one.

Then administrators at 10 Downing Street start interfering. They do not want the colonial but autonomous gov-



A 1921 conference on the future of the Middle East held in Cairo brought together Gertrude Bell, Arnold Wilson (standing to the left of Bell), and T. E. Lawrence (fourth from right in the second row). Winston Churchill, then Britain's colonial secretary, is seated in the front row.

ernment of British India to draw the map. They want to draw it themselves. So the battle begins. The Indian government draws maps of Iraq. London redraws them. India thinks small—for it, Iraq is a small thing. London thinks big. India makes its point by moving its army. London makes its point by drawing. London eventually wins. But winning will take a few maps.

## I

WHEN THE INDIAN ARMY ARRIVED IN 1914, SOMEONE was put in charge of maps. It probably was Captain (later Colonel, then Sir) Arnold Wilson. From the neck up, he might have passed for King Edward VII; from the neck

down, for a champion rugby player. (In the picture above, Wilson is standing on the far left.) He later held a seat in Parliament, and served in the Royal Air Force in World War II. All malevolent common sense, he admired what the British called the “martial races”—the Gurkhas and Sikhs who manned the Indian army, but also the Turks, who in 1914 had ruled Iraq for 400 years. Wilson’s admiration sprang from fear. Yes, the Indian army could defeat the Turks, but could it replace them? After the fall of the Chinese Empire in 1912, the Caliphate was the oldest of the world’s leading states. It included not just Iraq but Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, most of Saudi Arabia, and most of the Persian Gulf ministates. Not long before, it had included most of the Balkans, Egypt, Libya, and Algeria.

Turkish Iraq ran north from the gulf in three *vilayets*, or districts. Wilson did not make the mistake of calling them provinces. A province was something Canadian—or worse yet, French. Every square foot in a province would have a pig or a hedgerow, every house an address, every hamlet its own kind of cheese. Not Iraq, much of which was desert or swamp. Each of the three *vilayets* bore the name of its chief town—Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul. Basra occupied the southern third of the country, Baghdad the central third, Mosul the larger, northern third. West of Mosul was a subdistrict, Dair al-Zor, that divided Mosul from the *vilayets* of what is now Syria.

The Tigris and Euphrates rivers ran through all three districts, but some 120 miles above the Persian Gulf they flowed together as the muddy Shatt al-Arab, which needed constant dredging. In the center of Iraq, ancient irrigation canals crisscrossed the country, many of them silted over since the Mongols wrecked them seven centuries before. The chief town, Baghdad, a steam bath of mud-brick buildings beside the Tigris, was not accessible to ocean-going vessels. In the north, the rivers drew apart and formed Al-Jazira, “the island,” a large swath stretching into the mountains of Armenia. Too dry for good crops, it belonged mostly to Kurdish or Arab nomads.

No single name applied to these disparate regions. The phrase “Al-Iraq” (the lowland) was a topographical expression, not a political one, and it did not apply to the mountains in the north. “Mesopotamia” (the land between the rivers) was another topographical expression, and it applied neither to the mountains nor the Shatt al-Arab. “Mesopotamia” was a Greek word, and Wilson, who did not know Arabic, had an old boy’s advantage in dealing with Greek words. “Mesopotamia,” he knew, dated from the Hellenistic era, and there was nothing Hellenistic about Iraq.

When Wilson later wrote his memoirs, he alluded several times to the region’s long history. Basra had once been Sumer, the first civilization in the Tigris-Euphrates valley, dating from about 3000 BC. Sumerians built the first canals. The Babylonians, who occupied the center of the country from about 2200 BC, built the rest. Assyria later occupied the north, beginning about 1800 BC. No one ruled all three regions for more than a short time. The Persians ruled them longest, but only from about 530 to about 330 BC. Even the Romans could not hold all of Mesopotamia. By the time Islam came to the

region, in the seventh century AD, the Persians had regained Sumer and Babylonia, but not Assyria.

An Arab dynasty, the Abassids, had united Iraq, just as the greatest of the Persians had, but like them they had made it part of something bigger. In 762 BC they founded Baghdad, and it became a new Babylon, important well beyond the confines of the Tigris and the Euphrates. The Abassids’ best soldiers came from the Central Asian steppes, thousands of miles away. Their best administrators were Afghan ex-Buddhists who had been the hereditary patrons of the two great statues of the Buddha at Bamiyan—the statues destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. The best of the Abassids, Haroun al-Rashid, was the only Arab ruler to make a jihad against the Byzantines and a hajj to Mecca in the same year. Haroun was the protagonist in the book that made Baghdad famous—*The Arabian Nights*.

