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The *Guiding Principles* and the U.S. “Mandate” for Iraq: 20th
Century Colonialism and America’s New Empire

by
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Late last year the Council on Foreign Relations invited 25 academics, corporate executives, oil industry consultants, retired military men and American diplomats to meet at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy on the oak-shaded campus of Rice University. Co-chaired by two former career foreign service officers, Edward P. Djerejian and Frank G. Wisner, the group was charged with mapping out a plan for the U.S.’s role in Iraq after the anticipated war. The final report which followed, *Guiding Principles for U.S. Post-Conflict Policy in Iraq*, outlines a 3-phased, at least 2-year process by which Iraq would be “liberated,” cleansed of Baathists and weapons of mass destruction and transformed into a democratic, free-market republic fully integrated into the community of nations. The authors of the report never challenge the wisdom of war on Iraq; rather their plan is built within the framework of what is presumably a “best case scenario”: a short and swift war with low casualties and relatively little urban warfare. The authors also concede that full compliance by the Iraqi state with relevant UN resolutions or a coup might eliminate the need for an invasion.

While the Council on Foreign Relations is adamant in its assertion that it has no affiliation with the U.S. government, the Baker Institute’s close association with the current administration suggests that the report itself will contribute to the shape of any post-war American occupation of Iraq. This is especially the case with the involvement of Djerejian, who served for much of the 1980s as ambassador in Damascus and Tel Aviv and has often been used to open back channel contacts in the Middle East and Caucasus. Djerejian is a careful and sanguine thinker who is deeply sensitive to the history and culture of the region; he understands intimately the explosive power of sectarian and ethnic conflict and how corrosive the asymmetries of American policies towards Israel have been. The report bears his unmistakable imprint in the way it envisions “quiet U.S.-Iranian cooperation,” notes that the

elimination of Saddam will not cure all the ills of Iraqi society and concludes that the U.S. “must avoid imposing Versailles-style conditions on Iraq.” (13)

By the same token, the report’s emphasis on the stabilization of Iraq’s oil industry—partially for the redevelopment of the country—and the use of American power to level “the playing field for awarding energy sector contracts by supporting a transparent and competitive process” (10) reflects the contribution of among others, Djerejian’s co-chair Frank Wisner. Wisner has had various jobs in the State and Defense Departments since the Vietnam era and most recently served as ambassador to New Delhi. He was appointed to the Board of Directors of the now-bankrupt Enron in 1997 and currently works as Vice Chairman of External Affairs for American International Group, one of the world’s largest insurance and financial services company. His involvement is a tacit acknowledgement that post-war Iraq policy is predicated less on disarmament or democratization and more on the interests of the American energy sector.

The report envisions a “superintending role” for the U.S. over a UN-supervised Iraqi administration:

One that maintains low visibility but is clearly committed to protecting law and order and creating a breathing space for a nascent Iraqi government to take shape. The U.S. role will be best played in the background guiding progress and making sure that any peacekeeping force is effective and robust enough to do its job...While moving the process along as quickly as possible, the United States must not be limited by self-imposed timelines, but should rather adopt an objectives-based approach (6)

The “behind the scenes” strategy of America’s efforts—which would be led by an “Iraqi Coordinator”—are calculated so as to preclude any appearance of colonialism. The anxiety over U.S. actions being interpreted as neo-imperialist courses through the document (“A heavy American hand will only convince them, and the rest of the world that the operation against Iraq was undertaken for imperialist, rather than disarmament. It is in America’s interest to discourage such misperceptions.” [10-11]). To counteract any “misperceptions” that might arise, the report’s authors advocate the use of “vigorous public diplomacy” not just in the Arab and Muslim worlds, but also in the U.S. and Europe to “deflate... local criticism in the region and

help deny terrorist and extremists the ability to use the military action to their own political advantage.”(3) “Public diplomacy” is a euphemism for highly coordinated pro-American propaganda that has gained wider use since the aftermath of 9/11 and the appointment of Charlotte Beers, a distinguished advertising executive as the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

The stress placed on issues of *appearance* and the borrowing of the vocabulary and personnel of Madison Avenue amounts to a concession that American plans for Iraq in the least resemble colonialism and at most constitute the formulation of a neo-modern version thereof. What is left unsaid in the report’s analysis and a telling lacuna in a document whose authors seem so sensitive to history is that Iraq itself, and indeed all the states of the Eastern Mediterranean—Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel—are the end products of a similar style of colonialism, the inter-war phenomenon of League of Nations’ Mandates. While from a comparative perspective the parallels are striking, what is a constant in the historical experience of the Mandate system in the Middle East and the planned American Mandate for Iraq is that both are predicated on Orientalist and essentialized conceptions of Arab and Muslim society and the unique identification of liberalism with Western hegemony. And just as the Mandate system contributed to the destabilization of colonial and post-colonial Middle Eastern society, the lack of democratic structures and the failure of the inter-war international system, the cost of the American Mandate for Iraq will be similar, especially in the weakening of the UN and the way it will make permanent the radicalization of the region.

