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Faisal's Nomination for Kingship: Imperial Interests and Political Realignment in Iraq

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Received : 10 September 2025

Revised : 5 November 2025

Accepted : 17 December 2025

Online : 20 December 2025

Abstract

To conduct a historical analysis of British imperial interests in Iraq and the broader Middle East following the First World War, it is essential to examine the political, military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of British strategy, due to Britain's key role in shaping post-World War One Middle East. Central to this study is the perspective of senior British officials and how their strategic decisions, shaped by territorial, local, and international considerations, culminated in the selection of Faisal as the future King of Iraq at the 1921 Cairo Conference. While historians have explored Britain's post-war policies in Iraq, much of the existing scholarship on the selection of Iraq's monarchy tends to rely on incomplete narratives, often influenced by ideological, ethnic, or political biases. This study seeks to offer a more objective understanding of British decision-making by making extensive use of official British archives and government documents. Through this approach, it aims to clarify the rationale behind Faisal's nomination and to present a balanced assessment of British attitudes toward his kingship. This study is structured into three parts: first, The 1920 Arab rebellion and the formation of the Iraqi provisional government; second, the British view on Iraq's royal candidacy during the Cairo Conference; and finally, the reasoning behind Faisal's nomination as King of Iraq.

Keywords: Faisal, British Giverment, Cairo Confrence, Imperial and Iraqi State

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Journal of Islamic Civilization and Culture Review

<https://journal.foundae.com/index.php/jiccr>



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INTRODUCTION

At the end of the First World War, a few days after signing the Armistice of Mudros on 30 October 1918, British forces occupied the Ottoman vilayet (province) of Mosul, and thus completed the process of conquering Mesopotamia. This comprised the three vilayets of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, which were to become known as Iraq. In their attempt to establish stability in Iraq in the aftermath of the First World War, senior British policy-makers were influenced by the international context of the League of Nations' mandate system. The concept of the mandate was set out in article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations at the Paris Peace Conference on 30 January 1919, under which the former Ottoman territories and German colonies were to be entrusted to the guardianship of one of the Allied Powers on behalf of the League of Nations. On 25 April 1920, at the San Remo Conference, the Allies approved the provisional allocation that had already been discussed at the Paris peace conference. In the Middle East the mandates of Mesopotamia and Palestine would be under the trusteeship of Britain and those of Syria and Lebanon would be given to France.

After long discussions over a number of drafts of the mandate terms, on 7 December 1920 the final draft was eventually submitted by the Lord President of the Council and the British delegate, Arthur Balfour, to the Council of the League of Nations for their approval. The draft recited the fourth paragraph of Article 22 of Part I of Covenant of the League of Nations and Article 94 of the Treaty of Sevres (TNA: CO 735/1, 7 December 1920; TNA/CAB/24/115/98, 29 November 1920; TNA: CO 372/2, August 1921; Catherwood, 2004, 99). The decision of the San Remo Conference to assign the mandates over Mesopotamia and Palestine to Britain, and over Syria to France, had been announced publicly. This announcement stated that people in Mesopotamia could be assured that the British government would not accept the role of the mandate until they had full responsibility to carry it out (The Times, 3 May 1920; TNA: FO 371, 5226, 8 May 1920). After the mandate system was decided at the San Remo Conference, British policy adopted the strategy of establishing a national Iraqi state. This resulted in the formation of the Council of State. The British government then began negotiations to select a candidate for the head of the new Iraqi state. British policy-makers considered that the candidate should be from the family of Sharif Hussein of Mecca, due to promises given to them by Britain in the course of the First World War.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although no recent study has made Faisal's nomination for the Iraqi throne its central focus, several secondary sources address the subject. These works will be examined here through three thematic lenses: the 1920 Arab revolt and the formation of the Iraqi state; British perspectives on Iraq's royal candidacy during the Cairo Conference; and the underlying rationale for the nomination of Faisal as King of Iraq.