All this was schoolboy history—Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria scattered in fine print across the desert. New conquerors, the Ottoman Turks, arrived in the 16th century, but they made the same three-fold division. In the south they found Shiite Muslims under the spell of imams sometimes trained in Persia. Acknowledging the power of the clergy—Wilson called it the “Persian” clergy—the Turks governed the south through either the imams or the sheikhs of the local tribes. In the center of the country, the Turks found mostly Sunnis along with a scattering of Shiites and Jews. The Sunnis looked not to Shiite Persia but to the larger Muslim world, and so they were loyal subjects. Sunni landlords helped govern the region, and educated Sunnis served as bureaucrats and army officers. Here, unlike in the south, the Turks made some effort to collect taxes. The remaining region, the north, was the most backward. The chief group, the Kurds, were Muslims, but they were not Semites like the Arabs. They may have been descendants of the ancient Medes, horse-riding kin of the Persians. That would explain their yearning for independence, their pastoralism, and their unexampled poverty, Wilson thought. In some spots in the north, Christian minorities languished.

Having come from India, with its medley of princes, faiths, and races, Wilson did not wish to disturb this pottage. He only wanted to make Basra British—to build roads, clear canals, collect taxes, and supple-

ment Muslim courts with British ones. Burma was part of British India. Why not Basra? Then, in November 1915, came the news that the Indian army, which had taken Basra easily, had gone north to seize the railhead in Baghdad from the Turks, met with defeat, and surrendered. The next month, another British attack on Turkey, at Gallipoli, also ended in disaster. These setbacks aside, Wilson could not forget another thing. Like Wilson himself, Britain's Muslim soldiers felt some respect for the Turkish Caliphate. For the time being, London agreed with Wilson, too. The foreign secretary, at least, would be content with Basra. Sir Edward Grey, the last Liberal to hold this post, was an imperialist, but he did not forget his party's dislike of foreign lands (as opposed to foreign trade). The British, he concluded, should govern as little of them as possible without withdrawing.

And so Wilson and the British government in India decided to do as little as they dared. They were far from abolishing the three *vilayets*. Instead, they would take Basra and leave Turkey the rest. In response, a cabinet committee headed by Sir Maurice de Bunsen drew a new map, seen at the top of page 56. It was not the only map the committee drew, but it carried weight with policymakers in the British government, and it embodied the consensus of 1915. On this map, Basra became British. The rest of Iraq stayed Turkish, but not for long. In 1915, World War I was only a year old.

## II

BY 1916 SIR EDWARD GREY HAD RETIRED, AND control over Middle Eastern policy now moved from the Foreign Office in Whitehall to the "Garden Suburb"—a group of ramshackle temporary buildings erected in the yard behind 10 Downing Street, then occupied by Prime Minister H. H. Asquith. Unlike Arnold Wilson and Edward Grey, some of the denizens of the Garden Suburb were intellectuals. The first of them to draw a map of Iraq was Sir Mark Sykes, a Tory member of Parliament who was not

so rich as to disdain writing travel books about the Middle East. A Sykes book was mostly a *mélange* of his racial and religious opinions, each more flavorful than the last.

If Arnold Wilson liked the Turks, Mark Sykes did not. He divided them into "old" and "young." The Old Turks had governed the Caliphate until 1908. They resembled the Persians of antiquity—that master race taught to ride, shoot, and tell the truth. But the Young Turks, who gained control of the Caliphate in a coup that same year, were "Levantine." A Levantine was a Middle Easterner of mixed culture. Greeks were often Levantines; so were Armenians. Jews, surprisingly, were not—but as we shall see, Sykes had

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a theory about Jews. Whatever his nationality, a Levantine was too much of a mongrel to rule others. The Turkish Levantines could never reform the Caliphate, Sykes said. Look at their record since the coup.

But Sykes did not like the Arabs, the alternative to the Turks. He described them in a passage of his 1904 book *Dar-ul-Islam*:

Eloquent, cunning, excitable and cowardly, . . . diseased from years of foul living, contemptuous of villagers with all the loathsome contempt of a stunted cockney for a burly yokel; able to quote poetry in conversation; . . . ready to riot and slay for the sake of fanaticism as long as there is no danger; detesting Europeans with a bigoted, foolish, senseless hatred; . . . ready to cry "Kafir" to a stranger and fly ere his head is turned.

