

“We can do very little with them”¹: British Discourse and British Policy on Shi‘is in Iraq

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¹ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 10 July 1921,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University,
<http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of metropolitan religious values and discourses in influencing British officials’ discourse on Sunni and Shi‘i Islam in early mandate Iraq. It also explores the role that this discourse played in informing the policy decisions of British officials. I argue that British officials thought about and described Sunni and Shi‘i Islam through a lens of religious values and experiences that led British officials to describe Shi‘i Islam as prone to theocracy and religious and intellectual intolerance, traits that British officials saw as detrimental to their efforts to create a modern state in Iraq. These descriptions ultimately led British officials to take active steps to remove Shi‘i religious leaders from the civic discourse of Iraq and to support an indigenous government where Sunnis were given most government positions in spite of making up a minority of the overall population of Iraq. This study draws on documents created by British officials serving in Iraq from 1919-1922, including official reports and correspondence, published government reports, personal correspondence and memoirs. It also draws on biographies of British officials, the secondary literature on religion and civil society in Great Britain, and the secondary literature on Shi‘i Islam in Iraq. I engage in the historiography surrounding European Imperial perceptions of Islam and argue that historians should pay greater attention to the role that metropolitan religious experiences and values played in informing the way that imperial officials differentiated between different groups within Islam. I also engage in the historiography of British policy in mandate Iraq, offering a deeper view of how British discourse on Shi‘i Islam developed and how this discourse influenced the policy decisions of British official.

² “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 10 July 1921.”

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General Audience Abstract

This thesis explores British officials’ perceptions of Shi‘i Islam in early mandate Iraq from 1919-1923. It argues that British officials applied their personal ideas about the proper relationship between church and state, influenced by debates in Great Britain, to their duties in Iraq. As a result, British officials made comparisons between Sunni and Shi‘i Islam which led them to perceive Sunni Islam and Sunni Iraqis as more compatible with the British vision of a modern Iraqi state and society. These perceptions in turn led British officials to actively combat the political efforts of Shi‘i religious leaders and to create and support a national government made up of minority Sunnis. This study helps us understand how British officials differentiated between different strands of Islam. It also contributes to our understanding of how British officials in early mandate Iraq came to enact policies that would have a long-lasting influence on the future of statecraft and politics in Iraq. This study draws on documents created by British officials serving in Iraq from 1919-1922, including official reports and correspondence, published government reports, personal correspondence and memoirs. It also draws on biographies of British officials, previous research on religion and civil society in Great Britain, and previous research on Shi‘i Islam in Iraq

³ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 10 July 1921.”

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the First World War, the British set out to create a new state in Iraq. This project was part of a wider phenomenon known as the mandate system. Created to compromise between the desires of the victorious European powers to expand their imperial holdings and Woodrow Wilson's call for national self-determination, the mandate system gave the victorious European powers the effective right to rule territories that they saw as unfit for self-government, on the condition that the ruling European power would aid the territory in developing an indigenous government that would eventually be recognized by the international community as an independent state. In the fall of 1920, in the aftermath of a widespread revolt against British occupation, Great Britain created the first Iraqi national government. For the next eleven years, British officials and the newly created Iraqi government debated about the nature of Iraq's future, until British and Iraqi officials ultimately agreed to the termination of the mandate, to be replaced by a treaty that would lay out Great Britain's special role in Iraq.

In *A History of Iraq*, Charles Tripp suggests that many of the dominant trends in Iraqi political history began during the mandate period.⁴ One of these trends was the persistent dominance of Sunnis in the upper levels of government, in spite of the fact that the majority of Iraqis were Shi'is.⁵ Indeed, the British selected a Sunni to serve as the new state's hereditary leader and early governments were dominated by urban Sunni elites.⁶ Sunni-Shi'i conflict would

⁴ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 30.

⁵ This period also saw the emergence of an ongoing pattern of conflict between the Arab government in Baghdad and the Kurds of northern Iraq, but this project will focus specifically on the Sunni-Shi'i divide. Tripp, 31.

