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Recommended Citation

Heather S. Gregg, *The Grand Strategy of Gertrude Bell: From the Arab Bureau to the Creation of Iraq* (Carlisle: US Army War College Press, 2022),
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/950>

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THE GRAND STRATEGY OF GERTRUDE BELL

From the Arab Bureau to the Creation of Iraq

Heather S. Gregg

Women in Strategy

MONOGRAPH SERIES



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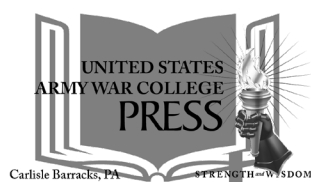
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The Grand Strategy of Gertrude Bell: From the Arab Bureau to the Creation of Iraq

Heather S. Gregg

July 2022



Strategic Studies Institute

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ISBN 1-58487-840-1

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Photo of British author and archaeologist Gertrude Bell in Babylon, Iraq (1909)

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Photo of Gertrude Bell's workers at the excavations of the Byzantine settlement of Madenşehir, Binbirkilise, Turkey (1907)

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Foreword

The contributions women have played in devising both military strategy and grand strategy are surprisingly understudied and in need of greater attention. In this monograph, Dr. Gregg provides a rich depiction of Gertrude Bell, an extraordinary individual who helped to shape British grand strategy in the Middle East during World War I and became one of the principal architects of the modern state of Iraq during the interwar period.

This description of Bell's work as both a military strategist and a grand strategist offers important insights into how Great Britain developed an unconventional warfare strategy in the Middle East during World War I and its attempts to stabilize the region after the war. A focus on Bell's life offers a glimpse into how this remarkable woman influenced British strategy and the extraordinary set of skills and perspectives she brought to promoting Britain's efforts to maintain influence as a great power and to secure key resources for the Crown.

As importantly, studying the life and work of Gertrude Bell offers significant lessons for the challenges of creating peace and stability after war. Britain's efforts at stability operations in Iraq following World War I demonstrate the inherent tensions in balancing an intervening country's objectives and priorities with those of the country the intervening country is trying to stabilize—especially, the challenges of creating transitional governments and including the population in stability operations.

This monograph should be read by anyone who wants to understand British military and grand strategy in the Middle East during World War I, the important perspective and skills Bell brought to shaping these efforts, and the challenges of securing a lasting postwar peace.

Carol V. Evans

Carol V. Evans
Director, Strategic Studies Institute
and US Army War College Press

Executive Summary

The remarkable life of early-twentieth-century British adventurer Gertrude Bell has been well documented through her numerous travel books and biographies. Bell's role as a grand strategist for the British government in the Middle East during World War I and the postwar period, however, is surprisingly understudied. This monograph offers insights into the role women play as grand strategists. It shows how Bell helped to devise Great Britain's military strategy in the Middle East during World War I and its creation of the modern state of Iraq.

Studying Bell as both a military strategist and a grand strategist offers important insights into how she helped to devise British military strategy in the Middle East. These insights include Britain's efforts to work through secret societies and saboteurs to undermine the Ottoman Empire during the war as part of the Arab Bureau and the country's attempts to stabilize the region after the war through the creation of the modern state of Iraq.

As importantly, studying Bell offers a glimpse into how this extraordinary woman was able to become one of the principal architects of British strategy and the exceptional set of skills and perspectives she brought to these efforts. Bell's education, firsthand knowledge of the region, fascination with archaeology, and, above all, her ability to make and maintain relationships with key individuals were invaluable tools for shaping and promoting British efforts at retaining influence as a great power in the postwar era as well as Britain's aims to secure key resources for the empire, including military bases and oil. Ultimately, Bell helped to shape British strategy in the region from 1915–26 because she was a woman, not in spite of it. She had access to both men and women within the local population, she used her social skills to connect and influence key actors in the region, and she brought decades of learning and firsthand experience traveling through the region and speaking with its people to inform and shape her grand strategy.

Additionally, Bell's grand strategy offers important lessons for the challenges of creating peace and stability after war. Britain's efforts at stability operations in Iraq following World War I demonstrate the inherent tensions in balancing an intervening country's objectives and priorities with those the intervening country is trying to stabilize—especially, the challenges of creating transitional governments and including the population in stability operations.

Bell's unique legacy offers insights into the roles women have played and continue to play as influencers of grand strategy in male-dominated contexts and the importance of including diverse perspectives in strategic thinking.

Introduction

In the days following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, looters broke into the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, carrying off an estimated 15,000 antiquities, including the Mask of Warka, a carved marble face that is one of the oldest depictions of the human face and dates back to around 3100 BCE. The theft of these antiquities—and the destruction of the Iraq Museum, more broadly—represented a devastating loss to Iraq’s national identity as well as human history. McGuire Gibson, the head of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, summarized, “The deep memory of an entire culture, a culture that has continued for thousands of years, has been removed. There was 5,000 years of written records, even Egyptian records don’t go back that far. It’s an incredible crime.” Similarly, Neil MacGregor, then-director of the British Museum, described the event as “the greatest catastrophe to afflict any major institution since the Second World War.”¹

Founded in 1926, the Iraq Museum was one of the first museums of its kind in the Middle East. The museum’s collection was the result of years of collaboration between key Iraqi leaders and Gertrude Bell, a British national who had spent much of her life working for the British government in the Middle East. Bell began her fascination with the region following her graduation from the University of Oxford in 1888, and she spent several decades traveling throughout the Middle East and documenting its people and ancient ruins before World War I broke out.

In 1915, the British military recruited Bell to join a small team of intelligence officers stationed in Cairo, Egypt, in an office that was eventually called the Arab Bureau. The team devised an unconventional military strategy that aimed to work through Arab leaders and secret societies to foment an uprising within the Turkish military and weaken the Ottoman Empire from the inside. Bell became a principal contributor to a series of secret reports called the *Arab Bulletin* that outlined Britain’s strategy for working with and through local leaders to undermine Ottoman authority in the region. Following Britain’s capture of Baghdad in 1917, the government made Bell its oriental secretary, and she helped to devise a plan for the military’s occupation of Mesopotamia.

After the war’s conclusion, Bell became an advocate for Iraqi self-rule and a key architect of the state of Iraq. Through reports and personal connections with key decisionmakers, Bell persuaded the British government to back Faisal bin Hussein (Faisal I), the son of Hussein Sharif of Mecca, to be the first king of Iraq, and she helped to sell this idea to the people through her long-standing relationships with key leaders in the newly formed country. Bell became a personal adviser to King Faisal I and attained the title of honorary secretary of antiquities in his new government. Just before her death in 1926, she helped open the first room of the Iraq Museum, which was dedicated to preserving Iraq’s antiquities as a symbol of its nation and rich history. As mentioned previously, the museum was sacked in 2003 following the US-led invasion of the country.

1. Juli Campagna, “War or Peace: It’s Time to Ratify the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflicts,” *Florida Journal of International Law* 17, no. 2 (June 2005): 271–344; Matthew Bogdanos, “The Casualties of War: The Truth about the Iraq Museum,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 109, no. 3 (2005): 477–526; and Matthew Bogdanos, *Thieves of Baghdad* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005).

Although Gertrude Bell's life has been well documented through two biographies, her numerous travel books, and her extensive archives, her role as a military and grand strategist for the British government during World War I and the postwar period is surprisingly understudied. Here, military strategy is defined as "the use of engagements for the object of the war" and is differentiated from grand strategy, which aims to use various instruments of national power to provide a broader and longer-term approach to shaping a region or the world in a way that favors the national interests.² Critically, in grand strategy, the military is just one instrument of statecraft a government can use to pursue a country's long-term vision. In grand strategy, the military is a means to greater ends, and military strategy fits within this wider pursuit.³ Sir Basil Liddell Hart summarizes the distinction between military and grand strategy as follows: "[W]hile the horizon of [military] strategy is bounded by the war, grand strategy looks forward to the subsequent peace. It should not only combine the various instruments [of national power], but so regulate their use as to avoid damage to the future state of peace, security and prosperity."⁴ Focusing on grand strategy (as opposed to just military strategy) widens the aperture of possible strategists to include female heads of government and state and key women within state bureaucracies who help envision a region or even the world in a way that ensures security and prosperity for their countries. As will be described, Gertrude Bell was such a woman.

Studying Bell as both a military strategist and a grand strategist offers important insights into how Great Britain devised its military strategy in the Middle East during World War I and the nation's attempts to stabilize the region after the war. As will be described, Bell became a principal architect of Britain's efforts to work through Arab saboteurs to undermine the Ottoman Empire during the war, the nation's military occupation of Mesopotamia toward the end of the war, and the nation's efforts to maintain influence as a great power in the postwar era as well as Britain's objective of securing key resources for the Crown.

Of similar importance, studying Bell's life offers insights into how a woman was able to become one of the principal architects of British strategy at the time and the unique set of skills and perspectives she brought to these efforts. Her education, considerable knowledge of the region, fascination with archaeology, and, above all, her ability to make and maintain relationships with key individuals were invaluable tools for shaping and promoting British strategy and became the means through which she envisioned and executed a grand strategy that reshaped the modern Middle East. As a grand strategist, Bell prepared reports and communiqués that used a mixture of diplomacy, economics, governance, social resources, and military measures to build the state of Iraq. Above all, Bell understood the importance of engaging key members of the population and leveraging tribal dynamics and different ethnic groups to stabilize the region following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Ultimately, as will be shown,

2. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 1976), 128.

3. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Strategy*, Joint Doctrine Note 1-18 (Washington, DC: JCS, April 2018), vi; and Sir Michael Howard, "Grand Strategy in the Twentieth Century," *Defense Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 1–10.

4. B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Decisive Wars of History: A Study in Strategy* (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1929), 151.

Bell was able to shape British strategy in the region from 1915 to 1926 because she was a woman, not in spite of being a woman. Bell had access to both men and women within the local population; she used gender-specific skills (such as throwing parties) as a means of connecting and influencing key actors in the region; and she applied decades of learning and firsthand experience traveling through the region and speaking with its people to inform and shape her grand strategy. Bell's example offers insights into the roles women have played and continue to play as influencers of grand strategy in male-dominated contexts.

This monograph begins by providing a summary of academic literature's inclusion and treatment of Bell during World War I and in the postwar environment. It continues with a brief overview of Bell's personal history, touching on her upbringing, education, and early travels, and then examines the British military's recruitment of Bell to work in the Arab Bureau and the critical role she played in shaping military strategy in the Middle East during World War I. The study continues with Gertrude Bell's grand strategic vision for securing Mesopotamia under British occupation from 1917 to 1921, followed by her role in creating the state of Iraq, led by King Faisal I. This depiction of Gertrude Bell as a grand strategist concludes with considerations for why her strategy failed to create stability in Iraq after the war, lessons learned for stability operations today, and broader implications for studies of women as grand strategists. The monograph draws from the vast digital archives of Bell's papers and correspondence at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in the United Kingdom, reports and other primary sources, and secondary literature to investigate Bell as a grand strategist.

Literature on Gertrude Bell

While Gertrude Bell is well known to historians who have studied World War I, some of the most influential books on British strategy and operations in the Middle East during this time have made only passing references to Bell's contributions to the war effort. For instance, David Fromkin's highly influential book on the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, *A Peace to End all Peace*, barely mentions the role Bell played in developing British strategy during World War I and her role in creating an Iraqi state following the war. Indeed, when Fromkin does mention Bell, he reduces her status to "author and traveler" and "not much of a political thinker."⁵ Polly A. Mohs uses military intelligence documents to provide an in-depth look at the Arab Revolt of 1916–18 and, in particular, the role the Arab Bureau played in formulating the strategy behind the revolt. However, Mohs only briefly mentions Bell's contributions twice.⁶ Historian Charles Tripp's succinct book, *A History of Iraq*, includes more of Bell's contributions to shaping the peace in Iraq, including the influential role she held as oriental secretary in postwar Baghdad, but the book still only devotes about a paragraph to her and does not include her contributions during the war.⁷

5. David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1989), 323, 326.

6. Polly A. Mohs, *Military Intelligence and the Arab Revolt: The First Modern Intelligence War* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 33, 37.

7. Charles R. H. Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 39, 41.

Toby Dodge's critical look at Britain's creation of Iraq includes considerably more coverage of how Bell helped to shape Britain's grand strategic aims in the Middle East under the mandate period after World War I. Dodge makes the claim, similar to key US individuals who occupied Iraq after the US-led invasion in 2003, the Britons tasked with occupying Mesopotamia at the end of World War I were significantly limited in the systematic research they could do on the population and therefore knew little about the people they were trying to govern. Dodge writes, "Instead they interacted with Iraqi society on the basis of what they thought it should look like. In lieu of detailed investigations and engagement with actual conditions and practices, Iraq was understood through the distorted shorthand supplied by the cultural stereotypes of the day."⁸ Dodge echoes this claim in his treatment of Bell, noting, "As the Oriental Secretary to the High Commissioner, she rose to become a key figure in the creation of the Iraqi state. In her voluminous writings she reproduces the views of her society, portraying the Iraqi population as mute and passive, favoring, when articulate at all, benign British rule."⁹ Dodge's treatment focuses on the many missteps the British made, of which Bell was certainly a part, that contributed to Iraq's chronic political instability. As will be described here, Bell and several other key British leaders had spent decades in the Middle East, were fluent in its languages, and had cultivated relationships with key leaders in the region. Despite these leaders' knowledge and experience, their efforts to forge a strategy for stability in Iraq was still confounded.

Perhaps one reason for the limited attention paid to Bell's efforts during the war—particularly, her role in influencing key Arabs and helping to foment a revolt against the German-aligned Ottoman forces—was T. E. Lawrence, who largely overshadowed these efforts. Bell and Lawrence first met in 1911 on an archaeological dig in the region before their collaboration during the war. Once recruited by the British military in 1915, Bell was the first woman to be given the rank of major, and she outranked Lawrence, who was a captain at the time.¹⁰ In addition to their collaboration in the Arab Revolt, Bell and Lawrence worked together on drawing boundaries between different countries after the war as well as the British agreement to create the Emirate of Transjordan and the Iraqi state with King Faisal I as its leader at the 1921 Cairo Conference.¹¹ Lawrence was made famous by the publication of his memoirs, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which became a best-selling book, and by the cinematography of Lowell Thomas. Lawrence aptly described his monograph as "the history not of the Arab Movement, but of me in it."¹² Ultimately, Lawrence's fame and self-promotion overshadowed Bell's contributions to the Arab Revolt.

Bell's contributions to Britain's wartime strategy in the Middle East and her crucial role in building the Iraqi state after the war's conclusion have also possibly been overlooked due to the methods she used. Throughout her life, Bell had a talent for building and maintaining relationships. For example, in 1888, at the age of 19 and just after her graduation from the University of Oxford,

8. Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), xi.

9. Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 11.

10. Georgina Howell, *Gertrude Bell: Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 426–37.

11. Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 214, 294–301.

12. T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 21.

she met the British diplomat Charles Hardinge in Bucharest, Romania. This relationship came in handy to the Arab Bureau in 1916, nearly 30 years later, when a power struggle emerged over which British office should control the Middle East: Cairo or Delhi, India. At the time, Hardinge was the viceroy of India, and Bell became the mediator who smoothed over relations between the two offices.¹³ Dozens of examples like this one punctuate Bell's life and demonstrate her strategy of building and maintaining relationships as a key means of influence. Bell further used parties and other social gatherings to connect key Arab, Kurdish, and British individuals and to facilitate informal meetings and soirees that were particularly important for shaping the postwar administration in Iraq. These methods could be easily dismissed as superfluous and the works of nothing more than a socialite when, as will be discussed, they were a deliberate strategy.