As for the desert-dwelling Bedouins, he wrote, "a more rapacious, greedy, ill-mannered set of brutes would be hard to find."

Yet the town and country Arabs were still better than the Turks. Sykes was even willing to consider British-



In a 1915 de Bunsen committee map, Basra belonged to the British and the rest of Iraq remained with the Turks.

sponsored Arab rulers for Iraq. But he was not willing to consider independent Arab rulers. Sunni or Shiite, the Arabs were incapable of self-government. So were the Kurds (though they were more trustworthy; Sykes thought they were good riders and shooters—after all, they were Medes—and reliable when bribed). So Sykes envisioned an Iraq in which the British would keep Basra, but would manipulate puppets elsewhere.

His ideas dovetailed with events in 1916 and the year before. Since Gallipoli, the British had been planning to attack Turkish territory in Arabia, Palestine, and Syria. They knew that the Arabs of these regions would not help them. Some of the Arabs were officers in the Turkish army, the same as the Sunni officers from Iraq. But the Arabs of the remote desert, the Bedouins, were everything Mark Sykes said, at least so far as the Turkish adminis-

tration was concerned. They had long harassed the Turks and levied illegal tolls on pilgrims to the shrines of Mecca and Medina. If some notable or other—no Bedouin, of course—could be made king of the Arabs, he might recruit them. They could then attack those usurpers of the Caliphate, the Young Turks, in the name of Islam. The new king would be an authentic (and docile) Arab. He might even mollify Arnold Wilson and the Indian army command, who did not like ordering Muslim soldiers to attack the troops of the Caliph. Now they would be ordering these

soldiers to fight alongside an Arab king—say, a descendant of the Prophet. And the British found just such a king—Husein ibn Ali, a descendant of the Prophet who was the hereditary custodian of the shrines in Mecca and Medina. The negotiations between Husein and the British, and later between Husein's sons and the British, affected the



Another de Bunsen map incorporated T. E. Lawrence's ideas, numbering the kingdoms he favored 3, 4, and 5.

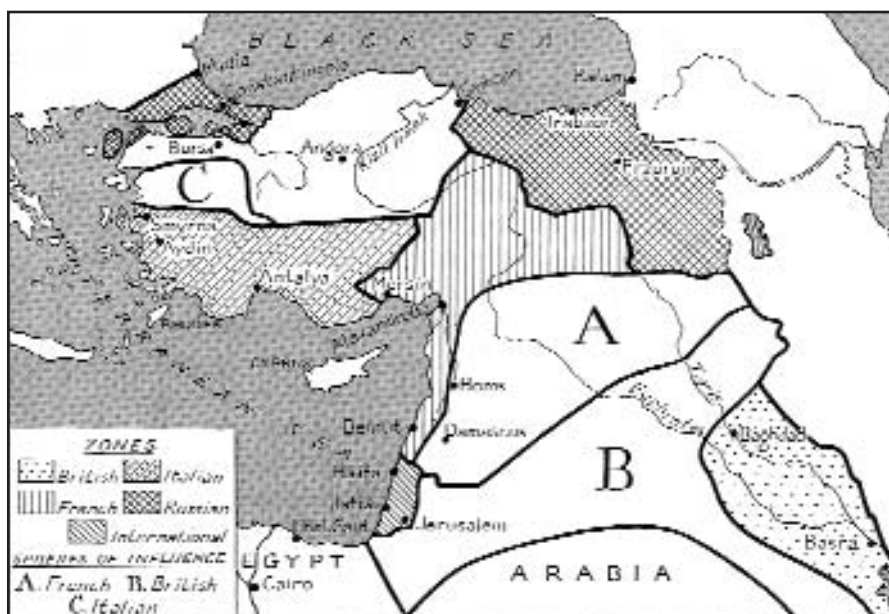
future of Palestine, Jordan, and what later became Saudi Arabia, but they also affected Iraq. They were complicated and tentative; Sykes might have called them “Levantine.” But two things about them are clear: Husein wanted Iraq, and the British did not want him to have it. The Garden Suburb did not know what it wanted, but it did not want that. When the British pledged their support to Husein in October 1915, they warned that “no guarantee for the unconditional delivery” of Iraq could be given.