Colonialism in Drag: Sykes-Picot in the Wilsonian Moment

During WWI, and long before its outcome was clear, representatives of France and Britain met to divide the Ottoman Empire (1916). The plan, remembered as the Sykes-Picot agreement for the two civil servants who drew it up, assigned to the two states areas of “direct control” and “indirect control.” France’s area of direct control was along the Eastern Mediterranean from southern Lebanon into Anatolia, with inland Syria under indirect influence. Britain was given exclusive control over southern Mesopotamia—primarily the oil producing regions adjacent to Kuwait and Iranian oilfields, and indirect control over inland Iraq. Palestine was to be placed under international control.

Growing American influence and pressure at home forced a shift in the way the British and French portrayed themselves in the region. Less as conquerors, they began to situate themselves as the humanitarian liberators of the Arabs from the authoritarian oppression of the Ottoman Empire. The British instigation of the Arab revolt, which has become a permanent feature of Western popular culture in the form of David Lean's film "Lawrence of Arabia," was, in part, a consequence of this shift.

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire colonial and military officials sought to persuade the local inhabitants that the European liberation/conquest of the region had been done on their behalf. Sykes and Picot themselves toured Syria in late 1918 and early 1919 delivering speeches calculated to lower local expectations of complete independence, no doubt in anticipation of the implementation of the territorial arrangements outlined in the once secret treaty which the pair had engineered. All of their presentations insisted on the existence of a separate Arab nation that, Picot maintained, had been oppressed "for four centuries by the government of Istanbul." Both claimed that the liberation of the Arabs and other peoples from this oppression had motivated them to make war on the Turks and that the Arabs were a nation among nations; nations that had joined together to "end Turkish despotism and return freedom to the people."

Stanley Maude, the British General who conquered Mesopotamia expressed similar sentiments before the incredulous inhabitants of Baghdad:

O people of Baghdad, remember that for 26 generations you have suffered under strange tyrants who have endeavored to set one Arab house against another in order that they might profit by your dissensions. This policy is abhorrent to Great Britain and her allies, for there can be neither peace nor prosperity where there is enmity and misgovernment. Therefore I am commanded to invite you, through your nobles and elders and representatives, to participate in the management of your civil affairs in collaboration with the political representatives of Great Britain who accompany the British Army, so that you may be united with your kinsmen in North, East, South, and West in realising the aspirations of your race...

By the time of the Paris Peace Conference, and fearing that Wilsonian notions of national self-determination would scuttle their colonial interests, the British and French seized upon a system of temporary “Mandates” as a compromise solution that would appear less “colonial.” Article 22 of the League’s *Covenant* explained the need for Mandates:

To those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant.

In order to bring these peoples into that “strenuous modern world,” “advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility,” would take on the burden of “tutelage.” And while the League recognized the “existence [of the Arab states of the Eastern Mediterranean] as independent nations” they would be “subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone.” Even though the League’s guidelines included a clause that the people of the soon-to-be-mandated territories should have some say in their Mandatory, Britain and France were given those areas first coveted in Sykes-Picot. Ultimately, the Mandate system envisioned the tutelage/ superintending role as temporary. At the time of their establishment, however, the voluntary exit of a colonial power was unprecedented and most considered the French and British presence permanent.

The most immediate consequence of the imposition of the Mandates was the drawing of new boundaries and the creation of unprecedented geographical constructs like Syria and Iraq. The new borders often had disastrous economic impacts and disrupted trade and migration patterns for thousands throughout the region. The territorial divisions cloaked a more concerted effort to create nonviable states (Trans-Jordan) or states in which potentially loyal religious minorities would amount to a plurality (Lebanon). Iraq was the most curious of these creations, binding together three Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul into a new state.