Perhaps the most thorough treatments of Bell's contributions to Britain's wartime strategy in the Middle East and her grand strategy for securing British interests after the war come from the two biographies written about her: Janet Wallach's *Desert Queen* and Georgina Howell's *Gertrude Bell: Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations*.¹⁴ Both books provide considerable coverage of Bell's wide-sweeping career. But, as with most biographies, these books focus on the totality of Bell's life and not specifically on Bell's role as a grand strategist. In other words, these books will most likely not be read by military historians seeking to understand how Britain formulated its grand strategy during and after the war.

Finally, Bell herself provides insights into her thinking through the volumes of letters she wrote throughout her life as well as her journals and reports for the British government, which are available through the University of Newcastle upon Tyne's digital archives.¹⁵ Several volumes of Bell's letters were published in 1927 shortly after her death. Through these letters, "which have been very widely read and deservedly admired . . . she is best known to the general public," wrote Sir Arnold T. Wilson, Bell's former boss, in 1930.¹⁶ These volumes, which are still available today, provide a detailed look into Bell's personal life, and her letters are included in this investigation. But, as personal correspondence to family and friends, these letters are filled with the daily minutia of Bell's life and do not merely focus on her job for the British government, making them of limited utility to a study of her grand strategic thinking.¹⁷ Furthermore, the letters do not fully encapsulate the complex political environment in which they were written, requiring additional context and sources to make sense of Bell's decision making.

Thus, Bell's contributions to Britain's military strategy in the Middle East during World War I, the nation's military occupation of Mesopotamia toward the end of the war, and the nation's efforts

13. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 144–56; Howell, *Gertrude Bell*, 252–58; and Fromkin, *Peace*, 168–72.

14. Wallach, *Desert Queen*; and Howell, *Gertrude Bell*.

15. "Gertrude Bell Archive," Gertrude Bell Archive (website), accessed on March 26, 2022, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/>.

16. Sir Arnold T. Wilson, *Loyalties; Mesopotamia, 1914–1917: A Personal and Historical Record* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1930), 159.

17. Gertrude Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell Volumes I and II*, ed. Elsa Richmond (London: Benediction Press, 2009). The author noticed some letters in the volume had been redacted. See, for instance, the letter dated June 23, 1921, in which the sentence "We've thrown our die—the next few days will show whether it's a winning number" was omitted from the published volume. Therefore, the author used the digital archives instead of the published volumes.

to establish stability in the region through the creation of an Iraqi state need to be investigated further. Understanding Bell as a military and grand strategist requires, first, understanding the invaluable knowledge, skills, and perspectives she developed leading up to the outbreak of World War I.

Bell's Early Life

As with other grand strategists like Basil Liddell Hart and George F. Kennan, Bell's personal history helped shaped her strategic vision, including her upbringing, formal education, linguistic skills, study of archaeology, travels in the Middle East, and relationships with people and key leaders in the region. Taken together, these experiences created a reservoir of knowledge from which she developed British strategy and policy throughout World War I and beyond.

Born into an elite English family in 1868, Gertrude Bell had all the benefits of wealth and privilege as a child, including education and travel. Her mother died when she was three and, perhaps because of this, she developed a close bond with her father that would last throughout her life.¹⁸ Bell took advantage of the newly emerging opportunities for women to enroll in university in Britain, first attending Queens College, London, and then Lady Margaret Hall at the University of Oxford.¹⁹ She studied modern history, tracing the development of civilizations following the fall of the Roman Empire, and graduated in 1888 with a first class honor's degree, the first woman to achieve this distinction in the university's history.²⁰

Following graduation, Bell furthered her education through extensive travel made possible by her family's wealth and connections. Bell spent time in Bucharest, Romania, where she became friends with individuals in the foreign service and key leaders, including Queen Elisabeth of Romania and British diplomat Charles Hardinge. Her family had hoped the trip to Bucharest would result in an engagement to a promising familial connection, but the introduction did not end in a match.²¹ While staying in Bucharest, Bell traveled to Istanbul, which began her fascination with the Near East.

In 1892, after coming out into society and being presented to Queen Victoria, Bell traveled to Persia, again staying with family friends in Tehran. Bell's time in Persia further introduced her to the Middle East, and she took several trips throughout the region. She began studying Farsi and became fascinated with Persian poetry. While in Tehran, Bell met and fell in love with Henry Cadogan, who worked for the British foreign service, but the romance ended

18. "Letters," Gertrude Bell Archive (website), accessed on December 28, 2021, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

19. "Portrait of Gertrude Bell, CBE," Lady Margaret Hall (website), accessed on December 11, 2021, <https://www.lmh.ox.ac.uk/about-lmh/lmh-objects/portrait-gertrude-bell-cbe>.

20. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 25; Howell, *Gertrude Bell*, 42, and "Gertrude Bell," Wikipedia, n.d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gertrude_Bell#:~:text=She%20specialised%20in%20modern%20history,were%20Bell%20and%20Alice%20Greenwood.

21. Howell, *Gertrude Bell*, 43.

in bitter disappointment when her father rejected the union based on Cadogan's social standing. The following year, Cadogan died of pneumonia.²²

Heartbroken, Bell returned to England and, in 1893, resumed linguistic studies in Farsi along with Arabic and Latin. The following year, she anonymously authored a travel book based on her time in Persia and translated Persian poetry, which was published in 1897 as *Poems from the Divan of Hafez*.²³ During this time, Bell traveled extensively, visiting Algeria, Burma, China, Egypt, Germany, Greece, India, Mexico, Singapore, the United States, and the West Indies. She also took to mountain climbing, summiting some of the most challenging peaks in the Alps, including La Meije in France and Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn in Switzerland.²⁴

Just after the turn of the century, Bell's interests in archaeology took on new importance to her. Beginning in 1904, she traveled throughout Anatolia, the Levant, and Mesopotamia to various sites, often on horseback, taking pictures and depicting ancient ruins. These trips eventually produced three additional publications: *The Desert and the Sown*, *The Thousand and One Churches*, and *Amurath to Amurath*.²⁵ During these trips, which occurred sporadically for about a decade, Bell also began documenting various tribes and ethnic groups in the region, including the secretive Druze in current-day Syria. In 1905, while traveling in Jerusalem, she met Sir Mark Sykes, an individual with whom she would later have important interactions. Although they shared similar backgrounds, interests, and ambitions, the two were quickly at odds. Bell found Sykes to be inexperienced and condescending toward the local population, and Sykes wrote to his wife that Bell was a "silly chattering windbag of conceited, gushing, flat-chested, man-woman, globe-trotting, rump-wagging, blethering ass!"²⁶ In 1911, Bell met T. E. Lawrence, who was working on an archaeological dig in Carchemish, Turkey, for the British Museum. This meeting began a lifelong friendship and collaboration on matters pertaining to the Middle East.²⁷

At the end of 1913, just before the outbreak of World War I—and against the advice of several British officials—a 45-year-old Bell set off from Damascus for a three-month trek to the Najd in the heart of current-day Saudi Arabia. The region was lawless and filled with bandits. Despite the perils, Bell successfully navigated through the desert, mapping ancient ruins and documenting tribes, clans, and key leaders.²⁸ Bell arrived in Ha'il in 1914 in hopes of meeting Ibn Rashīd, one of two great clan leaders in the region, along with Ibn Saud. Away on a raid, Ibn Rashid's uncle placed Bell under house arrest for over a week before mysteriously releasing her and her entourage, allowing for her travel on to Karbala, Baghdad, and, eventually, England.²⁹

22. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 32–37.

23. Gertrude Bell, *Poems from the Divan of Hafez* (London: William Heinemann, 1897); and Howell, Gertrude Bell, 56–57.

24. Howell, Gertrude Bell, 74–93.

25. Gertrude Bell, *The Desert and the Sown* (London: William Heinemann, 1907); Gertrude Bell, *The Thousand and One Churches* (London: William Heinemann, 1909); Gertrude Bell, *Amurath to Amurath* (London: William Heinemann, 1911); Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 66–80; and Howell, Gertrude Bell, 94–110.

26. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 73.

27. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 92–94.

28. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 116–20.

29. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 107–28.

Bell and the Arab Bureau

Less than a year after returning from her trip through the Najd, World War I broke out, dragging the European continent and its colonies and outposts, including those in the Middle East, into war. Bell's linguistic skills; her ability to talk with just about anyone; and her recent efforts to map carefully the human terrain of the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Hejaz caught the attention of the British military, which was eager to understand the loyalties of Arab tribes and, specifically, whether they would support Germany and the Ottoman Empire or they could be persuaded to back the British in the war. At the end of 1915, Bell left her job working as a nurse on the Western Front and traveled to Cairo to join the British military's intelligence office, which later became known as the Arab Bureau.³⁰ Bell was made a major—the first woman to attain this rank in the British military—and tasked with working as an adviser on tribal affairs for military intelligence.³¹ Biographer Georgina Howell notes Bell's experience made her particularly useful as an intelligence gatherer: "Gertrude's first-hand knowledge of the vast reaches of Arabia and its diverse peoples made her unique, not only because that knowledge was encyclopedic, but because her information was so recent." Howell further describes Bell's abilities as useful to the British military: "Her ever-growing directory of contacts, her skill in direction-finding and cartography, and the meticulous methodology of her records now brought her an official title."³²

Bell's assignment to the office in Cairo put her at the center of British efforts to confront the Ottoman Empire in the Arab world. Britain's foothold in Egypt began in 1882 following the British conquest of Egypt and the former's efforts to maintain access to the Suez Canal, which provided a critical sea line of communication between Britain and India. From 1882 to 1914, Egypt remained a province of the Ottoman Empire, but Britain acted as Egypt's de facto protectorate. As a young officer fluent in Arabic, Horatio Herbert Kitchener was sent to the region to lead Egyptian troops, eventually becoming the governor of the port of Suakin, inspector general of the Egyptian police, adjutant general of the Egyptian Army, and then its commander in chief. At the outbreak of the war, the British government recalled Kitchener from his post as council general in Egypt to London, where he was made the secretary of state for war.³³

On October 29, 1914, the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of Central Powers. Britain formally declared Egypt a protectorate, and the former's military presence in Cairo expanded to include devising a strategy for undermining Ottoman authority in the region while protecting access to the Suez Canal. Within the first year of the war, the British government had concluded it would not be able to defeat the Ottoman Empire solely through direct military confrontation, especially given the need for British troops on the Western Front and elsewhere throughout the British Empire. Several leaders, including the head of intelligence in Cairo, Gilbert Clayton (a protégé of Kitchener's), argued the British military should work with and through key Arab leaders and "secret societies" in the Middle East to foment an Arab revolt in the region, which

30. Bruce Westrate, *The Arab Bureau: British Policy in the Middle East, 1916–1920* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

31. Howell, *Gertrude Bell*, 236–37.

32. Howell, *Gertrude Bell*, 238–39.

33. Sir George Author, *The Life of Lord Kitchener* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007).

would help distract and weaken Ottoman war efforts throughout its empire. Several challenges emerged within Cairo's plans to devise an irregular approach to undermining Ottoman authority in the Middle East. Britain needed to carefully consider how its actions would be perceived by its French allies, who also had interests in the region, particularly in Syria. Furthermore, tensions between the Cairo office and the Government of India over who was in control of the Middle East also affected Britain's strategy against Ottoman forces.³⁴ Ultimately, the Cairo office became the main effort in formulating and realizing this unconventional warfare strategy in the region.³⁵

British military intelligence was interested in recruiting several key leaders to foment its Arab revolt. First, the British established ties with the Egyptian Aziz Ali al-Misri, who had been an officer in the Turkish Army. Al-Misri was one of the key leaders of the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, which forced Sultan Abdülhamid II to restore the constitution of 1876 and uphold parliamentary politics. In 1914, he founded Al-'Ahd (the Covenant), a secret society that aimed to mobilize Arab officers in the Turkish military to realize an independent Arab state. The British hoped to leverage this secret society for the revolt. Historian Jeremy Wilson explains, "Revolutionary Arab nationalist movements had existed for some time before the war, and their aspirations were widely known . . . the most promising course [for an uprising] would be a mutiny of Arab troops supported by the general populace." Wilson goes on to note, "[S]uch plans seemed feasible because the Turkish army was made up of conscript units, and the Arab provinces were therefore largely garrisoned with local troops."³⁶ But suspicious of his activities, the Turkish government arrested al-Misri and sentenced him to death in 1914. The British helped to secure his release from a Turkish prison and had him deported to Cairo just months before the two empires declared war on each other.³⁷

Once back in Cairo, al-Misri began working with the British to secure weapons and funds in exchange for a "small but well equipped force . . . obtained from the [Turkish] Mesopotamian Army, in which were large numbers of officers, N.C.O.s, and men who were only waiting for the word."³⁸ But Cairo's plan to leverage Arab nationalist organizations to disrupt Ottoman control over the region did not sit well with the Government of India, which had struggled with putting down several insurrections within its own jurisdiction. The Government of India was concerned working through national separatist organizations would set a precedent that could inspire movements elsewhere. As Wilson states, "If Arab nationalism were successful, the example would have an

34. Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence* (New York: Antheneum, 1990), 156.

35. The Department of Defense defines unconventional warfare as "Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area." The US Army defines unconventional warfare as "Operations conducted by, with, or through irregular forces in support of a resistance movement, an insurgency, or conventional military operations." JCS, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02 (Washington, DC: JCS, 2021), 223; and Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Army Special Operations Forces Unconventional Warfare*, Field Manual 3-05.130 (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, September 2008), 1-2.

36. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 156–57.

37. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 158.

38. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 159.

incalculable effect on native attitudes in India.”³⁹ As a result, the Government of India succeeded in squashing Cairo’s efforts to work through al-Misri to foment an Arab revolt and prompted the British to deport two key Iraqis in Basra, Sayyid Talib al-Naqib and Nuri Pasha al-Said, to India to prevent an uprising in Mesopotamia. The Cairo office revisited the possibility of working with al-Misri and al-Naqib to foment an Arab uprising in Mesopotamia in 1916, but the Government of India rejected the option again.⁴⁰

The British were also interested in Hussein ibn Ali, Sharif of Mecca, and two of his sons, Faisal and Abdullah. Like al-Misri, Hussein had been active in the Arab nationalist movement before the war and wielded influence as a respected religious and tribal leader.⁴¹ A few months before Britain’s declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire, Abdullah visited Cairo on behalf of his father and met privately with Lord Kitchener and Ronald Storrs, the oriental secretary, with the aim of securing a guarantee Britain would not interfere in internal Arab matters in exchange for Hussein not siding with the Turks or Germans.⁴² Through this exchange, the British came to believe the Sharif’s influence over Arab nationalist movements and tribes would make them particularly useful in fomenting an Arab uprising against Ottoman forces in Mesopotamia and Syria. Of similar importance, Sharif Hussein’s role as a religious leader and the head of the two holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina, gave him particular credibility over Muslims around the world, not just in the Middle East. The British believed this influence could be useful for providing a counterbalance against the Sublime Porte’s declaration of jihad, or Muslim holy war, against the British and allied powers, which was proclaimed at the outset of the war. Ultimately, Hussein’s refusal to back the Sublime Porte’s call for jihad helped to ensure Indian Muslims serving in the British military would continue to fight on behalf of the British Empire.⁴³

Hussein’s son Faisal also began to engage the British on behalf of his father. In May 1915, Faisal traveled to Damascus, where he met with Arab secret societies and was given a document promising support for his father in an uprising against Ottoman rule in exchange for an independent Arab state after the war. Faisal passed these demands, which became known as the Damascus Protocol, on to the British.⁴⁴ In August of the same year, Hussein sent another message to the British, demanding Syria, Mesopotamia, and the Hejaz be made an independent Arab state after the war in exchange for an uprising against Ottoman rule.⁴⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Henry McMahon, who replaced Lord Kitchener as the high commissioner in Egypt in 1914, exchanged a series of letters with Hussein—later known as the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence (or the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence)—that discussed this agreement

39. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 161.

40. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 164, 258–60.

41. Ali A. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 49–69; and Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 164.

42. Mohs, *Military Intelligence*, 18; Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 165; and Westrate, *Arab Bureau*, 14.

43. Timothy J. Paris, *Britain, the Hashemites, and Arab Rule, 1920–1925: The Sherifian Solution* (New York: Frank Cass, 2003).

44. Fromkin, *Peace*, 175; and Mohs, *Military Intelligence*, 24–25.

45. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 195.

along with Sharif Hussien's promise not to back the Sublime Porte's call for holy war against allied powers.⁴⁶

The British also built a relationship with an Arab officer, Muhammed Sharif al-Faruqi, after he surrendered to British forces during the 1915 battle of Gallipoli. Al-Faruqi claimed to have ties to al-'Ahd and another, more networked and organized, secret society called al-Fatat, also known as the Young Arab Party or Young Arab Society.⁴⁷ Al-Faruqi promised to act as an interlocutor between the British and this far-reaching secret society, which wished to revolt against Ottoman rule. Al-Faruqi also claimed al-Fatat recognized Hussein's leadership and would follow him.⁴⁸ After lengthy interrogations, British intelligence officers, including Clayton and Lawrence, believed al-Faruqi's claims and hoped to use his connections to foment an Arab revolt that would both distract and disrupt Turkish military operations in Mesopotamia, Syria, and the Hejaz and act as a psychological blow to the Ottoman Empire's perception of Muslim allegiance to its authority.⁴⁹ Ultimately, al-Faruqi would prove to be an elaborate fraud, playing one leader off another to secure his own freedom and prosperity.⁵⁰

Bell arrived in Cairo on November 26, 1915, as the British military was securing agreements with key leaders to foment an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire. During Bell's transit to Cairo, British forces were in the midst of their attempt to seize control of the Turkish straits by landing troops on the rugged shores of Gallipoli. After six months of fighting and approximately 141,547 Allied casualties and an estimated 251,309 Turkish casualties, Britain withdrew its forces in January 1916.⁵¹ Bell, who had been having a secret affair with Lieutenant Colonel Charles "Richard" Doughty-Wylie, a married man, was devastated when he died in the fighting at Gallipoli. The Cairo office began to brace for an attack elsewhere in the Middle East, fearing the withdrawal of British troops from Gallipoli would free up Turkish forces to move on other assets, like the Suez Canal. Turkish forces under German rule indeed attacked the Suez Canal beginning in 1915; this attack later became known as the Sinai and Palestine campaign.⁵²

The failures at Gallipoli reinforced the need for Britain to seek an alternative approach to direct military confrontation with Ottoman forces. To devise a strategy and to synchronize intelligence in the region, the British government stood up the Arab Bureau in early 1916.⁵³ Historian Bruce Westrate notes one of the principal goals of creating the Arab Bureau was to

46. "Pre-State Israel: The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence (July 1915—August 1916)," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed on June 21, 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-hussein-mcmahon-correspondence-july-1915-august-1916>; and Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East: 1914–1956* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963), 30–37.

47. Mohs, *Military Intelligence*, 16.

48. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 198–205.

49. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 204.

50. Fromkin, *Peace*, 173–78.

51. Estimating casualties for the Gallipoli campaign is difficult. According to the New Zealand History website, Allied forces suffered 141,547 casualties (44,150 dead and 97,357 wounded), and Turkish forces suffered 251,309 casualties (86,692 dead and 164,617 wounded). "Gallipoli Casualties by Country," New Zealand History, accessed on March 30, 2022.

52. Anthony Bruce, *The Last Crusade: The Palestine Campaign in the First World War* (London: John Murray, 2002).

53. Westrate, *Arab Bureau*, 31.

solve the bureaucratic challenges in the Middle East, where “eighteen individuals were empowered to advise on content and direction of British policy in the Middle East, exclusive of Persia,” and “these officials were scattered among numerous and often rival agencies, departments, and bureaus.”⁵⁴ Historian Polly A. Mohs echoes these aims:

The Arab Bureau was invited to process and streamline information on Arab political and military affairs from sources around the Middle East, and allowed to occupy a central office in Cairo, not London, as several figures had originally requested. Moreover, the office was placed under the authority of the High Commissioner in Egypt and the Foreign Office rather than being attached to Egyptforce or any other regional military group, a position that underscored the political emphasis of its outlook. This unusual constitution was only the beginning of the Arab Bureau’s singularity as an intelligence section.⁵⁵

Mohs goes on to assert, “Senior political and military voices from London to the Red Sea to India expected to lead the formulation of Britain’s policy for the crumbling Ottoman territories, but in the end, it was a small, elite intelligence group in Cairo that pushed through the most important policy initiatives for the theatre.”⁵⁶

The Arab Bureau was initially led by David George Hogarth, an archaeologist and scholar, under the supervision of Colonel (soon to be General) Clayton, who was initially in charge of military intelligence in Cairo, but then tasked with conducting “political intelligence” through the bureau.⁵⁷ Hogarth and Clayton were joined by Lawrence, who had been in Cairo for just over a year and who knew Hogarth from an archaeological dig at Carchemish before the war. Bell, who knew both Hogarth and Lawrence, also joined after a short stint as an intelligence officer for the admiralty, along with George Lloyd, Leonard Woolley, Aubrey Herbert; Philip Graves, Kinahan Cornwallis, G. W. Gerrard, Alfred Brownlow Fforde, and Ronald Storrs, the oriental secretary in Cairo. Westrate describes the membership of the bureau as “very fluid,” drawing in temporary experts as needed, including Wyndham Deeds, an expert on Turkish affairs, and Robert W. Graves, who was part of the Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau. Overall, the bureau was small, usually consisting of around 15 or so analysts who were housed in the Continental-Savoy Hotel.⁵⁸ The bureau began to devise a more concrete strategy to foment an Arab uprising in the Middle East. Westrate notes the bureau “dubbed their little group ‘the intrusives’ and set upon myriad tasks: gathering intelligence, interrogating prisoners, concocting propaganda, monitoring internal security in Egypt, and infiltrating enemy territory with agents.”⁵⁹

Bell’s contacts with key Arab leaders, her intimate knowledge of tribal politics, and her connections with key British diplomats and politicians were immediately put to use. In a letter

54. Westrate, *Arab Bureau*, 24.

55. Mohs, *Military Intelligence*, 6–7.

56. Mohs, *Military Intelligence*, 1.

57. Westrate, *Arab Bureau*, 35.

58. Westrate, *Arab Bureau*, 34–53.

59. Westrate, *Arab Bureau*, 35.

to her parents, Bell wrote, “I am helping Mr. Hogarth to fill in the Intelligence files with information as to the tribes and sheikhs. It’s great fun and delightful to be working with him. Our chief is Col. Clayton, whom I like very much.”⁶⁰ In addition to drawing on her recent knowledge of tribes, Bell interviewed various individuals who came into the bureau’s office, making use of her Arabic.⁶¹

The Arab Bureau began writing a series of secret documents called the *Arab Bulletin*. These reports, which had a total of only 25 recipients, helped to explain the strategy of the Arab Revolt and chronicled developments in the region to the British military and government.⁶² Mohs summarizes, “The bulletin’s value from the beginning was its swift transmission of all notable intelligence, delivered in an informal work-house style of reporting, its multi-source analysis and its editorial comment, conveying the Arab Bureau’s own impressions and preoccupations.”⁶³

Gertrude Bell was one of the principal authors of the *Arab Bulletin*. A postwar compilation of seven editions attributed to Bell underscores the particular expertise she brought to the bureau.⁶⁴ The wide-ranging topics of these bulletins included the role of tribal and religious customs, a biography of Ibn Saud, and rival tribes in Mesopotamia. One bulletin attributed to Bell, dated October 5, 1916, and titled “The Basis of Government in Turkish Arabia” focused specifically on the laws, structure, and administration of the Ottoman Empire. Bell paid particular attention to local customs and norms that governed communities beyond the reach of the capital and big cities. Of Iraq, in particular, she wrote:

In our own history, from the Moot court to the Magna Carta to the Imperial Parliament was the work of centuries, yet the first contained the germ of all that came after. The tribes of the Iraq have advanced but little beyond the Moot court, and should the shaping of their destinies become our care in the future, we shall be wise to eschew any experiments tending to rush them into highly specialized institutions—a policy which could commend itself only to those who are never wearied by words that signify nothing.⁶⁵

Bell also noted in a bulletin dated October 7, 1917, the Ottoman vilayet of Basra was drawn in a way that did not correspond to the territories of the Kuwait and Muhammerah tribes, hinting at the rivalries and challenges the British would have administering Mesopotamia.⁶⁶ Bell summarized the root causes and effects of British intervention in the 1916 rebellion against the sultan of Muscat in a bulletin from October 26, 1916.⁶⁷ Critically, a bulletin dated January 12, 1917, detailed the personal history of Ibn Saud and his travels to Basra to meet with

60. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 232.

61. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 150.

62. Mohs, *Military Intelligence*, 9.

63. Mohs, *Military Intelligence*, 10.

64. Gertrude Bell, *The Arab War: Confidential Information for General Headquarters from Gertrude Bell Being Despatches [sic] Reprinted from the Secret “Arab Bulletin”* (London: Golden Cockerel Press, 1940).

65. Bell, *Arab War*, 15.

66. Bell, *Arab War*, 16–19.

67. Bell, *Arab War*, 20–28.

British authorities on November 27, 1916, stressing the importance of this meeting for British policy in the Middle East. Bell described Ibn Saud's life, the rivalry between him and Ibn Rashīd, and the *darbar* (meeting of sheikhs) that recognized the "good will" of Britain in the region.⁶⁸ Indeed, Bell became instrumental in encouraging Britain to put Ibn Saud on its payroll to keep him aligned with British strategy in the region to the sum of almost £10,000 a month and to agree to the Treaty of Darin, which made Ibn Saud's territory a protectorate of Britain.⁶⁹

This compilation of bulletins underscored Bell's deep knowledge of and expertise in tribal matters in the region and the influence she wielded within British decision making. Furthermore, these various bulletins demonstrated Bell's knowledge of both individuals and dynamics between individuals—particularly, the rivalries between key tribes and Ibn Saud and Ibn Rashīd in the Hejaz. Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, a close friend of Bell's who was the director of the Arab Bureau from 1916 to 1920 and, later, the adviser to King Faisal I, wrote in the foreword of this compilation of bulletins "[t]hroughout them all can be seen the breadth of her knowledge, and her sympathy and understanding for the people whom she loved so well."⁷⁰

In addition to her knowledge of local leaders, Bell was also invaluable for her long-standing friendships with key British leaders—particularly, British viceroy to India Lord Charles Hardinge, whom she had met in Bucharest in 1892 after completing her studies at the University of Oxford. At the beginning of 1916, shortly after her arrival in Cairo, Clayton dispatched Bell to visit Lord Hardinge in India in hopes of smoothing over the tensions between Cairo and Delhi.⁷¹ While in India, Lord Hardinge suggested Bell visit Basra on her way back to Cairo, which had been under the Government of India's control since the first days of the war in 1914, when British Indian Expeditionary Forces seized the city.⁷²

Bell arrived in Basra in February in the midst of a Turkish siege against the 6th (Poona) Division of the British Indian Army, under the command of Major General Charles Townshend, in the city of Kut. British forces had successfully captured the city in September 1915 and mounted an assault on Ctesiphon. But reinforcements of skilled Turkish troops succeeded in pushing back Townshend's 17,000 soldiers to the city, where a siege ensued.⁷³ After several failed attempts to send military reinforcements, the Arab Bureau dispatched Lawrence and Aubrey Herbert to negotiate with Turkish forces for the safe release of British troops. In April 1916, Lawrence and Herbert arrived in Basra, having been authorized by the British government to pay up to

68. Bell, *Arab War*, 29–32.

69. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 152.

70. Bell, *Arab War*, 4.

71. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 144–56; Howell, *Gertrude Bell*, 252–58; and Fromkin, *Peace*, 168–72.

72. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 257–58; and Paul K. Davis, *Ends and Means: The British Mesopotamian Campaign and Commission* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated Presses, 1994), 31–32. Davis argues the British seized Basra in the first days of the war for three broad reasons: obtaining admiralty oil, checking foreign economic interests in the Persian Gulf, and maintaining "good Anglo-Arab relations"—particularly, to curb the potential for "an Arab-led holy war against the British."

73. F. J. Moberly, *History of the Great War Based on Official Documents: The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914–1918* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1924), 2:126–466; Davis, *Ends and Means*, 139–72; Wilfrid Nunn, *Tigris Gunboats: The Forgotten War in Iraq, 1914–1917* (London: Chatham House Publishing, 1932); and A. J. Barker, *The Bastard War: The Mesopotamian Campaign of 1914–1918* (New York: Dial Press, 1967).

£1 million to Turkish forces for the safe release of British soldiers.⁷⁴ After a series of negotiations, Lawrence and his team failed to free the forces and, on April 29, 1916, British troops ceded the fort to the Ottomans. The remaining British troops were later forced to march to Anatolia, over 500 miles away. The defeat cost 10,000 British Indian forces in the initial attempt to take the city and another 23,000 casualties following the failed attempts to free the imprisoned troops. Fromkin summarizes, together with Gallipoli, the siege of Kut was “another national humiliation inflicted upon Britain by an Ottoman foe British officials had always regarded as ineffectual—and whom the Arab Bureau proposed to bring crashing down by internal subversion later in 1916.”⁷⁵

On the heels of this humiliating defeat, Sharif Hussein launched his highly anticipated Arab Revolt on June 10, 1916, in the Hejaz, supported by the Royal Navy in the Red Sea. Fromkin claims, “The Arab Bureau believed that the uprising would draw support throughout the Moslem [sic] and Arabic-speaking worlds. Most important of all, it believed that the revolt would draw support from what the British believed to be a largely Arabic-speaking Ottoman Army.”⁷⁶ The Arab Bureau had invested £11 million in the procurement of the Sharif’s forces. Simultaneously, Hussein had secured 50,000 gold pounds from the Turks to maintain a force loyal to Ottoman authorities.⁷⁷ Hussein had promised to raise a fighting force of between 100,000 and 250,000 Arab troops. But these soldiers never materialized, and the membership of the secret societies was later determined to have numbered a few hundred at most, of which only eight from al-Fatat and 16 from al-’Ahd joined the initial fight in the Hejaz.⁷⁸ Moreover, the fighters the Sharif offered were no match for well-trained and well-equipped Turkish forces. This failure forced the Arab Bureau and Lawrence to abandon working directly with the Sharif and reevaluate their strategy for an Arab uprising in the Middle East. As will be described in the next section, Lawrence and the Arab Bureau went on to attack Ottoman outposts in the Middle East successfully, principally through guerrilla tactics in collaboration with Hussein’s son, Faisal.