One of the earliest works on modern Iraqi history was produced by Stephen Hemsley Longrigg (Longrigg, 1956). His service as a military and political officer in the Middle East in general, and in Iraq in particular, afforded him access to official documents, and his first-hand experience and daily records remain valuable for understanding the establishment of the Iraqi monarchy. Nevertheless, his limited knowledge of several key Iraqi figures represents a notable shortcoming. The principal weakness of his study lies in the broad manner in which he addresses Faisal's appointment; he does not investigate the underlying factors that shaped Britain's support for Faisal's candidacy to the Iraqi throne. By contrast, this thesis offers a detailed analysis of all the considerations that influenced British officials in relation to this

issue. Similarly, the work of Lieutenant-Colonel W. A. Lyon, edited by D. K. Fieldhouse, offers no critical analysis of the establishment of the Iraqi state (Fieldhouse, 2002). Lyon primarily recounts the daily events and actions he observed during his political and military service in Iraq. His narrative reflects the British perspective on the process through which Faisal was selected as the sole candidate by the British government. However, unlike the present study, he does not address the underlying reasons for this decision. Abbas Kadhim's book offers yet another interpretation of the 1920 Arab Revolt against the British Mandate in Mesopotamia (Kadhim, 2014). He states that his central objective is to reassert the significance of the revolt by incorporating new source material alongside the standard official British records. Nevertheless, Kadhim does not engage extensively with archival documents pertaining to the uprising. Instead, he relies primarily on the memoirs of several Shi'i leaders involved in the resistance to British rule, the correspondence of prominent Iraqi political actors, and the personal accounts of a few British officials. Consequently, his critique of British policy is largely constructed through an Arabic perspective, without substantial corroboration from British archival evidence. In contrast to this paper, Kadhim overlooks the key factors that influenced British decision-makers to install Faisal on the Iraqi throne. In contrast to Kadhim's interpretation, Amal Vinogradov contends that the British government established the modern Iraqi state in 1921 as part of its broader strategy of exercising indirect rule through the installation of Faisal (Vinogradov, 1972, 123-139). British officials regarded Faisal's ascension to the throne as a means of safeguarding the Anglo-French relationship, while also believing that his political experience in Syria equipped him to navigate and respond to Iraqi nationalist sentiment. Although Vinogradov's analysis of the motivations behind Faisal's appointment is compelling, it does not fully account for all the relevant considerations.

Rasheeduddin Khan's article, "Mandate and Monarchy in Iraq," examines how British policymakers, most notably Churchill, implemented the Cairo Conference's decisions and facilitated Faisal's election to the Iraqi throne (Khan, 1969, 255-76). Khan attributes Faisal's selection primarily to his personal charisma and political skill, which he argues allowed Faisal to outshine influential local contenders. Although Khan concedes that these factors are difficult to verify, he maintains that Faisal's pro-British orientation was decisive in securing his candidacy. However, the article gives insufficient attention to Britain's financial concerns at the Cairo Conference, particularly the drive to reduce imperial expenditure, as well as other political and economic considerations influencing the choice of Faisal. Its most notable limitation is its failure to address the 1920 revolt and its role in shaping Britain's decision to install Faisal. Efraim Karsh's article provides a clear account of how Faisal emerged as the preferred British and Hashemite candidate for the Iraqi throne, ultimately replacing his brother Abdullah (Karsh, 2002, 55-70). Karsh argues that Faisal's alignment with British aims at the Cairo Conference secured his position as their sole choice, and that officials saw him as uniquely capable of strengthening Anglo-Arab relations in a context where no local Iraqi candidate commanded broad support. However, the article overlooks the significant role of British financial concerns, particularly the drive to reduce imperial expenditure, in shaping their decision. Eventually, De Gaury's study of Iraq's monarchy focuses on the personalities of the three Hashemite kings and their associates rather than on British policy (De Gaury, 2008). Although he endorses the Colonial Office's choice of Faisal as the optimal candidate, his account largely reiterates familiar narratives about the royal family. De Gaury's close personal ties to the Hashemites from his service in Baghdad after 1924, his work must be treated with caution.

