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From Winston Churchill to Tony Blair: How British Leaders Destroyed Iraq for over a Century

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After seven years, the Chilcot report has delivered a damning verdict on Tony Blair's role in the war on Iraq, but British Prime Ministers playing a destructive role in Iraq is a centuries old practice.

Britain has used its military might and commercial prowess to subjugate Iraq and control its oil resources for over one hundred years.

Churchill invented Iraq. The end of World War I left Britain and France in command of the Middle East and the allies carved up the region as the defeated Ottoman Empire fell apart. Winston Churchill convened the 1912 Conference in Cairo to determine the boundaries of the British Middle Eastern mandate. After giving Jordan to Prince Abdullah, Churchill, gave Prince Abdullah's brother Faisal an arbitrary patch of desert that became Iraq.

Historian Michael R. Burch recalls how the huge zigzag in Jordan's eastern border with Saudi Arabia has been called "Winston's Hiccup" or "Churchill's Sneeze" because Churchill carelessly drew the expansive boundary after a generous lunch.

Churchill's imperial foreign policy has caused a century of instability in Iraq by arbitrarily locking together three warring ethnic groups that have been bleeding heavily ever since. In Iraq, Churchill bundled together the three Ottoman vilayets of Basra that was predominantly Shiite, Baghdad that was Sunni, and Mosul that was mainly Kurd.

Britain set up a colonial regime in Iraq. British oppression in Iraq intensified and an uprising in May 1920 united Sunni and Shia against the British. Winston Churchill, the responsible cabinet minister, took almost a decade to brutally quash the uprising leaving 9,000 Iraqis dead.

Churchill ordered punitive village burning expeditions and air attacks to shock and awe the population. The British air force bombed not only military targets but civilian areas as well. British government policy was to kill and wound women and children so as to intimidate the population into submission.

Churchill also authorized the use of chemical weapons on innocent Iraqis.

In 1919 Churchill remarked, “I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas. I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes… It will cause great inconvenience and spread a lively terror”.

Churchill, saw Iraq as an experiment in aerial technological colonial control as a cheaper way to patrol the over-extended empire. Almost one hundred years since Churchill sought the use of aerial technology to cling onto influence over a restive Iraq, Blair’s government began flying deadly drones over Baghdad and Helmand Province in Afghanistan.

To Britain’s imperial Prime Ministers, aviation has always promised to be the trump card, the guaranteed way of keeping native peoples and their resources under control. Arthur “Bomber” Harris, who was to lead the aerial bombardment of Germany 20 years after bombing Iraq, boasted that he had taught Iraqis “that within 45 minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or wounded”.

The British Royal Air Force maintained its military control over Iraq until World War II, even after Iraqi independence in 1932. Despite formal independence, British political and economic influence in Iraq barely receded.

Britain’s relationship with Iraq has always revolved around the issue of oil. Churchill viewed Iraq as an important gateway to Britain’s Indian colony and oil as the lifeblood for Britain’s Imperial Navy.

Britain established the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) as the vehicle through which Iraqi oil would be exploited. British Petroleum (BP), or the Anglo-Persian Oil Company as it was known back then, was also heavily involved in plundering Iraqi oil.

British oilmen benefited incalculably from Iraq’s puppet regime until the Iraqi masses rose up against British influence. This led to the Iraq revolution of 1958 and the rise and eventual Presidency of Saddam Hussein.

British and US intelligence helped Saddam’s Ba`ath Party seize power for the first time in 1963. Ample new evidence shows that Saddam was on the CIA payroll as early as 1959, when he was part of a failed assassination attempt against Iraqi leader Abd al-Karim Qassem. During the 1980s, the United States and Britain backed Saddam in the war against Iran, providing Iraq with weapons, funding, intelligence, and even biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction.

In 2003 the Guardian reported that a chemical plant, which the United States said was a key component in Iraq’s chemical warfare arsenal, was secretly built by Britain in 1985 behind the backs of the Americans. Documents show British ministers knew at the time that the $14 million dollar British taxpayer funded plant, called *Falluja 2*, was likely to be used for mustard and nerve gas production.

British relations with Saddam Hussein only began to sour when Hussein nationalized the Iraq Petroleum Company in 1972. As a result of Iraq's oil revenues finally flowing directly into the Iraqi Treasury, the nation experienced a massive windfall when oil prices quadrupled in 1973.

The Iraqi nation grew increasingly wealthy, as oil revenues rose from $500 million in 1972 to over $26 billion in 1980, an increase of almost 50 times in nominal terms.

During the 1990's, Britain supported severe economic sanctions against Iraq because of Saddam's increasing resource nationalism. The United Nations estimated that 1.7 million Iraqis died as a result of the sanctions. Five hundred thousand of these victims were children.

The British and American sanctions on Iraq killed more civilians than the entirety of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons used in human history.

Glaring similarities between Britain's 1917 occupation of Iraq and the modern military debacle in Iraq are too salient to dismiss or to ignore.

They told us that Iraq was a nuclear threat; Iraq was a terrorist state; Iraq was tied to Al Qaeda. It all amounted to nothing. Since the 2003 invasion, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died and over a million have been displaced because of this lie.

Prior to 2003, Iraq had zero recorded suicide bombings. Since 2003, over a thousand suicide bombs have killed 12,000 innocent Iraqis.

Tony Blair recently admitted to CNN that the 2003 invasion of Iraq played a part in the rise of the Islamic State militant group, and apologized for some mistakes in planning the war.

It is important to note that Al Qaeda in Iraq did not exist prior to the British-American invasion and that terror organization eventually became ISIS.

Former British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, told the House of Commons that Al Qaeda was unquestionably a product of Western intelligence agencies. Mr. Cook explained that Al Qaeda, which literally means an abbreviation of "the database" in Arabic, was originally an American computer database of the thousands of Islamist extremists, who were trained by the CIA and funded by the Saudis, in order to defeat the Russians in Afghanistan.

Blair's legacy in Iraq is ISIS. Blair has recently called ISIS the "greatest threat" faced by Britain.

Shortly after British general Stanley Maude's troops captured Baghdad in 1917, he announced, "our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators."

Almost a century later in 2003 Tony Blair said, "Our forces are friends and liberators of the Iraqi people, not your conquerors. They will not stay a day longer than is necessary".

History has a habit of repeating itself, albeit with slightly different characters and different nuances. Iraq may well go down in history as Britain's greatest longstanding foreign policy failure.

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