⁶ Faisal was a Sunni, but was not native to Iraq. He played a major role in the Arab revolt against Ottoman forces during the First World War and then subsequently led an independent Arab government in Syria before being removed by the French. He was selected as monarch because the British felt that any internal candidate would face more resistance from rival groups. Peter Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 37.

be a continuing concern for the rest of the mandate period and beyond.⁷ Why did British officials invest so much political power in Sunni leaders? Peter Sluglett argues that strategic and political concerns limited the number of viable Shi'ī candidates that the British would be willing to support.⁸ Toby Dodge and Abbas Kadhīm both argue that a general British disdain for Shi'īs, tied to orientalist assumptions, led British officials to limit Shi'ī influence in the new Iraqi state.⁹ This project will take a different track, exploring how British officials' metropolitan experiences with Christianity influenced their perceptions of Sunni and Shi'ī Islam in Iraq and their policy towards Sunni and Shi'ī Iraqis. Since decisions about who to include and exclude in the new Iraqi state were mostly made by British officials serving in Iraq, this study will focus specifically on their perceptions, descriptions and policy decisions.

British policy decisions and British discourse on Iraq were both influenced by numerous complex and often contradictory influences. When making policy decisions, British officials in Iraq had to consider the overall strategic interests of Great Britain, their personal interests as officials within the empire, the sometimes conflicting desires of numerous Iraqi actors, strategic limitations in terms of both resources and Iraqi cooperation, as well as officials' own ideas about what was in the best interests of Iraq. British discourse on Iraqis played an important role in informing British ideas about what was best for Iraq, although at times the discourse could also in turn be used to justify British decisions, failures, and successes, both to British officials

⁷ Some historians have overplayed the extent of the Sunni-Shi'ī split. Orit Bashkin has argued that Iraqi identities were actually complex and hybrid, embracing both religious affiliations and also a broader national community. See Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Nevertheless, the disproportionate representation of Shi'īs was an ongoing political issue in Iraq. See for example a series of controversies that ultimately led to violence in 1927. Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 102–5.

⁸ Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 231.

⁹ Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 68; Abbas K. Kadhīm, *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 6.

themselves and to their superiors and the public back in Great Britain. Numerous other factors also influenced British discourse. British officials were not entirely removed from reality, generally recognizing the actual actions of Iraqi actors and the general contours of Iraqi society. However, British officials were also influenced by the unique institutional context in which they wrote and by cultural assumptions and values that they carried with them to Iraq. In light of this complex web of influences, it is difficult and perhaps even disingenuous to explain British thinking and British decisions in terms of one or two key influences. Nevertheless, this study will emphasize the role that metropolitan experiences with religion played in influencing the British discourse on Shi'i Islam and British policy towards Shi'i Iraqis. This approach offers a more nuanced explanation for why British officials saw Shi'i Islam and Shi'i Iraqis in a negative light and explores an aspect of British perceptions of Islam that has been underexplored in previous studies.

This thesis will argue that British officials in Iraq interpreted Shi'i actions and the differences between the Sunni and Shi'i religious communities through a lens that was colored by officials' experiences with Christianity in Europe. They applied their personal ideas about the proper relationship between religion, civil society and the state to the Iraqi context and they also used symbols and ideas from metropolitan discourses on religion and society to understand and explain the situation in Iraq. Shi'i Islam was identified as possessing the negative traits that British Protestants associated with Catholicism, whereas Sunni Islam was associated with the Protestant values that Britons saw as crucial to their nation and empire's success. As a result, British officials consistently described Shi'i Islam and Shi'i Iraqis as prone to theocracy and religious and intellectual intolerance, traits that British officials saw as contrary to their mission of creating a modern state in Iraq. This discourse remained remarkably consistent in spite of

changes to the overarching narratives and goals of British officials and changes in the way that British officials described urban Sunnis. Moreover, this discourse also impacted British policy decisions. British officials consistently emphasized the need to exclude the Shi'i ulama from the political discourse of Iraq and they used a number of strategies to achieve this goal. British officials also supported the chronic underrepresentation of Shi'is in both the national and local government, drawing on their perceptions of Sunni and Shi'i Islam to make decisions about who was and was not fit to serve in the new Iraqi government.

Religion and Discourse in Imperial History

Beginning in the late 1970's, the ground breaking work of scholars like Michel Foucault and Edward Said would reshape the ways in which historians studied empire, both within the Middle East and across the globe. Prior to this period, the study of empire was dominated by political and social approaches. Historians tended to think about the actions of imperial actors either in terms of geopolitical strategic interests or theories of modernization. Michel Foucault was instrumental in influencing the "cultural turn" in imperial history with his theories about the control-focused agendas of modern institutions and his concept of discourse as a system of understanding which controls and dictates intellectual output and perceptions.¹⁰ Edward Said applied Foucault's concept to European depictions of the Middle East and Islam in *Orientalism*, arguing that the study of the 'orient' represented a systematic discourse in which writers interacted with a powerful set of unwritten rules and assumptions about the field.¹¹ According to

¹⁰ See for example, Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Alex Padamsee, *Representations of Indian Muslims in British Colonial Discourse* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

¹¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 3.