Although Faisal's candidacy for the Iraqi throne is not a new topic, this paper significantly contributes to filling the historiographical gap on the subject. Previous scholarship has not fully examined Faisal's selection within the broader context of British policy in the Middle East and

Iraq. While scholars have explored factors influencing his appointment, none have provided a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between British efforts to suppress the 1920 revolt, expedite the establishment of the new Iraqi state, and ultimately select Faisal as a cost-effective and suitable candidate during the 1921 Cairo Conference. This study confirms earlier findings while offering new evidence that sheds light on British decision-making, thereby providing a fresh perspective on the debates surrounding the choice of Iraq's first king.

METHODS

This study adopts an empirical research, drawing on the collection, analysis, and interpretation of relevant sources. Its methodology centres on British primary materials, both published and unpublished, supported by appropriate secondary literature. Although incorporating Iraqi perspectives through Arabic and Kurdish sources would have been valuable, most Iraqi government documents were lost in successive wars. Existing Arabic secondary accounts remain limited, often shaped by political or ideological standpoints and influenced by the authors' personal perspectives.

To examine how British decision-makers in London, India, and Iraq viewed Faisal as the preferred candidate for the Iraqi throne, this study draws primarily on records from the British National Archives in London, especially Cabinet Office, Foreign Office, and Colonial Office files, along with House of Commons debates. While these materials present only the British viewpoint and must therefore be approached critically, they reveal British intentions toward Faisal and show how political and financial considerations shaped British positions during the Cairo Conference. The research also uses published document collections, official publications, newspapers, and English-language secondary sources, which together provide substantial additional context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

The findings of this study indicate that slavery in pre-Islamic Arabian society functioned as a complex and deeply rooted system shaped by interconnected cultural influences from Africa, Persia, Mesopotamia, and the Mediterranean world, as described by Freamon (2019). Enslavement occurred through warfare, trade, inheritance, and social dependency, making slavery an integral part of the pre-Islamic social structure. The analysis of Islamic legal sources further reveals that the emergence of Islam introduced significant moral and legal reforms aimed at humanizing the treatment of slaves and promoting pathways to emancipation. Scholars such as Esposito (2005), Lewis (1994), and Watt (1974) note that Islamic teachings redefined slaves as moral subjects rather than mere property, marking a notable shift from pre-Islamic practices.

The study also finds that the development of slavery within the wider Islamic world did not follow a single uniform pattern. Although Islamic teachings encouraged liberation and ethical treatment, the actual practice of slavery varied across regions such as North Africa, West Africa, and the Middle East. Traini's (1966–1973) analysis shows that local cultural, political, and economic conditions shaped these regional differences, allowing certain forms of slavery to persist despite the presence of Islamic principles supporting manumission.

In the contemporary period, the findings show that modern forms of exploitation continue to exist in several Muslim-majority societies. The case of Talibé children in West Africa, documented by Amnesty International (2022), demonstrates that coercion, forced labor, and abuse remain present even when they do not take the exact form of traditional slavery.

These findings highlight a clear gap between the normative vision of human dignity in Islamic teachings and the social realities in which exploitation still occurs.

Another significant finding concerns the emergence of the concept of a “new *ijmā'*,” as discussed by El-Sawi (2011), which asserts that slavery in all its forms has no legitimate place in the modern Islamic legal framework. This evolving consensus strengthens the interpretation that Islamic law, both in its foundational texts and contemporary jurisprudential developments, supports the complete abolition of slavery and human trafficking.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that while slavery has appeared in multiple forms throughout Islamic history, Islamic moral and legal principles provide strong foundations for its eradication. At the same time, ongoing challenges in the modern era underscore the need for renewed application of these principles to address contemporary manifestations of exploitation in Muslim societies.

Discussion

The 1920 Arab rebellion and the establishment of the provisional Government of Iraq