In reply, Husein complained of British “ambiguity.” He was willing to be patient and give the British time to drive the Turks from Mesopotamia, but then they must turn it over and pay compensation. The British said that Mesopotamia required “special administrative arrangements.” They knew that Husein lacked the troops to drive them out of Basra. He could not even drive the Turks out of Medina.

What lay behind the words “special arrangements”? Britain’s ally, France. The Garden Suburb’s unofficial emissary, Mark Sykes, was in touch with his French counterpart, François Georges-Picot. When the two conferred in early 1916, Picot brought in the French ambassador to Russia, Maurice Paléologue. The three of them reached what became known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The agreement was simple. The Allies were to dismember the Caliphate. Russia would get the Dardanelles, the portion closest to Russia. Italy would get a nearby slice. The French and the British would get big pieces. The French would get Lebanon, where they had long interfered on behalf of Maronite Christian enclaves. The British would keep Basra. As for the rest of the Fertile Crescent, including the rest of Iraq, we come to Sir Mark Sykes’s theory about the Jews. Jerusalem and vicinity would fall under an international administration that would let the Jews of the Levant—or, for that

matter, the Jews of Berlin—settle there as herders. Sheep and goats, Sykes contended, would authenticate the Jews. That way they would not become Levantines, like the Turks and the Greeks. The Royal Navy would keep watch from Haifa, a nearby seaport that was another piece for the British.

To the Arabs Sykes offered a consolation prize, several towns in central Syria. But the Arabs would govern this region only on French sufferance, for Syria was another



In the Sykes-Picot scheme of 1916, Iraq was to be largely divided between the British and French.

piece for France. The same would be true of the Arabs of the Baghdad district, who would govern themselves on British sufferance. The Mosul district would go to France, a concession partly to Britain’s ally but partly to the Indian army, which did not want to have to patrol it. Let the French deal with the Kurds, Sykes thought. Or let the French try to deal with them and fail. If Kurdistan were in turmoil, Turkey would be the weaker for it.

Sykes’s map (above) was diplomatic. Wilson’s had been administrative. Neither map reflected public opinion. Both, in fact, were secret. A politically tolerable map would come from two writers who, unlike Wilson and Sykes, were never in Parliament—T. E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell, but especially Bell. Their chance came after the end of the war, when the military situation had changed some more, and influenza had carried away Sir Mark Sykes.

## III

T. E. LAWRENCE BECAME “LAWRENCE OF ARABIA” after Lowell Thomas made newsreels about him. Thomas had started in the Klondike, where he was the first man to report on the 1897 gold rush with the help of a movie camera. Although he came years after the era of travel by kayak, he paid local residents to let him board their boats and film the worst of the rapids. Narrating the footage to the accompaniment of a player piano made him famous in his early twenties. When the U.S. government sent him to Europe in 1916 to make movies about the war, Thomas avoided anything so confining as trenches and headed for the Middle East. He got to Jerusalem just after the British army reclaimed the city for Christendom. A few Bedouin irregulars in the British service were the stuff of an extra reel, and so Thomas interviewed them, only to find that one of the Bedouins was a sometime archaeologist less than fluent in Arabic. That was Lawrence. Lawrence told Thomas how a son of Husein had raised a force of several hundred, had tried but failed to seize Mecca and Medina, and then had ridden north to capture the village of Aqaba on an inlet of the Red Sea. After that, Husein’s men had accompanied the British Army north, raiding. Thomas had Lawrence take him into the desert to watch the Arabs reenact their marches. He took the footage to the United States and warmed up on Broadway for 12 weeks. Next: Covent Garden, London, for which Thomas hired an orchestra and veiled dancers, plus the Royal Welsh Guards Band. The show, titled *Lawrence of Arabia*, was the first movie Rudyard Kipling saw. To accommodate demand, Thomas had to move to Albert Hall. From there he went to Balmoral Castle, where the king and queen saw *Lawrence*. There would be many more like it—*Beyond the Khyber Pass* (narrated from the viewpoint of the Indian army), *Lauterbach of the China Sea*, and *Tall Stories: The Rise and Triumph of the Great American Whopper*. The hero was always speed, the enemy was always distance, and the action was a pageant—in *Lawrence*, a warrior prophet cantering ahead of a king, Husein, whom Lawrence could introduce in an Oxford common room.