In the fiction of the Mandate system, these new states would run themselves with advice and guidance from the Mandatory power. Consequently, parliaments were convened, constitutions written, elections held. In the case of Iraq, a new king was imposed. Faysal ibn Hussein (no relation to Saddam), who had briefly ruled in Syria, was elevated to the new throne of Iraq by the British following a questionable plebiscite. The states were systematically prevented from developing independent militaries, and instead, colonial troops from other imperial holdings were often employed to establish control. In the case of Syria and Iraq, men from non-Sunni Muslim minority groups like Alawites, Ismailis, Armenians and Assyrians were often used to bolster military units commanded by European officers. Foreign policy, security apparatuses, antiquities and tariff and trade policies were the domain of the Mandatory power. Education, court systems, and most middle management positions were left to the locals. In what must have been seen as one of the more humiliating dimensions of the Mandate system, Mandated states were responsible for paying the salaries of those officials “advising” them. The *Guiding Principles* outlines a similar plan to reimburse nation building costs with the Iraqi oil revenue (11-12).

Nevertheless, in a departure from their previous colonial enterprises, the French and the British sought for the most part to remain “behind the scenes.” Not only was this done to fulfill the letter of the Mandate, but it made sense from an administrative perspective. Still, the ultimate power in each of the Mandate states was the resident “High Commissioner” who could and would employ the military to enforce colonial will. Among the many responsibilities of the High Commissioner was periodic reporting of the improvement of conditions in the areas under his tutelage to the League. Rarely did the League challenge the veracity of these reports or criticize the practices of Mandatories; consequently the organization’s credibility as an anti-imperialist, liberal entity diminished through the course of the inter-war period. A caricature of its former self, and thus weakened, the League failed to prevent the brutal Italian colonization of Ethiopia or stand against Japanese militarism in China.

Resistance to the Mandates and Inter-War Politics

Before the ink was dry on the documents establishing the various Mandates on the new states of the Middle East, resistance to French and British neo-

colonialism had begun throughout the region. While many of these movements resembled proto-typical national resistance movements, and would become more formalized in the course of the inter-war period, opposition also arose in ways that were less easily understandable in the idiom of nationalism and made more sense when seen through the lens of late-Ottoman forms of religious authority and patterns of legitimacy. Regardless of form, the movements against European colonialism pivoted on two major themes: first, the whole notion who liberated whom; and second, whether those societies now liberated by the West were in need of “tutelage.”

With the exception of a very tiny group of Arab nationalists, British and French efforts to liberate the Arabs from Ottoman suzerainty rang hollow. The Arab identity was itself of little relevance to most, and until very recently the term Arab would be more commonly associated with desert-dwelling Bedouin. The urban, urbane, cosmopolitan inhabitants of cities like Damascus or Beirut would have bristled at the notion of being called Arab. More substantively, notions of identity followed lines of religious affiliation. Indeed the post-war efforts to enforce an Arab identity stemmed from the need to create Arabs, and Turks for that matter, in order to obscure the religious bond between the two groups and to disengage the newly imagined ethnicities from an historical dependence on Islam and the very real possibility of an ongoing anti-imperialist solidarity within its structure.

When seen from another direction the inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire, despite the authoritarian dimensions of its rule, were loyal to the state inasmuch as the state defended and protected Islam. The British and French—as Christians and Westerners—by definition could not accomplish this. Thus, as resistance took shape in the former empire, it acquired an explicitly Islamist character. Exemplary of this moment was a declaration made by one of the various groups fighting the French in Northern Syria in the early 1920s. The French should leave,

because of the existence of the government of the
paramount Islamic Caliphate which is giving aid to it
[the people], [this people] who consider themselves
one part of the several parts of the general Islamic
community and fight under its flag

Clearly sectarian in tone, the document makes mention neither of Arabs nor Turks and but instead embraced a vital Islamic community. As the French

abandoned parts of Anatolia to this resistance, campaigns of ethnic cleansing followed in which the residual Armenian population—which had survived the Genocide of 1915—was forced to flee again.

The British liberators of Mesopotamia were also greeted by a revolt. Equally expressing itself in terms of local autonomy and Islamic legitimacy, this revolt would bind together urban Muslims with Arab tribal confederations along the Euphrates and last several months. Following a brutal campaign of suppression which left over 10,000 Iraqis (and 450 British soldiers) dead, the resistance was broken. Other comparably bloody moments of resistance would occur later, most notably the Great Revolt in Palestine in the 1930s. It is not unreasonable to suspect that American efforts at liberation will be met by similar sentiments—not just in Iraq, but in other predominately Muslim countries.