Ultimately, the Arab Bureau’s failed attempts at fomenting the Arab Revolt in 1916 and, particularly, its overreliance on contacts who exaggerated their ability to rally thousands of Arabs to the cause wounded the office’s credibility. Mohs summarizes, “[A]n air of maverick independence from traditional organizational constraints would continue to characterize the Arab Bureau, which was seen either as a menace to policy procedures or a refreshing corrective, depending on the view.”⁷⁹

Following the devastating defeat of British forces in Kut, Bell’s visit to Basra in early 1916 became a permanent assignment as Britain made plans to regroup, capture Baghdad, and push Turkish forces out of Mesopotamia. Bell was assigned to be the Mesopotamian correspondent of the Arab Bureau, and her new boss was Sir Percy Cox, secretary to the Government of India

74. Moberly, *History of the Great War*, 2:451; Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 265; Mohs, *Military Intelligence*, 22–23; and Davis, *Ends and Means*, 166–67.

75. Fromkin, *Peace*, 202–3.

76. Fromkin, *Peace*, 219.

77. Fromkin, *Peace*, 219–23.

78. Mohs, *Military Intelligence*, 17.

79. Mohs, *Military Intelligence*, 37.

in Mesopotamia, whom she had met on several occasions throughout her travels. General Percy Lake, who was the commander of British forces in Mesopotamia, wrote to the Government of India “Cox and Lawrence who discussed the suggestion are of the opinion that Miss Bell is well qualified for the task and her assumption of duties would be agreeable to Cairo and ourselves.”⁸⁰ Lawrence’s biographer, Jeremy Wilson, writes of the assignment “Thus Gertrude Bell’s temporary visit to Mesopotamia became permanent. She was destined to achieve great distinction there, both during and after the war.”⁸¹

Bell and the British Military Occupation of Mesopotamia

Gertrude Bell’s assignment as the Arab Bureau’s Mesopotamian correspondent in Basra began a new trajectory in her career. Bell shared an office with Cox, the secretary to the Government of India in Mesopotamia, and they were tasked with devising a strategy for the military occupation and civil control of the region at the end of the war. Britain’s hold on the three Ottoman provinces of Mesopotamia—Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul—required the formulation of a strategy for both securing key assets in the region and governing the people who lived in these areas.

When Bell was posted in Basra in early 1916, Britain’s military was in the midst of making plans to regroup, capture Baghdad, and push Turkish forces out of Mesopotamia. Under the leadership of Lieutenant General Frederick Stanley Maude, Britain began to rebuild its Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force just after its humiliating defeat at Kut. As with the previous forces, most of the new soldiers were Indian, including from Indian Expeditionary Force D and III Corps (also known as “Tigris Corps”). In December 1916, the 50,000-strong force marched up the Tigris River, taking Kut before securing Baghdad from the outnumbered Ottoman forces on March 11, 1917.⁸²

With the successful capture of Baghdad and its surrounding areas, the British military found itself in control of two of the three provinces of Mesopotamia, Baghdad and Basra, with only Mosul still under Ottoman authority. Within each of these provinces, the Ottomans had instituted distinct policies that empowered different leaders for different reasons. Historian Charles Tripp notes, in the early days of the empire, collecting taxes was important for all of the provinces, as was the ability of leaders to provide security.⁸³ But, in the nineteenth century, Ottoman rulers initiated a reconquest of the empire’s peripheral territories and began to institute land reform, educational initiatives, infrastructure development, and other changes. These modernization efforts, known as Tanzimat (reforms), were not applied evenly across the three provinces in Mesopotamia and thus created new power dynamics that empowered different local leaders and changed the social order.⁸⁴ The 1906 Constitutional Revolution in Persia, which

80. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 276.

81. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 276.

82. Moberly, *History of the Great War*; Barker, *Bastard War*, 262–332; and Nunn, *Tigris Gunboats*, 241–75.

83. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 8–13.

84. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 13–19.

fostered political mobilization among the Shia in both Persia and Mesopotamia, along with the 1908 Young Turk Revolution followed by the Committee of Union and Progress coup d'état in 1913, further changed these provinces in different ways, creating new social and political power dynamics.⁸⁵

By the time the war began and the Government of India gained a foothold in Mesopotamia, the three districts of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra were economically, socially, ethnically, and politically distinct from one another. Tripp concludes, “[I]t would be fanciful to assume that in the years leading up to the British occupation of Mesopotamia the future state of Iraq was somehow prefigured in the common experiences of the provinces.”⁸⁶ Britain, in other words, would have considerable challenges governing Mesopotamia as one entity.

The Arab Revolt, which had begun in 1916, was still unfolding at the time of Britain’s capture of Baghdad in June 1917. As Sharif Hussein’s promises of a massive Arab uprising under his command began to show little promise of being realized, Lawrence and the Arab Bureau began to work more closely with the Hussein’s son Faisal to frustrate and undermine Turkish forces through raids and ambushes on Ottoman lines of communication—particularly, the Ottoman rail system. In July 1917, against General Clayton’s orders, Lawrence helped to lead Faisal’s forces and to take the port of Aqaba from the Turks, freeing up the Red Sea for the Royal Navy.⁸⁷ Lawrence and Faisal also executed a series of raids in Palestine that aided General Edmund Henry Hynman Allenby’s successful capture of Jerusalem in December 1917. And on October 3, 1918, on the eve of Ottoman surrender, Lawrence and Faisal claimed Damascus for Arab nationalists.⁸⁸

But, unbeknownst to key Arab leaders, and even British officials in the region, France and Britain had already negotiated how to divide up key territory in the Levant and Mesopotamia between themselves at the war’s conclusion. In 1915, an “interdepartmental group” known as the De Bunsen Committee led by Kitchener’s direct representative Mark Sykes and consisting of individuals from “the Foreign Office, the Admiralty, the India Office, and other relevant departments” began to carve up the Ottoman Empire.⁸⁹ Fromkin explains, “It is indicative of the spirit in which they approached their task that they saw no need to follow the lines of the existing political subdivisions of the empire . . . and felt free to remake the face of the Middle East as they saw fit.”⁹⁰ In 1916, the French and British governments secretly approved an agreement that became known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement. France consented to oversee current-day Lebanon, Syria, portions of southeast Turkey, and current-day northern Iraq, and Britain took the helm of Palestine, Jordan, Mesopotamia, and the ports of Acre and Haifa. Russia, the third member of the Triple Entente, received portions of Armenia and the Turkish straits, and Italy gained southern Anatolia. Jerusalem and surrounding areas were to be put under

85. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 22–26.

86. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 28.

87. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 395–435; and Mohs, *Military Intelligence*, 146–55.

88. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 542–68.

89. Fromkin, *Peace*, 146.

90. Fromkin, *Peace*, 148.

“international administration.”⁹¹ Hogarth, still the director of the Arab Bureau, learned about the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, but he kept this information from Bell and Cox, arguing in a letter “[T]he conclusion of this agreement is of no immediate service to our Arab policy as pursued here.”⁹²

Alongside the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the British government heavily debated the future of Palestine, particularly following David Lloyd George’s ascent to the office of prime minister in December 1916. Fromkin argued, unlike his predecessor H. H. Asquith, George had specific goals in mind for Palestine. George subscribed to the Christian prophetic expectation of returning Jewish people to their homeland as a condition for the return of Christ. George was also an advocate of the Zionist movement, which argued the Jewish people should have an independent state.⁹³ In this milieu, Arthur James Balfour, George’s foreign secretary, published the Balfour Declaration on November 2, 1917, which stated the following.

His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.⁹⁴

Many Arab leaders, including Sharif Hussein, came to see the Balfour Declaration as well as the Sykes-Picot Agreement as Britain’s betrayal of promises made in the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence and other negotiations during the war.

Britain had taken Baghdad in March 1917, just before the signing of the Balfour Declaration, and devising a strategy for securing the peace in Mesopotamia fell to Cox’s office and Bell, now the office’s oriental secretary. Tripp notes, despite Britain’s military expeditions aimed at pushing out Turkish forces and occupying Mesopotamia, “the British themselves were undecided about its future—notoriously so, as the Iraqis found to their bewilderment.”⁹⁵ In hopes of influencing British forces, Bell anonymously drafted *The Arabs of Mesopotamia*, a primer designed to provide guidance to troops now tasked with securing the peace. The booklet included an overview of tribes and leadership in Mesopotamia; how the Ottomans governed the region, including their form of justice; the challenges posed by the Shias; and the role of British occupation in securing the region.⁹⁶ Bell underscored the role of the British military as both an army and a stabilizing force that would have a lasting impact on the people the force occupied: “Before the smoke of conflict has lifted, within hearing of the guns, the work of reconstruction has

91. “The Sykes-Picot Agreement: 1916,” Avalon Project (website), accessed on December 12, 2021, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/sykes.asp; and Fromkin, *Peace*, 188–99.

92. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 198.

93. Fromkin, *Peace*, 267–71.

94. “Balfour Declaration 1917,” Avalon Project (website), accessed on July 4, 2021, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/balfour.asp.

95. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 36.

96. Gertrude Bell, *Arab War Lords and Iraqi Star Gazers: Iraq and Gertrude Bell’s The Arabs of Mesopotamia*, 2nd ed., ed. Paul Rich (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), vii.

been initiated . . . if the Expeditionary Force, with its train of civil and administrative officers, were to be withdrawn to-morrow, it would leave behind it a memory of prosperity, of incipient order, security and well-being.”⁹⁷

Within a strategy for securing Mesopotamia toward the end of the war, Cox and Bell had several grand strategic goals they needed to balance to satisfy the British government, European allies, and key Arab leaders. First, Britain had to comply with the promises it made to France in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. In addition to overseeing Lebanon and the Mediterranean, France had negotiated for Syria and Palestine to remain unified and under French control as far east as Mosul, forming a buffer with Russia.⁹⁸ Though France ultimately maintained control over Lebanon and the bulk of present-day Syria, France ceded portions of Palestine and Mosul to the British in a verbal agreement between British Prime Minister George and French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau in December 1918.⁹⁹

Cox and Bell also had to navigate the persisting power struggle among the Government of India, which believed it should control Mesopotamia; the Cairo office, which believed it had jurisdiction over the newly acquired territory; and the British government in London. Ultimately, in 1917, a hastily created Mesopotamia Administration Committee in London placed Basra under direct British control from London and had Government of India personnel eventually removed from Mesopotamia. General Maude protested the arrangement, arguing the British military should occupy and control Mesopotamia, and Cox raised the issue of who would be responsible for providing basic governance to the area, including law and order and public facilities.¹⁰⁰ Fromkin’s summarization of Britain’s initial efforts to devise a postwar governance plan “showed that Sir Mark Sykes and his colleagues had adopted policies for the Middle East without first considering whether in existing conditions they could feasibly be implemented, and if so, whether British officers on the spot would actually allow them to be implemented.”¹⁰¹

Within debates over who in the British government should run Mesopotamia, how to administer these newly acquired territories was also hotly debated. Some in the British government believed a more direct form of rule, similar to the one in India, should be used, whereas others advocated for a more indirect form of rule, similar to the one in Egypt.¹⁰² But placing these areas under direct rule was problematic, especially following US President Woodrow Wilson’s push for “the consent of the governed” and greater autonomy of regions in several empires, including the Ottoman Empire. On January 8, 1918, Wilson gave a speech that outlined the terms of peace for the end of the war—a policy that became known as the Fourteen Points principle. Point XII specifically addressed the Ottoman Empire: “The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire

97. Bell, *Arab War Lords*, 52.

98. Fromkin, *Peace*, 192.

99. Edward Peter Fitzgerald, “France’s Middle Eastern Ambitions, the Sykes-Picot Negotiations, and the Oil Fields of Mosul,” *Journal of Modern History* 66, no. 4 (1994): 697–725.

100. Fromkin, *Peace*, 306–7.

101. Fromkin, *Peace*, 308.

102. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 36–39.

should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Ottoman rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.”¹⁰³ Historian Erez Manela argues Wilson never intended for immediate independence of these regions, but, nevertheless, his Fourteen Points principle, along with rhetoric such as “national aspirations must be respected; people may now be dominated and governed by their own consent,” gave hope for independence to the region’s leaders and people and compelled imperial powers to consider their options in ruling newly acquired areas in the Middle East.¹⁰⁴ Despite Wilson’s speech and its various interpretations, most British leaders believed the Arabs were incapable of self-rule. Even Bell initially shared in this belief. In a recounted conversation with Sykes at the end of 1915, Bell wrote, “The Arabs can’t govern themselves; no one is more aware of that than I.”¹⁰⁵

Alongside how to govern, the civil administration had to address and balance the demands of local leaders, who had their own designs for the newly freed people in Mesopotamia. The social, political, and economic changes brought about by the Ottoman *Tanzimat*, the Constitutional Revolution in Persia, and the political uprisings of the Committee of Union and Progress had inspired key leaders to create various organizations in Mesopotamia that were agitating for greater autonomy under the Ottoman system. As previously mentioned, Aziz Ali al-Misri founded al-’Ahd, which mobilized Arab officers in the Turkish military and had offshoots in Baghdad and Mosul. In Basra in 1913, Sayyid Talib al-Naqib founded the Reform Society of Basra, which contributed to the British deporting him in 1914 for fear of a local uprising. In Baghdad, Muzahim al-Pachachi founded the National Scientific Club in 1912, mobilizing young Sunni and Shia intellectuals in the city.¹⁰⁶ These leaders and their organizations, along with key tribal leaders, had expectations for greater autonomy and even self-rule in Mesopotamia under British military authority.

Finally, the population needed some form of government to ensure access to basic resources. Tripp reports, at the beginning of 1920, the newly emerging state of Iraq had roughly three million inhabitants, and “more than half were Shi’i and roughly 20 per cent were Kurdish, with another 8 per cent or so composed of the Jewish, Christian, Yazidi, Sabeen and Turkmen minorities.”¹⁰⁷ Within this population, mass education had been introduced, albeit unevenly, as part of Ottoman reforms, as had the beginnings of industrialization in major cities, both of which had transformed society. With the arrival of the printing press, newspapers and other publications had sprung up, providing new sources of information and influence. Throughout their acquired territory, the population had produced varying responses to British occupation, including accommodation in Basra, calls for jihad among the Shia, and open revolt among the Kurds.¹⁰⁸

103. “President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points,” Avalon Project (website), accessed on May 18, 2021, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp; and Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

104. Erez Manela, “Imagining Woodrow Wilson in Asia: Dreams of East-West Harmony and Revolt against the Empire in 1919,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (2006): 1327–51.

105. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 152–53.

106. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 23–27.

107. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 31.

108. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 31–34.