Said, depictions of the 'orient' were highly inaccurate, based more upon European preoccupations and anxieties rather than rational observation.¹² Orientalist depictions ultimately created an 'other' against which European identity could be explored and promoted; these depictions also served to justify European domination as empires spread across the globe.¹³ For Said, the orientalist discourse was wide ranging, creating a common set of values that were internalized and reproduced by artists, novelists, academics of various disciplines and, eventually, colonial officials.

One major influence of Said and Foucault's work was the development of post-colonial studies, a field which takes a critical and often cultural approach to the study of empire and post-imperial states. Influenced by Said and Foucault's theories, post-colonial historians seek to understand the patterns of control that underlie imperial regimes. The Post-colonial turn had a significant impact on the way that historians evaluated the processes of intelligence gathering and decision making among colonial officials. Some historians employing a political focus continue to argue that colonial officials were mostly rational in their understandings of colonized subjects.¹⁴ Most, however, have begun to interrogate the cultural assumptions of colonial officials and to argue that these assumptions had a significant impact on the ways that officials thought about, described, and made decisions about colonized subjects. Just as Said focused on perceptions of Islam in *Orientalism*, the European discourse on the religion of colonial subjects continues to be a major theme in the literature. Alex Padamsee's *Representations of Indian Muslims in British Colonial Discourse* is a good example. Padamsee explores British

¹² Said, 21.

¹³ Said, 2, 36.

¹⁴ See for example Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonization 1918-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 40-41.

representations of Indian Muslims, with a particular focus on how these representations were impacted by the 1857 rebellion. He ultimately concludes that British descriptions of an ‘unknowable’ Muslim ‘stranger’ were tied to British officials’ anxiety about their Christian identity and their role as Imperial administrators.¹⁵ Post-colonial studies tend to describe European perceptions of Islam as monolithic, following Said’s lead by arguing that Europeans thought of Islam in terms of an ‘other’ against which Europeans measured themselves. This study will challenge these arguments by demonstrating that British officials in Iraq differentiated between different iterations of Islam and even made associations between Christianity and Islam.

Some imperial historians have critiqued elements of Said’s approach and proposed a methodology which employs a critical, cultural lens while also paying greater attention to the specific historical context in which officials operated. In *Colonialism In Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* Frederick Cooper argues that post-colonial scholars put too much emphasis on abstract theories and need to look at the contexts and actions of specific actors, rather than trying to understand empires only in terms of broad theoretical constructs.¹⁶ This trend towards a focus on the historical context of specific actors can be seen in studies of French Imperialism in Africa. In *The Ethnographic State*, Edmund Burke III argues that individual authors had perspectives that resulted from their unique historical and institutional contexts.¹⁷ He suggests that negative depictions of Islam in Morocco were tied to religious debates in the metropole, where the Catholic Church’s close relationship with conservative, pro-monarchy actors led liberals to see the Catholic Church with anxiety and disdain, a perspective that liberal colonial

¹⁵ Padamsee, *Representations of Indian Muslims in British Colonial Discourse*, 197–98.

¹⁶ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism In Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6.

¹⁷ Edmund Burke, *The Ethnographic State: France and the Invention of Moroccan Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 12.

officials brought with them to their studies of Islam in Morocco.¹⁸ This study will take a similar approach, looking at how the unique context in Iraq and the context of religious debates in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Great Britain influenced the discourse on Shi‘i Iraqis.