Although this study does not aim to explore the literature on the Arab Revolt of 1920 in depth, it focuses on the aftermath of the revolt and its consequences, particularly in relation to the formation of the modern independent state of Iraq and the decision to install Faisal as king in 1921. The outbreak of the Arab revolt in Mesopotamia in May 1920 was a key factor in encouraging Britain to make the process of creating a national government in Iraq as rapid as possible. The rising, therefore, was a formative event in the modern history of Iraq. The legacy of this revolt also went on to play a vital role in the selection of the Sharifian ruler at the Cairo Conference of March 1921. On 24 May, the tribes north of Baghdad and around Mosul started their revolt by burning a train. On 2 June, they attacked Tal-Afar and isolated the city of Mosul. The rising then transferred to Baghdad and the middle Euphrates area, where it was led by anti-British Shia tribes, after which it spread to the entire country. Both Arabs and Kurds were involved. The revolt cost many lives and caused instability in the country. There were both internal and external causes of the 1920 revolt. The foremost external factor was that Britain had not brought into effect the pledge that had been given to the Arabs and Kurds during the First World War of granting them their independence. Instead of this, the mandate for Iraq had been allotted to Britain at the San Remo Conference. This had been seen as the replacement of the Turkish tyranny by a British colonisation of the country. An internal factor was that the tribes in Mesopotamia were inspired by the Iraqi Nationalists who had served Faisal in Syria and then had returned to Iraq after they had been overthrown by the French government in Syria (TNA: CO 935/1, 6 August 1925; TNA: CAB 24/110/90, August 1920; Simon, 2004, 43-47; Macfie, 1999, 170).

The outbreak of the revolt therefore, forced British policy-makers to prolong their military control over Mesopotamia in order to suppress the rising without incurring the expense of bringing reinforcements into the country from overseas. Whilst this recommended a reduction in expenditure, it did not envisage complete withdrawal. The General Staff stated that withdrawing from Mosul did not necessitate also leaving Baghdad. Nevertheless, an increase of the size of garrison would be needed ‘at Baghdad and on the lines of communication south of that place’ due to the loss of confidence which would result from the evacuation and the prospect of a Turkish threat coming from the northern boundary. The Secretary of State for India also agreed that this action would be contrary to the execution of the mandate (TNA: FO 371/7772, 16 November 1922; TNA: CAB 24/117/56, 24 December 1920).

Consequently, in order to pacify the domestic situation in Iraq and reduce the heavy expenditure which had resulted from the revolt of 1920, under the instructions of both the India and the Colonial Offices, British administrators and officials made suggestions for future

strategy to create a unified Iraq. Following this, the British authorities took the first step towards forming a provisional government in Iraq, which resulted in the formation of the Council of State on 30 November 1920 as an instrument to fulfil future British indirect rule in the country, in which the High Commissioner could exert the real authority over all of the Mesopotamian vilayets. The Council was formed of a president, a secretary and eight ministers as follows: Interior, Finance, Justice, Defence, Education and Health, Works and Communication, and Commerce and Religion (Auqaf). The Naqib also proposed ten ministers without portfolio (TNA: FO 371/6349, no date; TNA: FO 371/6349, 25 October 1920; TNA: CAB 24/127/76, 11 November 1920).

There were some prominent Iraqi figures amongst the government ministers, such as Saiyid Talib Pasha, the Minister of the Interior, who had led the Arab National movement in the Ottoman regime before the start of the First World War; Sasun Effendi Haskail, the Minister of Finance, who was a former member of the Turkish Chamber and a representative of the Jewish community, and Ja'far Pasha Al-Askari, the Minister of Defence, who had been governor of Aleppo in Syria under Faisal (TNA: CO 935/1). After the appointment of a British advisor to each minister, the Council held its first meeting on 10 November. Therefore, under the mandate system, the first Iraqi institution called the Council of Ministers was established, as a consequence of the British aim of balancing the desire to keep control over Iraq and a wish to give self-government to the people of the country. On 30 November 1920, Cox issued an ordinance that all the officers and departments of the British Administration should immediately come under the authority of the Council (Dodge, 2003, 18).