Taken together, these demands and constraints presented considerable challenges for Cox and Bell as they formulated a strategy for governing Mesopotamia in the wake of the war. As she did with all of her previous undertakings, Bell drew on the rich array of skills she had cultivated over the years, including her deep knowledge of the area, her linguistic skills, and, above all, her connections with key leaders, both local and British, to formulate a plan. In December 1917, in the midst of rumors of a Shia uprising in Mesopotamia, Bell took a trip to Karbala and Najaf to assess the mood in these key cities. Bell found that anti-British sentiment was running high through a combination of adversarial propaganda and British forces seizing the locals' livestock and other resources. Additionally, the Turks had been paying local leaders and their tribes for their loyalty, an income that had now dried up with their retreat from the region, further angering the population. Ultimately, Bell summarized, "Things are not in a satisfactory state" in the Shia areas.¹⁰⁹

At the end of summer 1918, while Bell was continuing to gather information on key leaders and their loyalties, the British government chose to repost Percy Cox, her boss and close friend, to Tehran—a change that became permanent. Bell's relationship with the new acting civil administrator, Sir Arnold T. Wilson, was considerably less cordial, and the two soon were at odds over how best to govern the areas Britain had acquired through the war.¹¹⁰ Specifically, Wilson was a staunch advocate of Britain annexing Mesopotamia and placing it directly under the Government of India's rule, whereas Bell's attitudes over how to govern these territories were beginning to change.¹¹¹

On October 30, 1918, Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire signed an armistice treaty, officially ending hostilities in the Middle East. The end of combat in the Middle East raised expectations that Britain's tacit, if not explicit, promises for an independent Arab state were imminent. Wallach relates the following.

In the aftermath of the war, the Sharif Hussein, who, with his son Faisal, had helped the British defeat the Turks, expected to be duly rewarded. His expressed desire was to create an Arab kingdom that included Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq. He wanted the throne of the Hijaz, his Arabian turf, for himself, and he wanted two of his sons formally installed to the north: Faisal (already there) in Damascus; Abdullah in Baghdad. If the French wanted to keep Lebanon, with its mostly Christian population, he might agree. But the French were not willing to give up any of Syria nor were the British delegates ready to hand over Iraq.¹¹²

109. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 204.

110. Interestingly, Wilson's memoirs of his time in Mesopotamia, published in 1930 after Bell's death, present his relationship with Bell as highly amicable. For instance, Wilson wrote of Bell, "It was her destiny from the moment of her arrival until her death in Baghdad ten years later, to devote the whole of her extraordinary talents and unbounded energies to the service of successive administrations in Mesopotamia." Wilson, *Loyalties*, 158.

111. Monroe, *Britain's Moment*, 53.

112. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 225.

Although Sharif Hussein's dream of an Arab state of this size would not come true, as will be discussed further, Faisal would end up becoming a king: first, briefly, of a self-proclaimed Arab Kingdom of Syria; and then of the independent state of Iraq and largely at Bell's insistence.

At the direction of the War Office in London, Bell and Lawrence set about discerning the borders between Mesopotamia and its neighbors, a daunting undertaking made more complicated by the numerous promises Britain had made to local leaders and their European allies. In addition to devising borders between the newly emerging Iraq and its neighbors, Wallach writes, Bell's job at this point was "to watch the local weathercock . . . the educated Sunnis in town [Baghdad], the Shiite majority in the provinces, the large Jewish community in Baghdad, the Christians in Mosul." Specifically, Bell was tasked with discovering how these populations wanted to be governed and by whom.¹¹³

Bell also continued meeting with local leaders to get their perspectives on social and political life in Baghdad. In the fashion of the British leadership in India, Bell organized a *darbar* of sheikhs to introduce local leaders to the civil administration. Bell also began a "Tuesday Soiree" for wives of prominent Arabs; this social event provided another avenue through which to obtain information for the British as well as an opportunity to influence the population.¹¹⁴

In January 1919, Allied powers convened the Paris Peace Conference at Versailles. The conference sought to establish the terms for ending the war. Although over 30 countries participated in the talks, the "big four" Allied powers—Great Britain, France, Italy, and the United States—dominated the negotiations. Russia, the fifth Allied power, was not invited to the conference following the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in 1917. The conference had minimal representation from leaders in the Middle East. Now a lieutenant colonel, Lawrence attended and accompanied Faisal, who sought recognition as the self-proclaimed leader of Syria and acted as the *de facto* representative of Arab nationalists seeking independence in former Ottoman provinces. Egypt too had a delegation advocating for the independence the British had implied during the war.¹¹⁵ But Mesopotamia did not have its own representation at the conference beyond a small Kurdish delegation that was largely ignored. Indeed, Tripp asserts, "The British authorities had prevented a delegation from going to the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919."¹¹⁶ Instead, Bell and A. T. Wilson spoke on behalf of Iraqi leaders.¹¹⁷

In addition to formally ending the war, the Paris Peace Conference established the League of Nations, which would act as both a collective security agreement and a forum in which international disputes could be debated and resolved. The conference also aimed to develop a means of settling the fate of former territories of the Ottoman Empire and German colonies in Africa and the Pacific. The conference created a system later referred to as the "mandate system" that was enshrined in article 22 of the League's Covenant. The system created a means of placing

113. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 208–11.

114. Howell, *Gertrude Bell*, 428; and Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 212–13.

115. Gertrude Bell, "29/9/1919," Gertrude Bell Archive (website), accessed on December 12, 2021, http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/diary_details.php?diary_id=1245.

116. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 40.

117. Howell, *Gertrude Bell*, 312.

the territories under the trusteeship of European powers to promote the best interests of local populations with the eventual goal of self-rule. Critically, the mandate system prohibited formal annexation of territories by these powers.¹¹⁸ The follow-on Conference of San Remo in April 1920 established the British mandate to oversee Mesopotamia, and Bell was tasked with writing the mandate's annual report to the League of Nations.¹¹⁹ As will be described further, the decisions at San Remo helped to spark a revolt in Iraq that compelled the British to pursue a bilateral treaty between Iraqi leadership and Britain that paved the way for the creation of the Kingdom of Iraq in 1921 and its independence from Britain in 1932. In other words, the British mandate was never fully implemented in Iraq.

Following the Paris accords and the expectations it set for greater self-rule in the Middle East, Bell embarked on a tour of Cairo, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Aleppo with the aim of understanding the potential for local rule in the region. Bell met with key Europeans as well as various local leaders. Throughout her trip, Bell kept a journal that chronicled her conversations with these leaders and her observations.¹²⁰

In Cairo, Bell met with her old boss from the Arab Bureau, Brigadier General Clayton, who was now the interior minister of the country. As a formal protectorate of Britain during the war, Egypt had provided money and men to the fighting effort in the region.¹²¹ In return for their contributions and fueled by Wilson's Fourteen Points, Egypt demanded self-rule at the war's conclusion. Bell wrote of this demand in her journal, noting, "Then came the enunciation of principles favourable to Egyptian independence, Wilson's 14 points, warmly adhered to by Lloyd George, and much talk of self determination."¹²² But the British government initially refused self-determination, prompting a violent uprising in 1919 that had to be put down by the military. This contentious environment left the British government with few options for maintaining its hold on Egypt and its vital assets, particularly the Suez Canal. Bell's journal entries captured Clayton's strategy for Egypt given these constraints. Bell said according to Clayton, "our object should now be to guard a. Imperial necessities in Egypt, b. international interests for which we had made ourselves responsible, and let all the rest go."¹²³ Bell also noted that Clayton was quick to argue Egyptian self-rule would be messy: "No doubt the Egyptians would make grave mistakes and tie the departments into serious knots; but they have the right, as they claim, to a fair trial and to be given the opportunity of showing whether they cannot learn from their own mistakes."¹²⁴

On Mesopotamia, General Clayton stressed the importance of including local leadership in the country up front to avoid the discontent that had arisen in Egypt. Bell's journal described Clayton's recommendation for the path to self-rule in Iraq: "However poor our material, he would

118. Knock, *To End All Wars*, 194–209.

119. Howell, *Gertrude Bell*, 428.

120. "Diaries," Gertrude Bell Archive (website), accessed on December 12, 2021, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/diaries.php>.

121. Bell, "29/9/1919."

122. Bell, "29/9/1919."

123. Bell, "29/9/1919."

124. Bell, "29/9/1919."

create independent Arab ministries with departmental advisors to the High Commissioner. The ministers could form an [sic] Council with an Arab President without portfolio who would partly be occupied by social duties and who might easily be developed into a permanent head of the state.”¹²⁵ Bell also asked for General Clayton’s guidance on assessing a host of individuals with whom the British had collaborated during the war, getting his opinion on which person would best serve the interests of their government. Clayton facilitated introductions to several key Iraqis living in Cairo, including Sayyid Talib al-Naqib, who had helped to organize the Arab nationalist movement in Basra before the war and whom the British had deported to India.¹²⁶

The fate of Palestine remained a central question to Europeans and local leaders alike—particularly, the question of Zionism. The 1917 Balfour Declaration had committed Britain to some sort of Jewish homeland in Palestine, a proposition that had been soundly rejected by Arab leaders in the region. Wallach’s biography of Bell quotes a letter to her father that summed up the dilemma: “There is practically no question but Zionism in Jerusalem. All the Muslims are against it and furious with us for backing it. All of the Jews are for it and equally furious with us for not backing it enough.”¹²⁷ Similarly, Bell’s journal entries from this time returned frequently to the question of Palestine, Britain’s role in Palestine’s future, and how the overall “Zionist question” affected the region. Bell traveled to Jerusalem in October 1919 as part of her investigation into the dynamics in the region.¹²⁸

In Damascus, Bell had the chance to observe the effects of Arab self-rule directly. Nearing the end of the war, and with the help of the British, Faisal had declared an independent Arab constitutional government on October 5, 1918, a government the French did not recognize but allowed to function. Faisal would go on to declare a kingdom on March 8, 1920, which lasted until July 25, when Arab forces surrendered to the French.¹²⁹ Bell noted in her journal, though Arab rule was not perfect, it was meeting the needs of the people: “At any rate public business is kept going, tramways run in Damascus [Dimashq (Esh Sham, Damas)], streets are lighted.” She added, “Corrupt it certainly is, but no one minds corruption—on the contrary.”¹³⁰ Bell met with two Iraqis who worked with Faisal during the war and were helping to govern the newly declared government: Ja’far al-‘Askarī, the governor of Damascus; and his brother-in-law, Nuri Pasha al-Said.¹³¹ She understood these individuals could be valuable for self-rule in a future Iraqi state. On al-‘Askarī, Bell’s journal entry notes, “He is said to be by far the most capable administrator in the Arab Govt,” and “Ja’far Pasha in Aleppo [Halab] has done very well and is an honest man who would be useful to us.” And of al-Said, she wrote he was “probably the best of

125. Bell, “29/9/1919.”

126. Gertrude Bell, “30/9/1919,” Gertrude Bell Archive (website), accessed on December 12, 2021, http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/diary_details.php?diary_id=1246; and Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 234–36.

127. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 237.

128. Bell, “29/9/1919.”

129. Fromkin, *Peace*, 435–40.

130. Bell, “30/9/1919.”

131. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 236.

them, a moderate man of considerable intelligence.”¹³² Both leaders held key positions in the new Iraqi administration: al-‘Askarī became the minister of defense, and al-Said would go on to be the prime minister of Iraq through 14 administrations.¹³³

Ultimately, this trip through the region convinced Bell, though their style of government was completely different from Britain’s, local leaders were both capable and ready to govern themselves. Bell sent a report to London dated November 15, 1919, that became known as the *Syria Report* and summarized her findings. Wallach, one of Bell’s biographers, summarizes the report as follows:

Her ideas turned almost one hundred and eighty degrees from where they had been before her trip. She had gone from believing Arabs could never rule themselves to seeing them govern themselves in Syria. . . . She had gone from assuming that Britain must stay in total control to recognizing the need for it to cede considerable authority . . . compromise would prolong British importance, not reduce it. The more the British helped the Arabs achieve self-rule, she now proposed, the longer the British could retain their economic and political influence.¹³⁴

And although Bell became convinced of the need to devolve power to Iraqis, her boss, A. T. Wilson did not. In a cover letter accompanying the *Syria Report*, Wilson wrote, “The fundamental assumption throughout this note and, I should add, throughout recent correspondence which has reached me from London, is that an Arab State in Mesopotamia and elsewhere within a short period of years is a possibility. . . . My observations in this country and elsewhere have forced me to the conclusion that this assumption is erroneous.”¹³⁵

As will be described, the debate over how best to secure and govern the newly emerging Iraqi state continued to be a challenge for Bell and the civil authority in Mesopotamia.

Bell and the Creation of an Iraqi State

The League of Nations and its mandates for the Middle East, Africa, and Asia marked a turning point for European colonialization and the British Empire in particular. Historian Toby Dodge writes, “The creation of an Iraqi state represented a break with traditional territorial imperialism and signaled the beginning of the end of British international dominance. Under the mandate system, real political power had to be devolved to the institutions of the nascent Iraqi state and Iraqi politicians running them.”¹³⁶ Given this mandate, Gertrude Bell, along with other key leaders, began to formalize the idea of the creation of an Iraqi state under British advisement and protection.

132. Gertrude Bell, “11/10/1919,” Gertrude Bell Archive (website), accessed on December 12, 2021, http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/diary_details.php?diary_id=1258; and Bell, “30/9/1919.”

133. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 239.

134. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 242–43.

135. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 244–45.

136. Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 1.

Creating a viable Iraqi state had several daunting challenges Bell and the civil authority in Baghdad needed to address. First, as previously described, the provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra had developed unique social dynamics and leadership styles under the Ottoman vilayet system. The civil authority now needed to place all of these provinces under one political system, and this requirement was novel and necessitated social, political, and administrative changes. The British had to help to identify key leaders, including the head of state for the newly forming country. In addition, the British had to devise a system of governance, including a bureaucracy that could provide goods and services to the population and administratively control the newly unified territory. Within this state-building process, the British administration needed to knit together a sense of national identity in Iraq, which would require bridging ethnic differences among Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen; shoring up disagreements among Sunnis, Shia, Christians, and Jewish groups; and navigating rivalries among different tribes. Finally, Bell had to manage the viewpoints of her fellow Britons in Iraq, including those who still believed Iraq was better served under direct British rule and Iraqis were incapable of governing themselves.

In addition to tackling these challenges, the civil administration needed to maintain control of key resources—namely, military bases and oil—and keep the cost of securing the country, including troop strengths and the monetary cost of administering the Iraqi state, to a minimum. Britain would need to deploy over 300,000 troops, including a mixture of Indian and British forces, to secure the region—a number that was not popular given the devastating loss of life in World War I and Britain's economic challenges at home.¹³⁷ Furthermore, the British Empire had lost tens of thousands of troops in clashes with Ottoman forces during the war and had endured some of its worst defeats confronting Ottoman forces, including in the battle of Gallipoli and the siege of Kut. Given these losses, the government was reticent to keep large numbers of troops in the area indefinitely.

The April 1920 Conference of San Remo had intended to devise a plan for “Class A” territories under the League of Nations mandate system; these territories included Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Mesopotamia. British, French, Italian, Japanese, and American delegates attended the conference. As the Paris Peace Conference did in 1919, the Conference of San Remo lacked input from Arabs and other key stakeholders in the region.¹³⁸ Indeed, just a month before San Remo, Faisal had convened his own conference of key Arab leaders in Damascus, including those in Al-'Ahd and individuals from Mesopotamia. At the meeting, Faisal officially declared the Arab Kingdom of Syria and crowned himself king.¹³⁹ The Conference of San Remo did not acknowledge this development and, rather, confirmed the French mandate in Lebanon and Syria and the British mandate in Palestine and

137. Fromkin, *Peace*, 404, 499–501.

138. Wm. Roger Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez and Decolonization* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 251–77.

139. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*, 271–76, 352–56; and Anthony John Kuhn, “Broken Promises: The Expulsion of Emir Feisal and the Failed Struggle for Syrian Independence” (honors thesis, Carnegie Mellon University, 2011), https://kilthub.cmu.edu/articles/thesis/Broken_Promises_The_French_Expulsion_of_Emire_Feisal_and_the_Failed_Struggle_for_Syrian_Independence/6683990/1.