Lawrence went to see the picture too, but incognito. Something of his reaction to being a public personality can be seen in the photograph on page 53, where he stands in the same row as Arnold Wilson, unsure what to do with his hands. The reason for his disquiet was not just personal.

Thomas was an imperialist, and Lawrence was an anti-imperialist. The Arabs, he thought, were blessedly ungovernable: “[The Arabs’] idea of national union is episodic, combined resistance to an intruder. Constructive politics, an organized state . . . are not only beyond their capacity but anathema to their instincts.” Lawrence sometimes made this point in philological terms: “Unless he has learned English or French, the inhabitant of these parts has no words to describe all this country. . . . Sham in Arabic is the town of Damascus. An Aleppine always calls himself an Aleppine, a Beyrouti a Beyrouti, and so down to the smallest villages. The verbal poverty indicates a political condition.” Yet these same episodic, impoverished Arabs had been Britain’s allies. Had the Americans been more prompt, or the Italians more steadfast? The Arabs deserved some reward—say, a small kingdom or two. This appeal to fair play appeared again and again in articles, letters to the editor, and private communications with British politicians. Arnold Wilson and Mark Sykes faced a competitor.

Lawrence proposed that the Arabs rule three kingdoms: “Lower Mesopotamia, Upper Mesopotamia, and Syria, to be placed respectively under Abdullah, Zaid, and Faisal, sons of King Husein. Husein himself would remain King of Hejaz [i.e., Mecca and Medina]. . . . He would have no temporal authority in the three states above mentioned and in fact no position there at all save insertion of his name in Friday prayers in all mosques.” The British government took this plan seriously enough to let the de Bunsen committee embody it in another of its maps, shown on the bottom of page 56. The committee, though, did not want to give kingdoms to the Arabs. That was Lawrence’s idea.

Several developments favored Lawrence’s plan. In November 1918, the British and the French responded to the twelfth of Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points by promising to “establish indigenous governments and administrations in Syria and Mesopotamia.” The British government refused to heed Arnold Wilson’s protests, or his counterproposal that an Englishman serve as high commissioner in “Mesopotamia” for at least five years. The next month the French yielded any claim to Mosul, assigned to them two years before under the Sykes-Picot Agreement. This part of Iraq now fell to the British, the same as Basra and Baghdad. The French compensated themselves by taking Syria—

depriving Husein and his sons of any chance to rule in this quarter. But “Mesopotamia” was still left, and the chief administrator of it, Arnold Wilson, now unwittingly helped Lawrence. In 1919, he built the first railway south of Baghdad. In that same year, he also established an irrigation department to cope with floods and drain marshes, and an agriculture department to encourage the production of cotton. The British were starting to turn the southern half of the country into something like India, and so it was all the easier for Lawrence and others in Cairo and London to ask whether the British might not turn Iraq into something else—something new.

Nor had the Americans been idle. By 1919 the Paris Peace Conference was looming, and the Americans, who now learned of the existence of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (revealed by Russian Bolsheviks after they seized the papers of Ambassador Paléologue), objected to what they called new “colonies” and secret agreements. Woodrow Wilson’s confidante, Colonel Edward M. House, wrote in his memoirs, “It is all bad and I told Balfour so. They are making [the Middle East] a breeding ground for future war.” Arthur Balfour, the British foreign secretary, agreed to an American proposal to conduct a plebiscite asking the people of Iraq which government they preferred. That blunted the charge of colonialism, and so did the decision to give Britain the three Turkish districts in the form of a mandate granted by the new League of Nations. This decision provided for eventual independence for Iraq.

It was only two years since Sykes had worked his will on the boundaries of the Caliphate, but it might have been a thousand. As Balfour said, the Sykes-Picot Agreement was “alien to those modern notions of nationality



**The British fastened on Husein ibn Ali, a descendant of the Prophet, as a leader of the Arabs in the war against the Ottoman Empire. One son got the throne of Jordan while another, Faisal, became king of Iraq.**

which are enshrined in the Covenant [of the League of Nations]. . . . These documents proclaim that if we supply an aggregate of human beings, more or less homogeneous in language and religion, with a little assistance and a good deal of advice, if we protect them from external aggression and discourage internal violence, they will speedily and spontaneously organize themselves into a democratic state on modern lines.”