The British Perspective on Iraq's Royal Candidacy during the Cairo Conference

In order to maintain British political and financial objectives in Iraq, the Cairo Conference had decided to elect an appropriate candidate to the Iraqi throne. British policy-makers considered that the candidate should be from the family of Sharif Hussein of Mecca, due to promises given to them by Britain in the course of the First World War, especially in the Sykes-Picot Agreement and in recognition of their co-operation with British forces against the Ottoman regime, according to the Hussein-McMahon correspondence. During which, Ibn Ali, the Sharif of Mecca communicated to the British high Commissioner in Cairo in July 1915 and demanded British support for the establishment of an Arab Kingdom. Therefore, the British promised to support and assist the establishment of an Arab kingdom had been made in return for Hussein's war-time co-operation with British forces. On this premise, Hussein declared an Arab revolt against the Ottoman regime in Hijaz in June 1916. Despite the fact that the Arab revolt in Hijaz faced difficulties against Turkish forces and went through a critical time, it achieved its aim in clearing Turks in the area. It also progressed well in accordance with the general British and allied military strategy against Turks in Syria, Mesopotamia and Arabia during 1916-1918 (PA: Lloyd George MSS, F/205/2&3, 14 December 1915; Musa, 1966, 12, 15-16).

Although Abdulla had previously claimed the Iraqi throne and had some support amongst British officials, he lost the position to his younger brother, Faisal. The leadership of Faisal during the First World War and his bravery against the Ottoman Empire was the basis of the British view of him as a unique figure for leading Arabs. In October 1916, after his transformation from the Military Intelligence Service to the department of the 'Arab Bureau', Thomas Edward Lawrence had co-operated with Faisal and involved in the preliminary planning of the Arab revolt in October 1916 (James, 1935, 90). Faisal had also led the Arab delegation to the Paris Peace Conference as the representative of his father, and at the early February 1919, he had stated the claim for an independent Arab state to consist of all of the Arab-speaking inhabitants to the south of Turkey, based on the Allied promises and the

principles of President Wilson's fourteen points (Dockrill, and Goold, 1981, 150-151). On 8 March 1920, Faisal had declared himself King of Syria, and he was accepted by the Second General Syrian Congress. At the same time, his brother, Abdulla, proclaimed himself as King of Mesopotamia. (TNA: CO 935/1, 6 August 1925; Klieman, 1970, 46-47) This act by Faisal in the area that had already been defined as a sphere of French influence was soon reacted against by the French government. France took military action against Faisal and, after the occupation of Damascus and Aleppo, his kingdom came to an end on 25 July 1920. (TNA: CO 935/1, 6 August 1925) Faisal was then expelled from Syria to the United Kingdom until August 1920. Soon after Faisal's exile, the British government opened negotiations over the possibility of his becoming the king of Mesopotamia.

Sir Percy Cox, who was soon to be responsible for the conduct of the new British policy in Iraq/Mesopotamia, put forward a suggestion for Faisal's candidature for the Iraqi throne. On 31 July 1920, Cox stated that he had not changed his view about the unsuitability of Abdulla. He also argued that as a result of his experiences in the last few months in Baghdad, no local candidate could secure enough support from the population. Cox therefore concluded that: Faisal alone of all Arabian potentates has any idea of practical difficulties of running a civilised government on Arab line. He can scarcely fail to realise that foreign assistance is vital to the continued of the existence [sic] of an Arab State. He realises danger of relying on an Arab army. If we were to offer him the Amirate [emirate] of Mesopotamia not only might we re-establish our position in the eyes of Arab world, but we also might go far to wipe out accusation which would otherwise be made against us of bad faith both with Faisal and with people of this country (TNA: CAB 24/110/23 and TNA: FO 141/441/7, 31 July 1920).

Faced with strong Shi'a opposition to the British mandate in Iraq, the British ultimately decided to back a Sunni candidate for leadership in the country. Accordingly, Gertrude Bell, the Oriental Secretary of the British High Commissioner in Baghdad stated that "I am fully convinced that ultimate authority must rest with the Sunnis, despite them being a numerical minority; otherwise, the result would be a theocratic state dominated by Mujtahids, which would be extremely problematic" (Newcastle University, Bell MSS, 10 October 1920).