Mesopotamia, with the borders of these territories to be determined later. Ultimately, the Arab Kingdom of Syria lasted just under five months and was forced to surrender to French forces.

Within a month of the Conference of San Remo, elites in Baghdad and other key cities began to protest the treaty and mandate. In addition to Al-'Ahd, which predated the war, other secret societies had begun to take root in Mesopotamia, including Haras al-Istiqlal (Independence Guard), which was predominantly Shia and was headed by the Ayatollah Hassan al-Sadr.¹⁴⁰ In Baghdad, a series of large meetings that included both Sunnis and Shias began in May. Tripp relates, "Gathering by turn at Sunni and Shi'i mosques, increasing numbers of Baghdadis attended, providing vivid symbolic proof of co-operation between members of the two sects in the cause of Iraqi independence."¹⁴¹ These meetings produced a committee of 15 *mandubin* (representatives) that aimed to meet with British officials and negotiate for independence. But the newly formed council's meeting with A. T. Wilson, acting high commissioner, did not persuade him to allow greater Iraqi participation.

The revolt in Baghdad quickly spread south into the Shia-dominated areas of Mesopotamia. In the Shia holy city of Karbala, Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Shirazi—one of the highest-ranking Shia clerics in the city and a colleague of al-Sadr, the head of Independence Guard—issued a fatwa against serving in the British administration.¹⁴² Shia networks throughout the south organized protests that began peacefully but turned violent, particularly following the arrest of al-Shirazi's son in June along with several other prominent Shia leaders. Shortly thereafter, al-Shirazi issued another fatwa that implied armed rebellion was justified in the face of British persecution.¹⁴³ In return, British forces began military operations aimed at suppressing the uprising, including aerial bombardments.¹⁴⁴

Against Wilson's wishes, Bell continued to push for more Iraqi self-rule in the face of persisting protests in Mesopotamia. Bell's November 1919 Syria Report captured this change of heart and advocated for greater self-rule, enraging Wilson and others in the British government who felt direct rule was the only way of securing Mesopotamia. As a means of building relationships between key Iraqi elites, Bell held a series of parties in Baghdad, inviting key Iraqi leaders to informally meet and network, including Sayyid Talib al-Naqib, whom she had met on her trip to Cairo and who had since been allowed to return from exile. Al-Naqib was also a key figure in the push for Iraqi rule.¹⁴⁵

In August 1920, T. E. Lawrence—now famous from media coverage of his unconventional warfare fight with Faisal against Turkish forces—penned an op-ed in the *Sunday Times* that excoriated the situation in Mesopotamia. Lawrence began with a scathing accusation: "The people of England have been led in Mesopotamia into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity

140. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 40.

141. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 41.

142. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 41.

143. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 43; and Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*, 357.

144. Sir Aylmer L. Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia, 1920* (Nashville, TN: Battery Press, 2005).

145. Bell, "29/9/1919."

and honour. They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information.” Lawrence then continued to describe the British military’s ineffective governance and overuse of force and the cost to the British people of the stabilization plan.

We say we are in Mesopotamia to develop it for the benefit of the world. . . . How far will the killing of ten thousand villagers and townspeople this summer hinder the production of wheat, cotton, and oil? 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 colonial administration which can benefit nobody but its administrators?¹⁴⁶

As the uprising persisted throughout the summer, the British government decided a change of senior British leadership was needed. Cox, who understood the dynamics in the country, became the obvious choice for high commissioner.

In the midst of this political and social turmoil, Bell submitted a white paper to London titled “Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia” that provided a comprehensive summary of British involvement in Mesopotamia and the current conditions there, ranging from tribal dynamics to public works.¹⁴⁷ Wallach states, “Loaded with anthropological, sociological, historical and political facts, it encompassed every important personage and explained every significant event that had taken place in Mesopotamia over the course of the six years since Indian Expeditionary Force D had entered Basrah, in November 1914, up to the current steps to establish an Arab Government.”¹⁴⁸ The report received positive reviews in London. But in a letter to her stepmother, Bell noted, “The general line taken by the press seems to be that it’s most remarkable that a dog should be able to stand up and walk on its hind legs—i.e. a female write a white paper. I hope they will drop that source of wonder and pay attention to the report itself.”¹⁴⁹

Cox returned to Iraq on October 11, 1920, much to Bell’s relief. Despite this change in administration, the heavy-handed approach of the British military continued. Bell wrote the following to her father in a letter dated November 29, 1920.

We are greatly hampered by the tribal rising which has delayed the work of handing over to the Arab Govt. Sir Percy, I think rightly, decided that the tribes must be made to submit to force. . . . Nevertheless it’s difficult to be burning villages at one end of the country by means of a British army, and assuring people at the other end that we really have handed over responsibility to native ministers, so far as in their own interests we can do so.¹⁵⁰

146. T. E. Lawrence, “A Report on Mesopotamia by T. E. Lawrence,” *Sunday Times*, August 22, 1920, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/A_Report_on_Mesopotamia_by_T.E._Lawrence.

147. Sir Arnold T. Wilson, *Gertrude Lowthian Bell, and Iraq Civil Commissioner, Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia* (1920; repr., Sydney: Wentworth Press, 2016).

148. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 292.

149. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 292.

150. Bell, “29/9/1919.”

Ultimately, the deployment of over 60,000 British troops, a mixture of British military operations (especially the use of “aerial policing”), and the co-opting of key Iraqis who had benefited from land reforms and property rights quelled the uprising. The revolt cost between 6,000 and 10,000 Iraqi lives, the death of hundreds of British soldiers, and 50 million pounds.¹⁵¹ Allawi reflects this uprising had a lasting impact on the national psyche of Iraq, and the uprising “is one of the few founding stories about which most of Iraq’s population can agree.”¹⁵²

The Iraqi uprising compelled the British to seek an alternative path to stabilizing the country, one that would cost the Crown considerably less in money and troop strength and would secure its vital interests—namely, oil and the emerging need for air bases to support the newly formed Royal Air Force.¹⁵³ Greater Iraqi self-governance became this pathway. Just after his arrival, Cox helped to appoint a council of Iraqi advisers that was headed by the naqib al-ashraf of Baghdad (leader with blood ties to the Prophet Muhammad). The British also restored Ottoman-era municipal councils and administrations, keeping British advisers alongside their Iraqi counterparts. Although this approach was officially designed to establish Iraqi self-rule, the British still maintained control over key aspects of the country, including security and finances, leading historian Elizabeth Monroe to call the approach “an Arab façade with complete British control.”¹⁵⁴

Furthermore, Tripp argues the creation of an Iraqi administration more deeply enshrined ethnic and religious power dynamics in the country. Specifically, Tripp notes an Iraqi administration was dominated by Sunnis because “the Shia had largely been excluded from the Ottoman administration and consequently there were few amongst them with any administrative experience.” Tripp further asserts the recent revolts in the south, which were predominantly Shia, further fueled British leaders’ unwillingness to include the Shia in the newly forming government and administration. Ultimately, ethnic and religious alienation continued Iraq on a course of Sunni political domination at the expense of its Shia majority and other minority groups, including the Kurds, who also had revolted and were thus regarded with suspicion by the British and the newly forming Iraqi government.¹⁵⁵

One of the nascent Iraqi government’s first major steps was to create an Iraqi army. Ja’far al-‘Askari, a former Baghdadi officer in the Ottoman army and conspirator in the Arab Revolt during World War I, became the country’s first defense minister, and his brother-in-law, Nuri al-Said, the chief of general staff. Tripp explains al-‘Askari “organized the

151. James S. Corum and Wray R. Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars: Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2003), 51–86; David J. Dean, *Airpower in Small Wars: The British Air Control Experience*, Report no. AU-ARI-CP-85-1 (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, April 1985); David E. Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919–1939* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990); Marek Prusiewicz, “The 1920s British Air Bombing Campaign in Iraq,” *BBC News* (website), October 7, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29441383>; Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 277; Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 45; and Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*, 359. Some disagree over the number killed on both sides and the cost of the war to the British. Tripp puts the number of Iraqi deaths at 6,000. Historian Ali Allawi puts the number of British “killed, wounded or missing in action” at 2,500 and the cost at 40 million pounds.

152. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*, 356.

153. Paul Rich, “Gertrude Bell’s The Arabs of Mesopotamia,” in Bell, *Arab War Lords*, xvi.

154. Monroe, *Britain’s Moment*, 53.

155. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 45, 52–54.

return of roughly 600 former Ottoman officers of Iraqi origin, and from the men, drawn almost exclusively from the Sunni Arab families of the three provinces [Basra, Baghdad and Mosul], the officer corps of the new Iraqi army was formed.”¹⁵⁶ In other words, because the government drew from officers who had served in the Ottoman army, the government favored Iraq’s Sunni Arabs and became another institution through which this minority could assert its influence over the rest of the population.

In the midst of an Iraqi government and military taking shape in Mesopotamia, key British leaders convened a conference in March 1921 in Cairo. The conference aimed to cut the costs of occupying Mesopotamia and Palestine and to resolve disputes over territory and governance in the Middle East that had been created by the multiple agreements established during World War I, including the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, and the Balfour Declaration. Attendees included Winston Churchill, the newly appointed secretary of state for the colonies, along with Cox, Lawrence, Bell, and about 40 other official delegates. The conference also included two Iraqi delegates: Jaʿfar al-ʿAskarī, Iraq’s defense minister, and Sassoon Effendi, a Jewish Iraqi who became the country’s first minister of finance. Sayyid Talib al-Naqib was not invited.¹⁵⁷

Cox and Bell had drafted a proposal for how to administer Mesopotamia, advocating for the creation of a kingdom with an Iraqi administration and British advisers and an Iraqi military to quell potential future uprisings. Britain would continue to provide both political and military support, but the cost would be greatly reduced, and the goal would be Iraqi independence. Lawrence, now a colonel and Churchill’s personal adviser, met with Bell before the conference to go over these details and to discuss promoting Faisal as the future king of Iraq. Faisal and Lawrence had worked closely together throughout the Arab Revolt of 1916–18, fighting side-by-side in Aqaba and ultimately taking Damascus together in 1919. Lawrence also had accompanied Faisal to the January 1919 Paris Peace Conference and had stayed by Faisal’s side as France, Britain, and the United States worked out who would control which parts of the Middle East in the wake of the war, giving French mandate authority over Syria and reneging on the promises made to Faisal’s father in the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence.¹⁵⁸ Despite the British betrayal, Faisal maintained a relationship with the British—particularly, with Lawrence and Bell, who then conspired and advocated for Faisal to become the first king of Iraq.

Wallach writes, “Lawrence had already smoothed the way with Churchill in London, and Gertrude had done the same with Cox in Baghdad; now they would work together to make sure the man they wanted was anointed Emir.”¹⁵⁹ At the conference, under the advice of Bell, Cox promoted Faisal, as opposed to his older brother Abdullah, as the right choice because of the former’s military experience leading troops in the war; his connections with the British, including Lawrence and Bell; and Faisal’s administrative duties during his brief tenure as king

156. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 45.

157. Fromkin, *Peace*, 503; and Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 294.

158. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 598–620.

159. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 296.

of Syria. Ultimately, Churchill agreed to Cox and Bell's plan, stating in a cable the plan provided "the hope of best and cheapest solution" to Mesopotamia.¹⁶⁰

The conference adjourned with Churchill achieving his goal of reducing the cost of Britain's occupation of Mesopotamia. Wallach summarizes, "[T]he British garrisons would be reduced from thirty-three battalions to twenty-three battalions; expenditures would be dropped by five million pounds the first year and by twelve million pounds the next; communications lines would be installed and strategic air routes created to connect and strengthen the entire Empire."¹⁶¹ On Bell, Wallach further writes the following.

[T]he meetings had gone almost exactly according to her plan. It was she who had set her sights on Faisal as King of the new Arab state; it was she who had fought to include the vilayets of Basrah, Baghdad and Mosul, and to embrace Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds; it was she who had decided the borders and drawn the lines in the sand around Iraq. All that she had envisioned was beginning to take shape.¹⁶²

Once back in Mesopotamia, Cox and Bell had the difficult task of promoting Faisal as Iraq's new head of state. Despite his credentials as a military leader, a self-proclaimed king, an administrator with ties to key Iraqis, and the son of the Sharif of Mecca, Faisal lacked credibility, most notably because he had never set foot in Mesopotamia. Furthermore, as a Sunni and an Arab, Faisal was met with opposition from Iraq's Shia majority and its Kurdish minority. Tripp summarizes Faisal was "regarded with suspicion by most of the leading sectors of Iraq's heterogeneous society, for what he was, for his association with the British, and for his patronage to the small circle of ex-shariftan officers."¹⁶³ In other words, Bell and Cox needed to promote Faisal as the best head of state while not giving the appearance he was a British puppet. On the day of Faisal's arrival, Bell wrote, "We've thrown our die—the next few days will show whether it's a winning number."¹⁶⁴

Several key leaders protested the choice of Faisal before the delegates had even returned from Cairo. Sayyid Talib al-Naqib, perhaps the other contender most likely to lead the newly emerging state, had tried to use his influence to promote the elderly Naqib al-Ashraf of Baghdad, whom al-Naqib would replace upon his death. Al-Naqib touted the slogan "Iraqis for Iraq," threw dinner parties for key individuals, and resorted to bribing key leaders to gain their support.¹⁶⁵ Fearing al-Naqib would foment another uprising, the British had him deported once again, this time to Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka).¹⁶⁶

160. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 297.

161. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 300.

162. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 297–98.

163. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 48.

164. Gertrude Bell, "23/6/1921," Gertrude Bell Archive (website), accessed December 12, 2021, http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=479.

165. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 303.

166. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*, 362; and Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 304.

On June 23, 1921, Faisal arrived in Basra and began touring the country to build support for his leadership. Faisal received a formal welcome from British and local leaders in Baghdad a few days later and held a majlis, an Islamic court to adjudicate various cases, in the city.¹⁶⁷ At the prodding of the British, the Iraqi government held a referendum on Faisal's installation, asking the public whether they wanted Faisal as king and announced 96 percent of the vote had been in his favor. On August 23, Faisal was enthroned and the Kingdom of Iraq was officially created.¹⁶⁸

Following Faisal's coronation, Bell began to work closely with him, becoming one of his closest advisers. Bell's biographer states Faisal "confided in her his deepest fears. He consulted with her on the settlement of tribal feuds (between the Anazeh and Shammar), took her advice in choosing the members of his inner council, and depended on her to arrange the palace household. They picnicked, played tennis, attended the races, swam and took tea . . . they spent most of their time working together to build the state."¹⁶⁹ Bell also took advantage of her greatest skill in helping Faisal to arrange dinner parties and other social events with the aim of building important relationships with and between key leaders in Iraq. Bell's close relationship with the king compelled the *New York Herald* to run an article about her, calling her "Mesopotamia's Uncrowned Queen."¹⁷⁰

Faisal's trust in Bell included both turning to her as a confidant and asking for her help in securing one of Iraq's great treasures—its antiquities. In 1922, Faisal made Bell Iraq's honorary director of antiquities and, shortly thereafter, she began to collect key pieces for a museum and drafted legislation designed to protect Iraq's antiquities from foreign excavation.¹⁷¹ She oversaw British and American digs in Ur and Kish, respectively, ensuring the most critical artifacts would remain in Iraq.¹⁷² Bell's biographer relates her greater ambition in the preservation of antiquities was to show Iraq's history as a great civilization: "The more proof she had of the achievements of the early Mesopotamians, the more that she could substantiate her claims that Iraq would return to its former greatness."¹⁷³ Bell continued to devote much of her time to the preservation of antiquities and the creation of Iraq's first museum, which opened its permanent site in 1926 with Bell as its director. Wallach writes, "The museum was her creation, and she proudly brought anyone she could, from a former professor to visiting British officials to Arab ministers, to admire it."¹⁷⁴

Within efforts to build the Iraqi nation and state, political and social challenges almost immediately confronted the new king. Kemal Atatürk's rise to political power in Turkey gave him the opportunity to challenge Iraq's ownership of Mosul, which did not get resolved

167. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*, 362–68; and Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 316.

168. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 47; and Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*, 377–80.

169. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 323.

170. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 323.

171. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 342.

172. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 349–50, 355–56.

173. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 355.

174. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 356.

until Turkey and Iraq signed the Frontier Treaty of 1926, also known as the 1926 Treaty of Ankara. The treaty gave the city to Iraq, but the treaty also required Iraq to remit 10 percent of oil royalties to Turkey for 25 years.¹⁷⁵ Simultaneously, Britain and Iraq contentiously negotiated rights to the country's oil. The Turkish Petroleum Company, founded jointly in 1912 by Britain and Germany to secure the emerging oil resources in Mesopotamia, became the Iraq Petroleum Company in 1928 after oil was discovered near Kirkuk. The same year, the Red Line Agreement allowed a consortium of British, Dutch, French, and American companies to extract and process the oil for Iraqi consumption, an agreement that remained until Iraq's oil was officially nationalized in 1975.¹⁷⁶

Alongside the Mosul question, the king's relationship with the Kurds remained tense, particularly once the hopes of Kurdish autonomy would clearly not be realized in the new state.¹⁷⁷ Under the leadership of Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji, the Kurds began to revolt against the king in 1922. Barzanji and British authorities signed an agreement in December 1922 that promised greater Kurdish autonomy, but this agreement quickly crumbled, and the British Royal Air Force bombed the de facto capital of the Kurdish rebellion, Sulaymaniyah, in March 1923. British and Iraqi forces eventually reoccupied the city in 1924, forcing Barzanji into exile, where he led an insurgency until his capture in 1931.¹⁷⁸

In the south, Ibn Saud continued to challenge the border between Iraq and the Hejaz. The British government dispatched Cox to resolve the issue in November 1922. After days of negotiations, Cox succeeded in persuading Ibn Saud to agree to two "neutral zones"—one in Kuwait and the other in southern Iraq—which would require oil reserves to be shared between the countries, an arrangement Wallach notes continued to be contested up through Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991. Otherwise, the borders aligned with those Bell had drawn at the end of World War I.¹⁷⁹

Tensions also persisted between the new king and Iraq's Shia majority. Shia "fanaticism" had been a chief concern of Bell's since her arrival in Basra at the end of 1916. Bell had written about the fanaticism extensively in *The Arabs of Mesopotamia* (her primer for British forces), in her 1920 white paper on Mesopotamia sent to London, and in correspondence to her father and stepmother.¹⁸⁰ In 1923, several Shia clerics—including the notable Ayatollah Muhammad Mahdi al-Khalisi—reissued fatwas calling for noncooperation with both the Sunni-dominated Iraqi government and the British. The king had al-Khalisi arrested, and he went into exile in Persia. To quell the unrest, the king gave tax exemptions to key Shia leaders and—together with the British promise that 40 percent of the seats in the national parliament would be reserved for

175. Frontier Treaty of 1926, G.B.-I.Q.-T.R., June 5, 1926; and Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 362–63, 370–71.

176. Reuters, "Nationalizing of Oil Completed by Iraq," *New York Times* (website), December 9, 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/12/09/archives/vationalizing-of-oil-completed-by-iraq-iraq-completes-nationalizing.html>.

177. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 53; and Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*, 385–86.

178. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 53–54.

179. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*, 394–95; and Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 347–48.

180. Bell, Arab War Lords; Wilson, Bell, and Iraq Civil Commissioner, *Civil Administration*; and Gertrude Bell, "28/3/1918," Gertrude Bell Archive (website), accessed on December 12, 2021, http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=291.

tribal sheikhs, including Shia sheikhs, as well as the promise of majoritarian politics through the electoral process—a major uprising was avoided.¹⁸¹

As critical to dynamics within Iraq, the king also had to address the country's relationship with Britain continuously. The 1920 rebellion and persistent religious and ethnic tensions coupled with Faisal's sense of betrayal from Britain's broken promises in World War I and unwillingness to support his short-lived kingdom in Syria compelled the new head of state to seek alternative arrangements to the Mandate ratified by the League of Nations.¹⁸² Tripp writes the following:

Because of general Iraqi opposition to the idea of the Mandate, the British decided to organize their relationship with Iraq by means of a treaty, giving the appearance of a normal relationship between two sovereign states. The fact that one of the parties was overwhelmingly powerful, was effectively in military occupation of the other and held the Mandate of the League of Nations to rule the other pending true self-government could scarcely be disguised by this fiction.¹⁸³

The conditions outlined in the Cairo Conference of 1921, which aimed to establish Iraqi sovereignty and self-rule but continued to allow the presence of British security forces and advisers in the country, were ratified in an initial Anglo-Iraqi Treaty in October 1922 and fully ratified in 1924.¹⁸⁴ Subsequent agreements between Iraq and Britain included another treaty in 1927 that promised to recommend Iraq to the League of Nations by 1932. In addition, the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930 amended the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1922, affirming Iraq's sovereignty. But the treaty also gave Britain continued access to Iraqi oil.¹⁸⁵

In December 1922, Cox was called back to London to address Britain's newly formed government and Churchill's replacement, the duke of Devonshire. Sir Henry Dobbs assumed leadership in Iraq, eventually becoming its new high commissioner in May 1923. Although Bell had a good working relationship with Dobbs, he did not seek her advice, and their collaboration was not as fruitful as her collaboration with Cox had been.¹⁸⁶

Around the same time Dobbs became high commissioner, Bell's influence with King Faisal also began to subside. Faisal sought the council of his official adviser, Kinahan Cornwallis, the former director of the Arab Bureau and a close friend of Bell. Wallach writes that Bell's feelings toward Cornwallis, a diplomat who was 17 years her junior, turned romantic over the years, but, ultimately, he did not reciprocate her affection, and, by 1926, he had refused her pleas for marriage and pulled away from her almost completely. Coupled with this disappointment, in early 1926, Bell's half brother Hugo died of pneumonia. Shortly after this tragedy, Bell's family's fortune was depleted from a steelworkers' strike in England. In addition,

181. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 54–56.

182. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 337–39.

183. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 51.

184. Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, G.B.-I.Q., 1924; and Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*, 394–409.

185. Monroe, *Britain's Moment*, 76–79.

186. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 351–53.

Bell's personal health also suffered sporadically during this time, and she was frequently too ill to work. By spring 1926, Bell's position in the high commissioner's office was clearly nearing its end.¹⁸⁷ Wallach summarizes Bell's decline as follows: "Like the image she had drawn of snow, her power had melted away. Her reign of influence was over. Her family fortune had disappeared. Her last love had turned his back. Her health had declined. Physically tired and emotionally spent, she knew she had done all she could for the British Empire. The future now lay in the hands of others."¹⁸⁸

On June 14, 1926, the first wing of the Iraq Museum was opened with the king in attendance. The day marked the culmination of years of work preserving Iraq's ancient history and a lifetime of passion toward antiquities. On July 11, just three days before her 58th birthday, Bell returned home after a lunch with Dobbs and a swim in the Euphrates. The next morning, her maid found her dead. Bell's death was initially labeled an accidental overdose of sleeping pills, but, given all that she had been through in the last year of her life, most came to see her death as a suicide.¹⁸⁹ David George Hogarth, her initial supervisor at the Arab Bureau and longtime friend, penned one of several obituaries for Bell, which, in part, read as follows:

No woman in recent time has combined her qualities—her taste for arduous and dangerous adventure with her scientific interest and knowledge, her competence in archaeology and art, her distinguished literary gift, her sympathy for all sorts and condition of men, her political insight and appreciation of human values, her masculine vigour, hard common sense and practical efficiency—all tempered by feminine charm and a most romantic spirit.¹⁹⁰

Bell's dying wish was to be buried in Baghdad, where she remains to this day.

In the wake of her death, Great Britain continued to stumble through its relationship with Iraq and its move toward independence. On October 3, 1932, the League of Nations unanimously voted to recognize Iraq's independence. Faisal died a year later. A coup d'état in 1941, followed by Iraq's alignment with Germany and Italy, compelled Britain to invade in May 1942, after which Britain occupied Iraq until 1947. And in 1958, Faisal's grandson, Faisal II, was assassinated in the July 14 Revolution, which abolished the monarchy and made Iraq a republic, eventually paving the way for the rise of the Ba'ath Party and Saddam Hussein.

Analyzing Bell's Grand Strategy

Through her deep knowledge of the region—including its languages, people, and geography—and her lifelong friendships with key individuals, Gertrude Bell developed a military strategy that helped to undermine Turkish authority in the Middle East during the war and

187. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 363–71.

188. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 370–71.

189. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 371–72.

190. David George Hogarth, "Obituary: Gertrude Lowthian Bell," *Geographical Journal* 68, no. 4 (1926): 363–68.

to transition Mesopotamia to self-rule after the war's conclusion. Bell's grand strategy aimed first and foremost to preserve British influence in the region and to secure key assets for the Crown. As one scholar succinctly said, "The priorities of the British government went beyond the setting up of desert democracies."¹⁹¹ Ultimately, these priorities came at the expense of a stable, independent Iraqi state.

Bell helped to develop and implement three broad, grand strategic goals for Britain in the Middle East. First, and perhaps most critically, Britain aimed to maintain its influence in the region as a great power. Before World War I, major European powers, including Britain, Germany, France, Italy, and Russia, jockeyed for spheres of influence among themselves in the Middle East. With the defeat of Germany at the end of the war and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the mandate system reconfigured and enshrined these spheres of influence. British influence over other European powers as well as relevant populations in the region continued to be a priority, if only because this influence symbolized the great power of an empire. In turn, influence could be used to secure key resources. Historian Alan Sharp summarizes this dynamic by observing Prime Minister David Lloyd George "wished, for sentimental as well as pragmatic motives, to create a new major British sphere of interest in the Middle East."¹⁹² For the British, these resources included access to the Suez Canal, which provided a critical sea line of communication to India; key ports, which doubled as economic hubs and military refueling stations, including the port near Basra; oil in Persia and, later, Iraq; and land bases, including airfields.

Vis-à-vis Iraq, Britain's grand strategy aimed to keep a foothold within the country for military bases, specifically air bases, as a line of communication to India and for "aerial policing." The birth of airpower as a military instrument in World War I followed by the founding of the Royal Air Force on April 1, 1918—the first independent air force in the world—prompted the need for air bases throughout the empire. Mesopotamia became a strategic location for an air base because the region provided a way station en route to India and bridged the gap between western and eastern bases in the region. As one scholar notes, "Iraq remained an important British military staging post and its airfields (at Habbaniya, Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Shaibah, Seram Adia) were presumed upon well into the post-World War II era, although the reluctant Iraqis were anything but perfect hosts."¹⁹³ Alongside the role bases played in linking together the empire, airpower became an important tool of "aerial policing" following the war because airpower represented a cheaper and less manpower-intensive way than ground forces to coerce Iraqis into compliance with British policies.¹⁹⁴ For both of these reasons, the British Empire needed to maintain military bases well beyond Iraqi independence in 1932.

Finally, Britain's grand strategy in the Middle East aimed to secure access to oil and ports, which were necessary for moving oil and resupplying ships. Britain's decision in 1912 to move

191. Rich, "Arabs of Mesopotamia," x, xii.

192. 1914–1918-online, s.v. "The Paris Peace Conference and Its Consequences," updated October 8, 2014, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/the_paris_peace_conference_and_its_consequences.

193. Rich, "Arabs of Mesopotamia," xvi.

194. Corum and Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars*; Dean, *Airpower in Small Wars*; and Omissi, *Air Power*.

its naval fleet from coal, a resource Britain had, to petroleum, a resource Britain did not have, compelled London to seek out and maintain access to this vital resource of national security. British strategy included access to both oil and ports that could act as storage and refueling stations for the fleet. At the outbreak of World War I, British forces captured Basra with the aim of securing access to Persian oil as well as checking other European powers in the region—most notably, Germany—and providing a means to influence Arabs in the region.¹⁹⁵ At the war's conclusion, the importance of oil was mentioned at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and the Conference of San Remo in 1920. After the war, oil became the topic of several treaties between Iraq and Britain as well as between France, Turkey, and the United States and Iraq. And suspicion Basra had oil, a hunch that was confirmed in 1927, drove key decisions in London to keep a firm foothold in the newly emerging state and to secure the city within Iraq's borders. British efforts to secure long-term influence and control in Iraq cannot be separated from Britain's quest for bases, ports, and oil.

Gertrude Bell used her expertise to shape and realize British grand strategy in the various positions she held in the Middle East. In her work with the Arab Bureau during the war, Bell helped to devise a military strategy that aimed to frustrate the Ottoman Empire, undermine the influence of the Sublime Porte, keep critical sea lines of communication open, and degrade Turkish military presence by working through key leaders in the region. To these ends, the bureau devised an unconventional warfare strategy—working with and through local leaders, including Sharif Hussein of Mecca and his son Faisal, as well as Arab officers within the Turkish military—to undermine Ottoman authority in the region. Within this approach, the Arab Bureau had to strike a delicate balance of empowering local leaders in the Middle East while not invoking rebellions elsewhere in the empire—particularly, in India. The contacts Bell had made and fostered throughout her travels in the region, as well as her understanding of tribal dynamics, made her invaluable to this strategy. Bell's 1914 trip through the Najd and to the city of Ha'il, in particular, gave her unique insights into the region's tribes, clans, and key leaders—knowledge that compelled the British military to commission her as an officer.¹⁹⁶ Bell then advised the Arab Bureau on how to leverage tribal dynamics as well as which leaders to engage and bankroll as part of Britain's unconventional warfare strategy.

Bell's role in devising a plan for the British military's occupation of Mesopotamia following its capture of Baghdad in 1917 further drew on her unique knowledge of the region and its people. She helped to inform discussions over whether Britain should directly annex Mesopotamia and whether the administration in Baghdad should report directly to Delhi or Cairo. Although she was initially skeptical of self-rule in Mesopotamia and other newly formed countries in the Middle East, an extensive research trip through the region and lengthy conversations with former colleagues and local leaders changed her mind. Bell's November 1919 *Syria Report* advocated for greater Arab self-rule, contradicting her boss, A. T. Wilson, and others in the British government who felt direct rule was the only way of securing Mesopotamia. Bell also traveled throughout Britain's newly acquired territories to understand

195. Davis, *Ends and Means*, 31–32.

196. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 116–20.

the perspectives of the tribes, sects, and ethnic groups and, particularly, their views on British rule better. Bell paid close attention to the Shia in the south and the Kurds in the north, especially in light of the 1920 revolt. Bell expressed her disdain at British “aerial policing” and noted the ill will the policing was producing among the very groups Britain needed to secure its presence in Mesopotamia.