Scholars of the British empire have also adopted this more context-focused approach towards the study of British imperial perceptions of Islam. John Slight takes a nuanced approach to British interactions with Islam in *The British Empire and the Hajj*. Exploring British efforts to regulate and protect their colonial subjects’ pilgrimages to Mecca, he argues that British Hajj policy was a byproduct of their conception of the British empire as a “British Muslim Empire.”¹⁹ In the process, he also argues that imperial officials differentiated between Muslims and did not see them as a monolithic other.²⁰ Faisal Devji draws on Slight’s arguments in “Islam and British Imperial Thought.” He challenges Said’s assertion that British perceptions of Islam were rooted in contact with Muslims in the Levant and his assertion that Europeans always saw Muslims as a negative *other* against which they measured themselves. Instead, Devji argues that British perceptions of Islam were rooted in their experiences in colonizing India and that these perceptions were actually highly ambivalent and prone “to lapse into identification,” often seeing the British Empire as a Muslim Empire.²¹ These studies help us to move beyond the notion that British officials saw Muslims as a monolithic, negative ‘other,’ but they do not give us a detailed explanation of how imperial officials differentiated between individual Muslims or different subgroups within Islam. Did British officials differentiate between individuals and groups based on objective observation, or did cultural assumptions or other factors still influence their

¹⁸ Burke, 53.

¹⁹ John Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj, 1856-1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1.

²⁰ Slight, 3.

²¹ Faisal Devji, “Islam and British Imperial Thought,” In *Islam and the European Empires*, Ed. David Motadel, 256, 261, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

perceptions? Slight does focus on describing how the evolving imperial context effected British perceptions in different colonial situations, but he devotes little time to considering the influence of cultural assumptions and metropolitan values.

This study will add to the work of scholars like Slight and Devji by exploring how British officials used their metropolitan religious values and experiences to differentiate between Sunni and Shi'i Islam. British officials in Iraq did not see Iraqi Muslims as a negative, monolithic other, but they nonetheless interpreted differences between Muslims in terms of European values, making associations between 'good' iterations of Christianity and Islam (British Protestantism and Sunni Islam) and 'bad' iterations of Christianity and Islam (Catholicism and Shi'i Islam). One should not assume that the influence of metropolitan experiences worked the same way in all contexts, but a careful exploration of British documents with an eye towards the religious currents that were prevalent in the metropole before and during their writing could provide a more nuanced understanding of how British officials developed their views on their subjects' religious ideas, values and institutions.

Colonial Discourse and Policy in Iraq

Many historians focusing on mandate Iraq have acknowledged the British tendency to look down on Shi'is and make policy decisions that limited their political power, but this study is the first to make a thorough effort to understand this phenomenon. Shortly before the widespread implementation of the cultural turn, Peter Sluglett wrote one of the definitive works on mandate era Iraq in *Great Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country*. The underrepresentation of Shi'is and the conflict with the Shi'i ulama were major themes in

Sluglett's work, but he did not make an exhaustive effort to explain British officials' reluctance to empower Shi'i Iraqis. Ultimately, he blamed the underrepresentation of Shi'is on British officials' desire for a pliable government, saying that, "With the Sunnis in power, the British could control the country through them; with the Shi'is in power there could have been no British mandate."²² This rationale makes sense in light of Sluglett's overarching argument that British officials made policy based on their strategic interests in Iraq (as opposed to the best interests of the Iraqis), but it also precludes the possibility that British officials misunderstood the Shi'i threat or were motivated by other considerations (like the assumption that most Shi'is were incapable of self-governance).

Yitzhak Nakash, devoted a considerable portion of *The Shi'is of Iraq* to explaining how the policy of British officials and the Sunni-led Iraqi government fundamentally altered the practice of Shi'i Islam in Iraq, but he also provided little insight into the motivations of British officials. This oversight does not negate the relevance of Nakash's work, but his argument that British policy and the creation of the modern Iraqi state fundamentally altered the nature of Shi'i Islam in Iraq could be even more relevant to contemporary discussions about British policy and British colonial knowledge if he considered how imperial perceptions of Islam influenced British actions.

Toby Dodge devoted more time to understanding British perceptions and their impact on policy in *Inventing Iraq*. He blamed British biases against Shi'i Iraqis on orientalist assumptions, arguing that British officials saw Shi'i Islam as more 'Islamic' and hence more 'backwards' than Sunni Islam, leading them to favor Sunnis over Shi'is.²³ This argument seems

²² Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 231.

²³ Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 67–68.

reasonable on the surface, but British comments about the corrupt nature of Shi'i Islam and the purer nature of Sunni Islam raise questions about Dodge's argument. This study offers an alternative explanation: that British officials used their experiences with and ideas about Christianity in Great Britain to evaluate the relative merits of Sunni and Shi'i Islam and make decisions about which actors to empower.

