

The Crystallization of the Iraqi State

Geopolitical Function and Form

von
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Preface

In 1921 the State of Iraq was established in the Middle East, under a British-held mandate from the League of Nations. It took until 1926 for the final geographical extent of the new State to be decided.

This book analyses the geographical and historical factors which shaped the new Iraqi State. Historically, the region that became the Iraqi State lay in the heart of an ethnically, religiously and geographically complex area, a fundamental shatterbelt zone between rival regional and colonial powers. Iraq's geostrategic location was the key to its political and cultural developments, lying as it did at the frontier of clashing geostrategic powers and political ideologies. Many resultant features were to filter into the State that was created in 1921, and seriously affect Iraq's geopolitical function and form.

This book examines the fundamental factors that impacted upon the geopolitical crystallization of the Iraqi State in the 1920s. The international political climate of the post-First World War era filtered into Iraq. The book argues that the complexities and clashes between the various communal identities, themselves a reflection of Iraq's geopolitical position, presented severe challenges to the new State's consolidation and geopolitical function. Also fundamental was Iraq's geostrategic location as this invited the attentions and ambitions of competing world powers.

Immediately after the First World War, Wilsonian principles of ethnic self-determination and nationalism came to the forefront of international politics. Iraq was born out of this international political climate, but its mandatory was Britain, an established imperial power. Whilst trying to retain the mandate for Iraq by an outward display of agreement with the idealism of nationalism, Britain was principally trying to secure its interests in the Middle East and, more importantly, India. Thus, the British backed a narrow strand of nationalism within Iraq, which was Sunni and Arab in essence. With such a limited

support base, this Arab administration remained militarily, economically and politically dependent upon Britain.

Ethnic and religious divisions were deep-rooted within the Iraqi region, as they had been tolerated for centuries under the Ottomans. After the First World War and the establishment of the State of Iraq, many of these social divides remained, or were even strengthened by resentments from many sides, in particular what was seen as the favouring of the Sunni Arab elite and the subsequent neglect of other main ethno-religious groups. Such unequal access to power was reinforced by the geographic distribution of the major ethnic and religious groups, as they tended to be spatially clustered.

This book allows some true insights into the genesis of a state that is currently in the headlines on a daily basis. Without speculating about whether such issues persist within the contemporary Iraqi State, it has been of fundamental importance to examine the factors that first shaped the state. In explaining the political structure that was installed in Iraq in the 1920s, we can at least understand the political foundations that became the inheritance of modern Iraq.

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