But the British did not meet with anything like spontaneous democratic statehood. The plebiscite proposed by the Americans never took place. Instead, Arnold Wilson conducted a plebiscite of his own in late 1919. Using lists of Ottoman taxpayers, he established a voter roll dominated by property owners in Basra and Baghdad, and used army officers and translators to ask them



whether Iraq should be protected by the British or be subjected to some other regime. Wilson allowed freedom of the press, something new in Iraq, but the result was predictable: The Arabs, no less respectful toward British uniforms than they had been toward Turkish ones, mostly voted to be protected by the British. A few voted to be governed by an Arab notable under a British protectorate. Hardly any voted to be governed by the sons of Husein. Wilson thought he had silenced London and the Americans, too.

**ARNOLD WILSON AND T. E. Lawrence  
met their match in the woman who proved  
to be the last of the mapmakers, the English  
author and administrator Gertrude Bell.**

He had not silenced the Arabs. The freedom of the press that accompanied the plebiscite made resistance easier, and the loss of Syria to the French made resistance attractive to troops under Husein's son Faisal. Nor were Faisal and his men without resources. Embarrassed by the disappointment of Arab hopes to rule Syria, the British were still paying them. British forces in the north had met with trouble among the Kurds, and British troops all over the country were beginning to go home to India. There was one more map to be drawn, and rebellious Arabs in Faisal's employ hoped to draw it.

#### IV

THE ARAB REBELS, ARNOLD WILSON, AND T. E. Lawrence met their match in the woman who proved to be the last of the mapmakers. This was the English author and administrator Gertrude Bell. Her contemporaries knew her all too well. Virginia Woolf, for one, was afraid of her. Woolf wrote a friend who was traveling in Iraq, "Now where are you? With Miss Gertrude Bell, I suppose. . . . Miss Bell has a very long nose: she is like an Aberdeen terrier; she is a masterful woman, has everyone under her thumb, and makes one feel a little inefficient."

Gertrude Bell was taller than any terrier; that is her, next to Wilson in the group photo on page 53. But physiognomy and height were not all that made her intimidating. She had climbed a number of the Swiss Alps, one of which was named for her. (She had given up mountain climbing when a bolt of lightning struck her ice pick as she was ascending the Finsteraarhorn in a thunderstorm.) A man like Sykes could not compete, as he learned one year when she kept him out of Syria. She had convinced Turkish officials in Damascus that Sykes's brother-in-law was

the prime minister of Egypt. This was nonsense, but her Arabic was good, and her reputation was too, and so Turkish objections to the policies of the prime minister kept Sykes out. He called her "a flat-chested, rump-wagging man-woman—a blethering windbag," and many agreed with him, but

to no effect. She had been the first woman to take a first in history at Oxford, had grown up in a house decorated by William Morris, and was the granddaughter of one of Britain's greatest industrial chemists.

Because she was a woman, Bell could move more freely in Muslim countries, where a female traveler would not arouse as much suspicion as a man. Unlike Sykes, she consulted local leaders, wrote judiciously, and did not presume to give advice to governments in London and elsewhere. Unlike Wilson, she did not ignore Lawrence's Arab irregulars, and unlike Lawrence, she did not overestimate them. Far from hating "Levantines" or Arabs, she admired them. The only cause she ever took part in was that of the anti-suffragettes.

Lawrence knew her weakness: She tended to judge any opinion by her own opinion of those who held it. When she came to Iraq in 1916 to work under Arnold Wilson, she recognized his ability and agreed with him about the future of what was not yet Iraq. Later, when the war ended, she made several trips to Europe and Egypt to report to officials who needed to deal with Iraq at the Paris Peace Conference or other, later conferences, and she saw much of Lawrence. Now she changed her mind. After meeting Lawrence in Cairo in 1919, she wrote in her diary,

We sat in the garden under the night, his homely, unromantic face and stout person illuminated by the lights on the verandah, where, before we had finished our talk, a crowd of British officers and Englishwomen were dining. My heart burned, my heart ached as I listened to him. [The heartache] is all the more bitter because the thoughts were nobler and the desire ran in broader channels.

Bell realized that Lawrence wanted something bigger than Wilson's *India Inferior* or Sykes's zone of control—something like a nation. He had come up with three kingdoms. After the British took Mosul, he switched to advocating just one kingdom. This switch inspired Bell to help him. A kingdom would need a name and it would need boundaries. Lawrence's notion of a king of the Arabs would not suffice. There would have to be an Iraq for the king to rule. The inhabitants would have to accept him.