The assertion that the societies of the Eastern Mediterranean were in need of tutelage was likewise met with derision. The territory conquered by the British and the French had been the stage for nearly a 100-year process of modernization and state centralization. Certainly the level of development of the region compared favorably with those European states once part of the Empire of Austria-Hungary—Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia—slated for complete independence in the post-war settlements. The entire region had been fully integrated—though in a subordinate position—into international patterns of trade. Schools and universities were established, and chambers of commerce and industry had been formed. With the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, the Ottoman Empire had even begun to embrace liberal notions of political and intellectual freedom and the creation of a national economy which rejected the debilitating economic concessions imposed on the state by the Europeans during the course of the 19th century. The various social and economic reforms left the Ottoman Empire as one of the strongest non-Western states on the globe and the Ottoman military, far from collapsing in the face of the Allied assault, withstood successfully the two major expeditionary forces sent against it in the initial years of the war—Gallipoli—and the first invasion of Iraq, both of which left thousands of British, Australian and Anglo-Indian soldiers dead or captured. The inherent strength of late-Ottoman society—and the fact that the Ottoman Empire, were it to be left intact, would have controlled vast amounts of oil—no doubt contributed to the Western efforts to force its division. Thus divided, the residual states still possessed layers of bureaucrats, local notables and an emerging middle class of liberal professionals and businessmen who formed

the backbone of resistance to European colonialism. As the Mandates evolved, the British and French turned to older strategies of divide and conquer to moderate the position of those antagonistic to their rule. Such techniques included the encouragement of compradorial cadres within minority groups and the use of bureaucratic strategies to make more acute sectarian and ethnic divisions within the areas under their control. The formation of Lebanon by the French and early British cooperation with Zionists are the most pertinent examples of this phenomenon. This form of rule was later adopted by most of the post-colonial governments of the region and fully integrated into styles of authoritarian rule.

As both the French and British grew exhausted by their colonial endeavor, they moved to more open cooperation with the least liberal parts of Middle Eastern society, primarily the semi-feudal notability of the Ottoman period who still dominated much of urban life. Ironically, this elite was itself under tremendous threat from an emergent urban middle class that peopled civil society and ideologically and culturally resembled more the Europeans themselves. Thus colonialism contributed the persistence of the Middle East's *ancien régime* and the political marginalization of a liberal-minded middle class. Planks in the *Guiding Principles* have the potential to do the same. While the authors of the report seem less committed to the idea of an ethnic division of Iraq, their continued advocacy of a separate de facto Kurdish "enclave" in a federal system is equally support for the Kurdish notability who, despite taking on the mantle of political leaders, have divided Iraqi Kurdistan into fiefs. The report's intention to employ "consultative councils" made up of "leaders at the national and local level" and "representatives of external opposition" (7) upon the occupation of the country strikes me again as an attempt to use a newer version of Mandate-era illiberal notable politics to identify a pliant clientele and suppress dissent. This strategy when deployed in Afghanistan—i.e., the Loya Jirga—did nothing to instill democracy, but rather ensured continued warlord hegemony.

Exit Strategies

The gradual turning over of authority in British and French controlled Mandated areas to the semi-feudal elite anticipated their final "exit strategies." In the case of the French, the election of a socialist premier in 1936 led to a period of direct negotiations between the notable elite of both

Syria and Lebanon but not a complete withdrawal. The Second World War and post-war French efforts to reclaim parts of their empire made their final departure a clumsy affair. The basic colonial ethos of the permanence of sectarianism was left behind in the organic document establishing the Lebanese Republic—taking sectarianism a fact of Lebanese political culture and a contributing factor of the 1975 civil war. In Syria, the urban notables who ruled briefly were replaced almost immediately by military strong men drawn from the minority groups from which the French built the armed forces. The ascendancy of the Alawites in the person of the recently deceased Baathist dictator of Syria, Hafez al-Assad is a residue of this aspect of French colonial policy.