The unfriendly relationship between France and Faisal might have been a concern if Britain took steps to make him the ruler of Mesopotamia, but a note from the French government to the British Foreign Office on 17 March showed that despite their objection to appointing Faisal, the French government did not wish to intervene in the British zone of influence drawn up in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. As regards the French opposition, the British government supposed that if Faisal gave France a guarantee about the tribes in the border zone, this would probably cause the French to drop their objection to him. Moreover, the French had been told that Britain would not veto Faisal's candidature if the Mesopotamian people selected him for the throne (TNA: CAB 24/112/7, 19 February 1921). It seemed that Faisal's stock rose in British views as the best candidate, whilst they had feared that Abdulla, as ambitious man, would work for a fully independent Arab government in Iraq that would remove British influence in the future. Officials in the British government, who had dealt with Iraq, strongly supported Faisal to be king instead of Abdulla. Amongst these officials, Sir Percy Cox, the British High Commissioner in Iraq, Gertrude Bell, the Oriental Secretary of the High Commissioner in Iraq, and Mr. Garbett, the expert on Mesopotamia in the India Office, all had doubts about Abdulla's abilities (TNA: FO 371/5226, 17 May 1920; Catherwood, 2004, 130).

Cox's telegram to the Secretary of State for India on 26 December 1920 indirectly supported Faisal as the future king of Mesopotamia. Cox argued that Britain should not wait for the Iraqi Congress and people to settle this difficult question, as he believed that they would welcome a decision being made for them (TNA: CAB 24/118/7, 26 December 1920). In January 1921, Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, the director of the Arab Bureau in Cairo, was instructed by

Curzon to offer Faisal the rule of Mesopotamia. On 9 January, Curzon wrote to Cox that, despite the British intention not to intervene in opinion in Mesopotamia, he accepted Cornwallis's proposal to invite Faisal to rule and the government would not disagree with this intervention. Cornwallis's meeting with Faisal on 8 January and his advocacy of Faisal was crucial in British government's official endorsement of Faisal's candidature. Cornwallis also played a great role in convincing Faisal to be a candidate and to act in compliance with British political interests, especially in accepting the terms of the mandate (Karsh, 2002, 61-62). It appeared that Churchill, who was concerned about the level of British expenditure in Iraq, finally persuaded to accept Faisal as the best candidate. In a private telegram to Curzon on 12 January 1921, Churchill explained that he had that day asked Cox 'whether he was convinced on the merits that Faisal is the right man, or whether he only put him forward in desperation to enable reductions to be made in the garrison (Gilbert, 1977, 1300-1301).

However, even before receiving a reply from Cox, Churchill indicated his support for Faisal by saying that I firmly believe Faisal is the most suitable choice, and I see little value in proposing a less qualified candidate simply to have him rejected in order to ease the process of ultimately selecting the right man (Gilbert, 1977, 1300-1301). At the Cairo Conference, the Mesopotamian agenda was mainly considered by a Political Committee, chaired by the Colonial Secretary, and a Military and Financial Committee, chaired by General Walter Congreve, the General Officer Commanding the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (TNA: CO 732/4, 12 to 30 March 1921). Accordingly, Faisal's candidature as king of Iraq was addressed as one of the main issues. As part of fulfilling the pledge giving to Hussein to create an Arab state in the Arab territories, the Cairo Conference also decided to offer the emirate of Trans-Jordan to Abdulla, although it doubted that he would accept the kingship of such a small area (TNA: FO 371/6342, 22 March 1921). Appointing Abdulla to Jordan was quite helpful for Britain as it restored peace and helped foster friendly relations with both France and the Arabs. The British conclusion was that Faisal should be King of Iraq and to ensure this Cox would guarantee that the Council of State would vote for him (TNA: CO 935/1,no date).

The Rationale behind the Nomination of Faisal as King of Iraq

It can be said that there were several reasons behind the choosing of Faisal by Britain at the Cairo Conference. The first benefit which would result from appointing him was to increase the good name of Britain by overcoming the criticism from Arabs who believed that Britain had not delivered on its promise of an independent Arab state. Furthermore, Faisal's loyalty to Britain and his leadership helped solidify British influence in the Middle East, serving as a buffer the growing threat of the influence of Mustafa Kemal, the leader of Turkish nationalism, whose attempt to improve his relations with Hussein would pose a danger to the progress of Anglo-Arab relations, ultimately paving the way for the Lausanne Treaty. In addition, his hostility to the Bolsheviks would make his country a future barrier against them (TNA: CAB 24/112/7, 19 February 1921). The key factor was that, in order to maintain its political and financial influence over Iraq, Britain had ignored the wishes of the Iraqi populations and obliged them to accept its candidate from outside the country; a man who, as a foreigner, would always need British support to rule the country. Thus Faisal was trusted to be the most reliable and loyal alternative able to secure future British interests in the country.