She had already made a start. Wilson had put her in charge of antiquities, and she had gone on to found the Iraqi National Museum. Iraq is the only country in the world in which the national museum is older than the nation, and the reason is that Gertrude Bell did not think that a museum only ought to commemorate. It also ought to inspire. The ideal viewer was a citizen, not a connoisseur, and the ideal staff were visionaries, not scholars. What Greek and Latin tags were to Wilson, and what classical archaeology could not be to Lawrence (for he had left the profession), the mounds that hid Babylon and other cities were to Bell. Others would quote. She would create. And she would be as efficient as Woolf would have expected.

To accomplish her goal, she would have to get rid of Arnold Wilson, but what should have been impossible proved easy. In June 1920 the Arab rebels rose against the British, and Wilson made the mistake of predicting the rebellion without preventing it. He even knew where it would start—Dair al-Zor, the border district of Ottoman times. Faisal's forces had gathered here at the end of the war. That June, 300 men raided Iraq and killed Englishmen near Mosul. Wilson pointed out that the attackers were on the British payroll and asked London to discharge them. Partly at the urging of Lawrence, London refused. Wilson was surprised, but he would have been even more surprised to learn that Bell agreed

with London. She wrote to her father, "I think we're on the edge of a pretty considerable Arab nationalist demonstration with which I am a good deal in sympathy. It will, however, force our hand and we shall have to see whether it will leave us with enough hold to carry on here."

When the "demonstration" came, Wilson was more than equal to it. He thought the chief threat came from the Sunnis of the central region, quick to act because they had been accustomed to political and military service under the Turks. Meeting with Sunni leaders, he tried to discourage them: "I reminded them that only the British mandate stood between them and the resumption by Turkey of her former position in Iraq. . . . One of the three remarked that the Turks were after all Muslims and were prepared . . . to give Iraq autonomy. I mentioned the Kurdish minority and the powerful Shia elements on the Euphrates. . . ; they replied that both groups were ignorant peasants who could easily be kept in their place, the former by the mutual jealousies of their leaders, the latter by the same agency and through the Shia priesthood, who, they said, were at one with the Nationalist party."

Seeing that his threat had failed, Wilson tried to keep the Sunnis and Shia from cooperating. The Turks

## Iraq: A Chronology

1914	British troops land at Basra
1915	British defeated at Baghdad
1916	Sykes-Picot Agreement
1917	British control extended to Mosul
1920	Iraqi rebellion against the British
1921	Monarchy established under King Faisal
1930	British League of Nations mandate ends
1941	British reinforcements remove pro-Axis government
1958	Fall of the monarchy
1979	Saddam Hussein becomes president
1980–88	Iran-Iraq war
1990–91	Iraq invades Kuwait and is expelled by a U.S.-led coalition
2003	U.S. and coalition forces invade Iraq



The only woman present, Gertrude Bell takes center stage at a 1922 picnic with King Faisal (second from right) and others.

had done that, and now Wilson did it well enough so that when the Sunnis at Dair al-Zor asked for Shiite help, the Shiite clergy refused to give any, saying that Faisal's men were "vestiges and remains of the Ottomans and their servants." Success, though, was Wilson's second mistake. Suppressing the rebellion cost 50 million pounds, or a quarter of a billion dollars. It also tied down the Indian army. And it took six months at a time when the government wished to devote its efforts to the deteriorating situation in Europe, where communists held or threatened Russia, Germany, and Hungary.

In the London *Times* of August 22, 1920, Lawrence asked, "How long will we permit millions of pounds, thousands of imperial troops, and tens of thousands of Arabs to be sacrificed on behalf of a form of colonial administration which can benefit nobody but its administrators?" Wilson paid no attention, but when Bell and others said the same thing, he replied, "The population is so deeply divided by racial and religious cleavages and the Shiah majority after two hundred years of Sunni domination are so little accustomed to holding high office that any attempt to introduce institutions on the lines desired by the advanced politicians

would involve the concentration of power in the hands of a few."

When this argument failed to sway the government, Wilson made his last mistake. He told what he thought was the truth: "We cannot maintain our position as mandatory by a policy of conciliation of extremists. Having set our hand to the task of regenerating Mesopotamia, we must be prepared to furnish men and money and to maintain continuity of control for years to come." He concluded, "If His Majesty's Government regard such a policy as impracticable or beyond our strength (as well they may) I submit that they would do better to face the alternative, formidable and from the local point of view, terrible as it is, and evacuate Mesopotamia."