Finally, Bell was a key influencer in the 1921 Cairo Conference, which ultimately created the state of Iraq with King Faisal at its helm. Bell helped to sell the idea of Faisal, a sharifian and foreign Hashemite, as the best leader for the country. She became one of Faisal’s most trusted advisers, provided guidance on governance, and facilitated meetings through social events. Together with Cox, Bell worked to create an Iraqi administration with carefully placed British advisers who could maintain influence in the country. And Bell spent the last years of her life preserving one of Iraq’s greatest treasures and symbols of national identity, its antiquities, fostering laws that prevented European excavators from seizing key pieces and, ultimately, opening the first wing of the Iraqi Museum in 1926, just weeks before her suicide.

As a subject and servant of the Crown, Bell helped realize these grand strategic goals through a variety of means, most of which were indirect, subtle, and easy to overlook or dismiss. First and foremost, Bell drew from a lifetime spent studying the cultures, languages, dynamics, and leaders of the region to inform her decision making as a military officer and a civil servant of the empire. She understood rivalries between different tribes in the region and how to manage these rivalries and play them off one another to suit British interests. Bell also understood local customs and religious norms and rules, and, within all of this knowledge, she respected and even loved the people. This deep knowledge and love of the peoples, the languages, and the cultures of Mesopotamia and the Hejaz allowed her, as a foreigner and a woman, to have influence in societies that were closed otherwise. Bell’s respect of the culture and people earned her the honorific title of *al-Khatun*, or “the lady.”

Bell also had the unique capacity and wherewithal to see and speak with everyone in Mesopotamia, including the women. She understood women in local cultures possessed power and influence over key decisionmakers, especially their husbands and sons. Bell used this knowledge to facilitate socials for women—particularly, in Baghdad—and to include them as part of the influence campaign to win the population over to British policy. These parties also served as opportunities to listen and learn from what others might have dismissed as idle gossip of local women. As Wallach relates, Bell had the important responsibilities “to watch the local weathercock . . . the educated Sunnis in town, the Shiite majority in the provinces, the large Jewish community in Baghdad, the Christians in Mosul” and to understand their desires and perspectives.¹⁹⁷ Including women in this pursuit was one of Bell’s key tactics.

Perhaps most critically, Bell understood the need to build relationships and work through key leaders to achieve strategic effects. Bell had a gift for developing lifelong friendships, both with her fellow Britons and with individuals in Mesopotamia and the Hejaz. Bell’s nearly 30-year relationship with Lord Hardinge helped smooth over tensions between the

197. Wallach, *Desert Queen*, 211.

Government of India and the Arab Bureau at the height of the former's efforts to foment an uprising in the Middle East. She collaborated repeatedly with T. E. Lawrence, whom she met in 1911, including in their work together at the Arab Bureau, their efforts in drawing frontiers between countries at the end of World War I, and their collusion at the Cairo Conference in 1921, which brought Faisal to the throne. Bell's relationships with Cox and Cornwallis were also critical for influencing British policy in Iraq. As importantly, Bell's relationships with key local leaders acted as a bridge between British policy and Iraqi implementation, her friendship with Faisal perhaps being the ultimate example of this bridging of the gap. Bell made excellent use of her social ties and friendships to arrange meetings between key leaders through teas, soirees, and other gatherings, facilitating introductions in an informal atmosphere in hopes of building relationships between leaders and creating diplomatic solutions to the many challenges Britain faced in the region.

Ultimately, Bell's expertise—her time spent in the region, her research, the relationships she built, the influence she wielded, and her well-laid plans—did not result in a successful strategy that created lasting stability in the region. Several broad factors help to explain Britain's failed efforts to create a stable state in Iraq. First, and perhaps most significantly, the many contradictory promises Britain made to key stakeholders in the Middle East during the war hindered the creation of a viable Iraqi state at the war's conclusion. The promise Britain made in the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence for an independent Arab state stretching from the Levant to the Hejaz and Britain's agreement to cede the same land to the French in the Sykes-Picot Agreement were a watershed moment between key Arab leaders and the British, second only perhaps to the Balfour Declaration in 1917. David Hogarth, the director of the Arab Bureau, learned about the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, but he kept this information from Bell and Cox. Ultimately, when local leaders learned of these contradictory agreements, the leaders understood the agreements as a betrayal by the British.

Of similar significance, bureaucratic infighting within and between Delhi, Cairo, and London over who should control and shape policy in the Middle East impeded progress in Mesopotamia. From the onset of the war in 1914, the Government of India believed it should control policy and strategy in the Middle East, particularly after British Indian troops secured Basra. The Government of India fought the creation of the Arab Bureau; its control of decision making in the Middle East; and, particularly, the bureau's unconventional warfare strategy of fomenting a revolt against Ottoman authority, which the Government of India feared would spark uprisings within its indigenous ranks. The Government of India and the British military further fought for control of Mesopotamia after the war, leading to disunity of effort with the civil administration in Baghdad. And key individuals fought the decision to push for Iraqi self-rule throughout the British government, including High Commissioner in Mesopotamia A. T. Wilson. Historian Elizabeth Monroe succinctly describes the British bureaucratic infighting in Mesopotamia as a "civil war" and a "feud."¹⁹⁸ Bell played a pivotal role in attempting to mitigate this bureaucratic infighting, smoothing over relations between Delhi and Cairo in 1916, for instance, but also exacerbating the tug-of-war at other times, particularly

198. Monroe, *Britain's Moment*, 47, 52–53.

when she openly disagreed with A. T. Wilson's policy recommendations on Iraqi self-rule in 1919 and 1920.

Also of similar significance, British authorities made decisions with minimal or no Iraqi input, ultimately causing key leaders and groups to rebel against British decisions. In 1919, Iraqi leadership was not present at the Paris Peace Conference, which led to British control of Mesopotamia through the Mandate System. Iraqi leadership was also absent at the Conference of San Remo in 1920, and the British invited only a few Iraqis to the 1921 Cairo Conference, omitting key leaders like Sayyid Talib al-Naqib and Ayatollah Hassan al-Sadr. The absence of key leaders at these junctures helped spark the 1920 Iraqi revolt after San Remo and lack of support for King Faisal after the 1921 Cairo Conference. Rather than securing the buy-in of key leaders, the British had to overcome the leaders' influence and resistance at several critical junctures in the creation of the Iraqi state. Gertrude Bell's role in sidestepping local leadership during moments of European and British decision making is perhaps the most perplexing of all of her actions. Though she wrote about her deep respect for key leaders in the region, Bell kept them at arm's length, choosing to seek out their help only after Britain made its decisions for the newly forming country. Bell's insistence on Faisal as Iraq's first king is the strongest example of this pattern of behavior. In the end, Bell perhaps never reconciled her concerns over Iraqi self-rule with how it would serve British interests. Promoting Faisal as king benefited Britain because he was the leader the British knew, not the one the Iraqi people knew or wanted.

British decision making also helped to enshrine ethnic divisions created under the Ottoman Empire and further set the conditions for minority rule in Iraq. When Iraqi self-rule became the policy, the civil administration chose to back individuals who had experience governing under the vilayet systems, which had tended to favor Ottoman-educated Sunnis over Shias and Kurds. The creation of the Iraqi army in 1921 with Ja'far al-'Askari as the country's first defense minister and Nuri al-Said as the chief of general staff further empowered Sunni leaders over other religious and ethnic groups, particularly after the return of around 600 former Sunni Ottoman officers.¹⁹⁹ And the promotion of Faisal as Iraq's first king, a Sunni and sharifan, shut out other ethnic groups from leading the country, at least until the July 14 Revolution. Gertrude Bell's actions tended to conform to and support these leadership decisions. Bell was deeply suspicious of "Shia fanaticism," as she described it in several places; the 1920 uprisings in the south seemed to reinforce her mistrust of Iraq's majority group. As is often the case with diplomats, Bell tended to interact with local political leaders in the capital city, which included both key Arab Sunnis and Iraq's influential Jewish population. Bell did not appear to have strong personal connections with Kurdish leaders in the north or Shias in the south.

Ultimately, British grand strategy was less about creating an independent state in Iraq and more about maintaining access to key resources in Mesopotamia, including influence as a great power, oil, bases, and ports. Despite the demise of several empires at the end of World War I and the efforts of the League of Nations and the mandate system to foster self-determination

199. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 45.

around the world, Britain still maintained its empire and imperial mentality. Although a lifelong friend of the Middle East, Gertrude Bell was still a subject and servant of the British Empire, and her grand strategy served the empire's imperial aims. Britain's efforts to hold onto its empire largely did not survive World War II, and Iraq was no exception to this trend. The country continued to have internal uprisings following its independence in 1932, including nearly a dozen coup attempts and the murder of the king's family in 1958, which ushered in a republic. Britain went to war with Iraq in World War II and ultimately withdrew from its last air base in Habbaniyah in 1959 following the July 14 Revolution. And British Petroleum lost direct control of Iraq's oil in 1975 when the Iraqi government finalized the nationalization of its oil fields.

Bell and Implications for Grand Strategy Today

Studying the grand strategy of Gertrude Bell has several important implications for military practitioners and grand strategists today. First, Bell's grand strategy reveals the inherent challenges that come from an intervening military conducting stability operations in the wake of war or other causes of state fragility. Stability operations are a core competency of the US military. Signed in 2018, Department of Defense Directive 3000.05, *Stability Operations*, dictates, "To the extent authorized by law, DoD will plan and conduct stabilization in support of mission partners across the range of military operations in order to counter subversion; prevent and mitigate conflict; and consolidate military gains to achieve strategic success." The directive further states the Department of Defense's "core responsibility during stabilization is to support and reinforce the civilian efforts of the US [United States government] lead agencies consistent with available statutory authorities, primarily by providing security, maintaining basic public order, and providing for the immediate needs of the population."²⁰⁰ Even as US military priorities shift from irregular warfare to great-power competition, the military will still be called upon to engage in stability operations in the wake of man-made and natural disasters as well as war.

Britain's efforts at stability operations in Iraq following World War I demonstrate the inherent tensions in balancing an intervening country's objectives and priorities with those of the country the intervening country is trying to stabilize. Although Bell was initially a skeptic, her letters, journals, and reports reveal she ultimately came to believe self-rule in Iraq was the best policy to pursue. But Bell had to balance this objective against British priorities to maintain a degree of control within Iraq to secure air bases, seaports, and access to oil along with the need to exercise influence in the region as a great power. In an attempt to strike a balance, Bell promoted the leader she thought would allow for a degree of control within Iraq, Faisal, an individual who was not representative of the population or even known to Iraqis. While this decision allowed Britain to retain control of critical resources, it ultimately undercut the stability it aimed to create.

200. Patrick M. Shanahan, *Stabilization*, Department of Defense Directive 3000.05 (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, December 13, 2018), 4.

Second, Bell's grand strategy reveals the importance of working through the local population to give stability operations legitimacy and potential longevity. Working with and through the population is more relevant today than in Bell's time given the greater empowerment of individuals and communities in the information age. Bell and her colleagues went through several iterations of building Iraq's government in the wake of World War I. The iterations included increasingly more Iraqi input, particularly from key elites, but the iterations still largely kept the population out of the process. Bell's decision to promote Faisal, an individual who had never been to Iraq, to be the country's first leader threw the legitimacy of the country's government into question and sparked violent uprisings among both the Shia and the Kurds. Not working through the population to build the fledgling Iraqi state ultimately contributed to long-term instability in the country.

Third, the example of Gertrude Bell's role as a military strategist during World War I offers important lessons for the US military today. In the first year of the war, the British military sought out experts to help to inform the military's strategy in the Middle East. Critically, the military did not confine its search to experts within the military; rather, the military looked to individuals who had spent considerable time studying the region. Bell's linguistic skills, recent trip through the Middle East, and detailed maps of the terrain and key tribes made her an obvious choice.

The US military has experimented with programs that have aimed to draw from civilian expertise, including the US Army's 2006 creation of the Human Terrain System, which sought to address cultural gaps in the Iraq War and Afghanistan War. This program focused more on recruiting experts from academic disciplines—particularly, anthropology—as opposed to subject-matter experts in Iraq or Afghanistan. This program was also deeply controversial during its 10-year existence.²⁰¹ Despite this controversy and the current respite from counterinsurgency, cultural experts will continue to be a key requirement for the US military in the era of great-power competition—particularly, firsthand and academic knowledge of strategic competitors. The example of Gertrude Bell demonstrates that the US military needs subject-matter expertise to devise military plans effectively and to help shape strategic vision. Finding a means of tapping into and learning from expertise outside the Department of Defense is critical for understanding today's strategic environment, just as it was during Bell's time.

Within the need to recruit experts, the example of Gertrude Bell demonstrates the importance of building a team that provides diversity of experience and thought. Bell brought an important perspective as an individual who was not in the military and, bluntly, not a man. In both the Arab Bureau and the Iraqi civil administration, Bell represented the only diversity on the team. Bell was both valuable for her knowledge and how she thought and tackled problems. Bell's approach to strategy was different from that of her military and civil service counterparts, as were the tactics she employed and how she influenced key actors. Bell did not always get along with her colleagues; she clashed repeatedly with Wilson, her boss, military leaders, and

201. Montgomery McFate and Steve Fondacaro, "Reflections on the Human Terrain System during the First Four Years," *PRISM* 2, no. 4 (2011): 64–82; and Christopher Sims, "Academics in Foxholes: The Life and Death of the Human Terrain System," *Foreign Affairs* (website), February 4, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2016-02-04/academics-foxholes>.

even her longtime friend Lawrence over what to do and how. Arguably, this friction was important for avoiding groupthink and helped in devising better strategies. The US military should learn from this example and cultivate relationships with a wide array of individuals from different backgrounds and perspectives to build a diverse team to tackle strategic problems.

Fourth, Bell's ability to build and maintain relationships is also an important lesson for today's US military. Bell understood the need to move beyond networking to cultivating genuine friendships that lasted years, decades, and even lifetimes. In turn, these relationships became one means through which Bell shaped her environment and pursued her strategy. These friendships included influential Britons with whom she worked—such as Hardinge, Hogarth, Clayton, Lawrence, Cox, and Cornwallis—and key Iraqis—important elites in Baghdad and, especially, King Faisal. Bell also appreciated the important role women played as influencers in the region and provided opportunities to work with and through the women in Iraq to shape perceptions of British policies. Bell's ability as a woman to engage other women was a unique contribution to British efforts in Iraq.

In the era of great-power competition, allies and partners are more important than ever. Building and maintaining relationships is often considered to be an essential skill for Department of State officials, but the skill is also vital for Department of Defense officials—especially officers who work with allied and partner militaries around the globe. Gertrude Bell provides an excellent example of how to build and maintain relationships and why they matter for shaping the strategic environment.

Taken together, Gertrude Bell's strategic vision for the Middle East and the various approaches she used to realize this vision demonstrate she was influential because she was a woman, not in spite of it. Bell's example offers insights into the roles women have played and continue to play as influencers of grand strategy in male-dominated contexts.

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About the Author

Heather S. Gregg is a professor of military strategy and policy in the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College. Dr. Gregg earned a PhD in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a master's degree in Islam from Harvard Divinity School, and a bachelor's degree (with honors) in cultural anthropology from the University of California at Santa Cruz. She is the author of *Religious Terrorism* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), "Religiously Motivated Violence" (Oxford University Press, 2018), *Building the Nation: Missed Opportunities in Iraq and Afghanistan* (University of Nebraska Press, 2018), and *The Path to Salvation: Religious Violence from the Crusades to Jihad* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014) and coeditor of *The Three Circles of War: Understanding the Dynamics of Modern War in Iraq* (Potomac Books, 2010).

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