It had been agreed that Churchill had found Faisal to be the most suitable man for enabling a reduction in British expenditure, which had already been planned in early 1920. Thus, Churchill's aim to save money would be a leading factor for making Faisal the king of Mesopotamia. On 14 March 1921, Churchill telegraphed to the Prime Minister that 'I think we shall reach unanimous conclusion among all authorities that Faisal offers hope of best and cheapest solution'. Churchill suggested that the best solution to prevent a French objection was

to offer British support to France in Germany. Furthermore, he repeated that 'I have no doubt personally Faisal offers far away best chance to save our money'. He believed that Faisal's action against anti-mandate propaganda in Iraq was a hope for his acceptance of the mandate (TNA: CO 732/4, 14 March 1921; TNA: FO 371 6342, 14 March 1921). In reply to Churchill on 16 March, the Prime Minister pointed out that the French had been told that Britain would not veto Faisal's candidature if the Mesopotamian people selected him for the throne. Accordingly, he indicated to Churchill that Faisal should be put forward as a candidate (TNA: CO 732/4, 16 March 1921).

It can be said that both economic and political factors had led British policy-makers to view Faisal as the best candidate for Mesopotamia. In regard to the economic factor, British decision-makers were trusting Faisal's loyalty to enable the reduction of the British garrison, and thus economise on the expenditure in Mesopotamia. As regards the political factor, Britain had also ascertained that Faisal would conduct the mandate according to the League of Nations' decisions and would maintain peace, which would be helpful for Britain in maintaining its indirect rule over Mesopotamia. As a result, the Cairo Conference decided that a reduction of the garrison in Mesopotamia could be made from 33 to 23 battalions, with a consequent reduction of all services, staff and auxiliaries, as fast as shipping became available. This reduction would be made by 15 June and it was expected that further reductions could be made to 12 Battalions after 1 October if the establishment of the Arab government and the local army progressed satisfactorily. This reduction was estimated to save £5,500,000, with another £10,000,000 to be saved later (HC Deb., 14 June 1921; TNA: CO 732/4, 12 to 30 March 1921; TNA: CO 732/4, 16 March 1921; TNA: CAB 24/123/27, 10 May 1921). The Conference also decided to conduct the experiment of controlling Mesopotamia through the Royal Air Force. The scheme, which was submitted by the Chief of the Air Staff, was actually Churchill's own idea, as he believed that Britain air power would be more effective and efficient than troops on the ground. After the implementation of this proposed scheme, the British and Indian garrisons in Mesopotamia would be reduced to eight squadrons of the Royal Air Force, three armoured car squadrons, two armoured trains, four battalions of infantry, one Indian pack battery and four gunboats. The total annual cost of this would amount to approximately £4,500,000 (TNA: CAB 24/126/99, August 1921; TNA: CO 732/4, 12 to 30 March 1921).

On 21 June 1921, Faisal reached Baghdad. In the referendum process organised by the British administration, he was endorsed by 96 per cent of people who participated, and he was proclaimed as a king officially by Cox on 23 August 1921 (TNA: FO 371/6353, 27 August 1921; Bell, 1927, 619-20; Ellis, 2004, 35). Although there is no evidence to show any falsification of the result, it must be asked how this number could be so high when the population of Sulaimaniya had boycotted the election and the citizens of Kirkuk had not voted for Faisal. The Turkmens and some Shia notables had also not supported Faisal. Thus, despite the possible objection of the French government and the definite one from the Kurds and Turkmens, Britain made the way clear for Faisal to be elected. Gerald de Gaury, the British officer who spent a long time working as an official in Iraq, pointed out that '....it had been, in fact, an uncertain business, and without the British political officers' explanations and management would have gone otherwise' (Gaury, 2008, 23). Therefore, the British policy-makers finally recognised Faisal as king of all three vilayets of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, although they realised that the Kurdish areas should not be ruled by an Arab ruler (TNA: CO 935/1, no date). Despite the difficulties that Britain faced with electing Faisal, this action could be seen as a great step for Britain towards conducting its scheme for Iraq successfully. Bell stated that 'We have had a terrific week but we've got our King crowned and Sir Percy and I agree that we're now half seas over [sic], the remaining half is the Congress and the Organic Law'. (Ibid) It seems that in order to maintain its political and financial influence over Iraq,

Britain had ignored the wishes of the Iraqi population and imposed upon them a man from outside the country, who trusted to be the most reliable man to secure future British interests in the country.