Govern, said Wilson, or evacuate. The British government did not want to do either, and so it was Wilson who evacuated, resigning in October of 1920. Britain decided to make Faisal king of Basra, Baghdad, and Kurdistan too. (A brother got Jordan. The father got Mecca and Medina, until the Saudis expelled him.) But a king of Iraq could not be created in London. He had to enter the country, pass through Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, uniting the country through his visit, and

receive popular support. He had to be crowned, and he had to make the British army and the local police believe that he was king. Most of all, he had to believe it himself. Otherwise, no one else would.

Working under Wilson's successor, Sir Percy Cox, Bell helped arrange another plebiscite, this one to accept Faisal. Complicating her task was the lack of any formal way to give power to the Iraqis. The British were still administering the country as though it were part of India. So Bell dispensed promises to various Iraqis who were frequent dinner guests at her home. When Faisal arrived from Medina in June 1921, Bell and others squired him through the country, engineering support. Crowning Faisal was another chore:

The enthronement took place at 6 am on Tuesday, admirably arranged. A dais about 2 ft 6 ins. high was set up in the middle of the big courtyard . . . by the Tigris. . . . [I]n front were seated blocks of English and Arab officials, townsmen, Ministers, local deputations. . . . Exactly at 6, we saw Faisal in uniform, Sir Percy in white diplomatic uniform with all his ribbons and stars, [and] Sir Aylmer [the military commander]. . . . We all stood up while they came in and sat when they had taken their places. . . . Then the Secretary of the Council of Ministers stood up and read Sir Percy's proclamation in which he announced that Faisal had been elected King by 96 per cent of the people of Mesopotamia, long live the King! With that we stood up and saluted him. The band played 'God Save the King'—they have no national anthem yet.

But the chief obstacle was Faisal himself. He had never been to Iraq. At the enthronement he looked "dignified but much strung up—it was an agitating moment." Bell needed something more inspiring than Sir Percy Cox with his stars and ribbons. She took Faisal to the ruins of Ctesiphon, the capital when the Arabs invaded, bringing Islam. She wanted him to think that Iraq and Arabia formed a whole, and that he could come from the one to the other and be king. And there, in the ruins, she succeeded:

The Ctesiphon expedition was an immense success. . . . After we had reconstructed the palace and seen the [Persian] Khosroes sitting in it, I took him

into the high windows to the south, when we could see the Tigris, and told him the story of the Arab conquest as Tabari records it, the fording of the river and the rest of the magnificent tale. It was the tale of his own people. You can imagine what it was like reciting it to him. I don't know which of us was more thrilled. . . . I sometimes think I must be in a dream.

Away with districts, zones, or kingdoms—there was to be a nation. But Gertrude Bell was no Lowell Thomas speaking to an audience of one. She was an administrator, and so, when she returned Faisal to Baghdad and she and Cox put the new state through its first budget cut, she was able to plot the consequences on a map. The Indian army had gone. From now on, the British would control the country in a new way. Rather than hold port towns and oases, they would build airstrips every several hundred miles and patrol from the air. A dozen Royal Air Force squadrons able to bomb villages and caravans would be far more powerful than an army, and would cost far less.

“The most interesting thing which happened during this week,” Bell wrote her father in July 1924, “was a performance by the R.A.F., a bombing demonstration. It was even more remarkable than the one we saw last year at the Air Force Show because it was much more real. They had made an imaginary village about a quarter of a mile from where we sat on the Diyala [Sirwan] dyke and the two first bombs, dropped from 3,000 ft, went straight into the middle of it and set it alight. They then dropped bombs all round it, as if to catch the fugitives and finally firebombs which even in the sunlight made flares of bright flame in the desert. They burn through metal, and water won't extinguish them. At the end the armoured cars went out to round up the fugitives with machine guns.

“I was tremendously impressed. It's an amazingly relentless and terrible thing, war from the air.” Arnold Wilson would have agreed with her. Sir Arnold, as he then was, died in combat in the skies over France in 1941. Bell had died 15 years earlier. Lawrence wrote her grieving father, “The Irak state will be a fine monument: even if it only lasts a few more years.” ■