



Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied

Toby Dodge

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If we think there is a fast solution to changing the governance of Iraq, warned U.S. Marine General Anthony Zinni in the months before the United States and Britain invaded Iraq, "then we don't understand history." Never has the old line about those who fail to understand the past being condemned to repeat it seemed more urgently relevant than in Iraq today, with potentially catastrophic consequences for the Iraqi people, the Middle East region, and the world. Examining the construction of the modern state of Iraq under the auspices of the British empire—the first attempt by a Western power to remake Mesopotamia in its own image—renowned Iraq expert Toby Dodge uncovers a series of shocking parallels between the policies of a declining British empire and those of the current American administration.

Between 1920 and 1932, Britain endeavored unsuccessfully to create a modern democratic state from three former provinces of the Ottoman Empire, which it had conquered and occupied during the First World War. Caught between the conflicting imperatives of controlling a region of great strategic importance (Iraq straddled the land and air route between British India and the Mediterranean) and reconstituting international order through the liberal ideal of modern state sovereignty under the League of Nations Mandate system, British administrators undertook an extremely difficult task. To compound matters, they did so without the benefit of detailed information about the people and society they sought to remake. Blinded by potent cultural stereotypes and subject to mounting pressures from home, these administrators found themselves increasingly dependent on a mediating class of shaikhs to whom they transferred considerable power and on whom they relied for the maintenance of order. When order broke down, as it routinely did, the British turned to the airplane. (This was Winston Churchill's lasting contribution to the British enterprise in Iraq: the concerted use of air power—of what would in a later context be called "shock and awe"—to terrorize and subdue dissident factions of the Iraqi people.)

Ultimately, Dodge shows, the state the British created held all the seeds of a violent, corrupt, and relentlessly oppressive future for the Iraqi people, one that has continued to unfold. Like the British empire eight decades before, the United States and Britain have taken upon themselves today the grand task of transforming Iraq and, by extension, the political landscape of the Middle East. Dodge contends that this effort can succeed only with a combination of experienced local knowledge, significant deployment of financial and human resources, and resolute staying power. Already, he suggests, ominous signs point to a repetition of the sequence of events that led to the long nightmare of Saddam Hussein's murderous tyranny.



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