A despatch from the Foreign Secretary on 27 August 1921 attributed the nomination of Faisal to being an economic measure taken by Churchill to establish an Arab army controlled by the British government. It indicated that this was intended to reduce the high expenditure about which the British press and public were complaining, by replacing the Indian and British troops. Moreover, behind this nomination, there was a secret political goal of establishing an Arabian British empire which would stop any future Turkish interference in the foreign mandate (TNA: FO 371/6353, 27 August 1921). After the British installation of Faisal as King of Iraq, the procedure for appointing the rest of the Iraqi government still had to be carried out. The British government adopted a new policy to deal with King Faisal and the new government in Iraq, by proposing a treaty which would secure British control over the country economically, politically and militarily. The Anglo-Iraqi negotiations regarding the treaty finally reached a settlement, and it was accepted by the League of Nations as fulfilling the British mandatory responsibility towards Iraq. It was signed at Baghdad on 10 October 1922. Despite strong opposition in the Constituent Assembly, the treaty protocol and the agreement were eventually ratified, in a meeting on 10 June 1924 (TNA: FO 371/10096, 11 June 1924; *The Times*, 15 July 1924).

CONCLUSION

Existing scholarship has investigated British post-First World War policy toward the nascent Iraqi state, with particular attention to the elevation of Faisal to the throne. The secondary literature has likewise interrogated Britain's determination to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity as a mechanism for securing its strategic and political interests along the northern frontier. This paper contends that economic and administrative imperatives constituted the principal drivers of Britain's endorsement of Faisal during the deliberations of the Cairo Conference concerning the Iraqi kingship. Moreover, it argues that these imperatives were integral to Britain's broader mandate-era strategies aimed at consolidating its imperial, political, and security position in the region. Following the costly 1920 revolt in Iraq, Britain opted for indirect rule through an Arab government to manage the three Mesopotamian vilayets. To prepare for this, it established a Provisional Council of State, aiming to recognize an independent Arab state that would support Britain in all key affairs under international mandate guidelines. To secure British political and financial interests in Iraq, the Cairo Conference aimed to appoint a suitable Sunni Arab king who could stabilize the country and reduce post-revolt costs. Although Abdullah had shown interest in the throne, Britain favoured Faisal due to his loyalty, and perceived reliability.

Although few local Arab leaders had broad support, the British backed Faisal at the Cairo Conference to secure their interests. His wartime alliance with Britain and lineage as a descendant of the Prophet made him a strategic choice, especially amid mistrust of Shia leaders after the 1920 revolt and divisions among Sunni Arab nationalists and pro-Turk factions. Faisal's candidacy aimed to reduce British costs in Iraq and strengthen their position in the region, though many Kurds, Turkmens, and Shias ultimately did not support him in the referendum.

Furthermore, Faisal's loyalty to Britain and his leadership were instrumental in consolidating British influence in the Middle East. His role served as a buffer against the growing threat of Mustafa Kemal, the leader of Turkish nationalism, whose efforts to foster closer ties with Hussein threatened to undermine Anglo-Arab relations. This strategic alignment

was a key factor in the eventual drafting of the Lausanne Treaty. Additionally, Faisal's opposition to Bolshevik ideology positioned his regime as a crucial barrier to Soviet expansion in the region. While Britain disregarded the wishes of the Iraqi populace by installing a foreign monarch, Faisal—being an outsider—was seen as someone who would depend on British support to maintain authority. As such, Faisal emerged as the most reliable and loyal figure to safeguard British interests in Iraq. This situation, in turn, reflected a broader, covert British political objective: the establishment of an Anglo-Arab sphere of influence that would preclude any future Turkish interference in the region's geopolitical affairs.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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