Great Britain's failures in Palestine are legendary and in 1948 they merely abandoned it to the United Nations. However, the British exit strategy for Iraq most closely resembles that implicit in the *Guiding Principles*. By the early 1930s, the British had grown confident that their imposed king, Faysal, would be able to rule by employing a mix of divide and conquer and the British Royal Air Force. The treaty negotiated between Baghdad and London that followed is itself a blueprint for neocolonialism and anticipates the way various European states and the U.S. would deal with former colonies or conquered states in the post-WWII era. By the terms of the 1930 Treaty, the British retained two air bases in the country and reserved the right to unilateral intervention in Iraq. The Iraqi military would be developed under close British supervision: all military hardware was to be purchased from British companies, foreign trainers were to be British and if Iraqi military personnel traveled abroad for training, they were required to go to the United Kingdom. The question of oil had been handled previously in a 1925 agreement by which the Iraqi Petroleum Company—a British firm—had exclusive rights to the development of Iraqi oil reserves in return for the payment of modest royalties. Far from completing the developmental and liberal process envisioned at the award of the Mandate, the British had merely identified a limited number of strategic interests in Iraq—access to oil and military assets—and abandoned Iraqi society to those who could best dominate it. Exemplary of this British abandonment was their failure to stop the immediate post-independence genocidal massacres of the Assyrian Christian community of Iraq. The Assyrians, most of whom were refugees from Anatolia had made up a significant portion of the colonial military and served as a convenient stand-in for anti-British anger. Bakr Sidqi, the officer most responsible for the massacres, used his newly acquired prestige to mount a military coup in 1936, thus setting the stage for Iraqi political instability for

the next 45 years. And while the British did intervene in Iraqi affairs in 1941, it was not to reassert civilian constitutional rule but rather to suppress the government of Rashid Ail al-Gaylani, an Iraqi nationalist who expressed pro-German sympathies, and moreover sought to abrogate the terms of the 1930 Treaty.

The *Guiding Principles* report includes a similar strategy to disengage access to oil from the process of democratization. In the short-term, the report advocates “isolating the [oil] industry from domestic turmoil.” (16) While the report envisions this isolation as only temporary, American withdrawal from the oil fields would be contingent on the stability of Iraq, defined here as an Iraqi commitment to the “depoliticization” of the oil industry and again, the “leveling of the playing field.” In this sense, the American plan copies the underlying sense of the 1930 Treaty: the Iraqis will have sovereignty over their oil resources, as long as sovereignty does not interfere in the American strategic access to those resources. The physical format of the report itself seems to mimic this stance. The working group’s report fills pages 1-14. The sole addendum, “Oil and Iraq: Opportunities and Challenges” take up the next 13.

Conclusion

Perhaps hoping to make the best of a terrible situation, the authors of the *Guiding Principles* have failed to imagine a solution for Iraq that transcends the basic formulas of 20th century colonialism. The inherent illegitimacy which will adhere to any U.S. occupation of Iraq—no matter how sheltered by “public diplomacy”—will tar any who seek to cooperate in democratization as collaborators. That the plan includes the obvious limitation of Iraqi sovereignty means any Iraqi leader who cooperates will again be viewed as a servant of American interests, no matter how enlightened. Other questions remain: would the U.S. allow an Iraqi government to continue to oppose Israeli policies, perhaps even force it to recognize Israel? To facilitate security, would it place permanent bases on Iraqi soil like those in Turkey, Qatar or Afghanistan? More to the point, any ruler who rules only with the aid of American—Christian—occupation forces would lack, in a prima facie sense, any effective legitimacy. Consider for a moment Osama bin Laden’s criticism of the Saudi royal family’s support of American troops in Arabia.

Certainly the use of the UN to “supervise” an American Mandate on Iraq will add credibility to those who denounce that body as a tool of Western imperialism. Likewise, the use of “crimes against humanity” trials to purge the upper echelon of Iraq’s domestic oil industry as the *Guiding Principles* advocates (17) is a conscious perversion of international norms of justice for purely corporate ends. Any such efforts would turn farcical the whole system of human rights jurisprudence.

Ultimately the plan points to some of the reasons why colonialism in any form must be opposed. By the late-1930s the peoples of the Middle East had only experienced the liberal age promised to them by the League of Nations as an oppressive mixture of brutish colonialism, political instability, social and cultural dislocations and Great-depression era economic hardship: liberalism had lost credibility and grown hollow. It was in that context that young educated Arab men began to turn to more radical and racist Pan-Arab ideologies like Baathism. Simultaneously, it was the era in which more conservative Islamic movements emerged that were opposed to both the secularizing dimensions of nationalism and Western Imperialism. Present day radical Islamists like al-Qaeda and Islamic Jihad trace their lineage to groups like the Muslim Brotherhood of the inter-war period of European colonialism. The people of Iraq, and by extension, those in the remainder of the Arab world stand to suffer promised American liberation in the same way.

A full text version of the *Guiding Principles for U.S. Post-Conflict Policy in Iraq* is available at
http://www.cfr.org/pdf/Iraq_TF.pdf.

Suggested Reading:

Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945* (Princeton, 1987)

Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq, 1914-1932* (London, 1976)

Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, -1978)