In terms of the broader conversation about British policy in Iraq, this study supports Dodge's assertion that British officials were heavily influenced by their misunderstanding of Iraqi society. Peter Sluglett argues that British officials were primarily concerned with promoting Great Britain's strategic interests, leading them to create an Iraq that was strong enough to remain stable without largescale British support, but incapable of rejecting Britain's demands. Sluglett does not deny that British officials often lacked an accurate understanding of Iraqi society, but he is precluded from exploring how misunderstandings influenced policy because his overarching narrative emphasizes British strategic concerns. Dodge acknowledges that British strategic interests complicated British policy making, but he argues that British officials were motivated, at least in part, by a genuine desire to create a successful state and failed because they fundamentally misunderstood Iraqi society, leading them to make choices that resulted in a weak Iraqi state. Dodge bases this argument largely around his analysis of British tribal policy. He argues that British officials' understanding of Iraqi society was colored by their experiences from the metropole, specifically a growing disillusionment with urban spaces and modernity that led them to embrace a romantic view of rural elites as a source of social stability.²⁴ Dodge goes on to argue that this misunderstanding led British officials to empower tribal leaders, creating a new social hierarchy in Iraq and also weakening the power of

²⁴ Dodge, 61.

the central government. This study supplements and supports Dodge's narrative by demonstrating that policy decisions surrounding the representation of religious groups were also influenced by metropolitan values and anxieties, rather than just strategic concerns. British officials evaluated the actions of Shi'i religious leaders and citizens based on their metropolitan values and used these evaluations to develop a mandate policy that underrepresented the Shi'i population and altered the trajectory of the Shi'i ulama.

A Turbulent Beginning: The Context of British Officials in Iraq

A brief survey of the context that British officials operated under will prove helpful in understanding their perceptions, discourse and policy decisions. When British officials arrived in Iraq alongside the military during the first world war they found a complex, diverse society. Prior to the war, the area that is now the modern state of Iraq sat on the Eastern border of the Ottoman Empire. This area was divided into the three provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra and Ottoman authority over the region waxed and waned depending on the priorities and resources of the central administration. Unlike most of the Ottoman empire, the provinces of Baghdad and Basra contained a large Shi'i population. This population was given no representation in local councils, no opportunity to serve in local government and limited access to state-sponsored Western-style schools.²⁵ Religious life for Shi'i Iraqis centered around cities which contained the shrines of major figures in Shi'i Islam; the three most significant shrine cities were Karbala, Najaf and Kadhimain. These cities had extensive connections with predominantly Shi'i Iran to the East. Pilgrims from Iran visited the shrine cities in large numbers

²⁵ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 12.

every year and many members of the Shi'i religious leadership in these cities were natives of Iran that continued to take an interest in the political and social life of that country. The Sunni-Shi'i division and the complex relationship between the Shi'i shrine cities and Iran would both complicate British state building efforts during the mandate period.

British officials in Iraq also had to contend with ongoing uncertainty and conflict over who would be responsible for overseeing British policy in the region. Prior to the first world war, the Indian government took an interest in Iraq as part of its policy of protecting British navigation and trade throughout the Persian Gulf. When the Ottomans entered the first world war aligned with Germany, the Indian government established an expeditionary force that would move into Southwest Iran and later invade Iraq, occupying most of present day Iraq before the end of the war. During the war, officials across the British empire contemplated establishing authority over parts of the Ottoman empire to meet their post-war goals. Iraq and the Middle East as a whole sat along the fault line that traditionally separated areas where policy was directed from London and areas where policy was directed from India, leading to conflicts over which part of the British empire would shape the future of the region.²⁶ The India Office of London was officially responsible for overseeing the British civil administration in Iraq, but during the war and protracted peace process, the India Office worked closely with the Foreign, Colonial and War Offices of London, as well as the Indian government when discussing short and long term policy for Iraq.

When the British invaded Iraq a small group of civil administrators were brought in to establish a temporary government responsible for day to day administrative issues. Most of the

²⁶ Robert J. Blythe, *The Empire of the Raj: India, Eastern Africa and the Middle East, 1858-1947*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 202.

government officials in Ottoman Iraq were Turks, and these men retreated along with their military, often taking government records with them. As a result, British officials were tasked with quickly creating a temporary government to replace the Ottoman state that had effectively vanished. The new British civil administration was made up of British officials drawn from existing colonial administrations; many of these officials came from the Indian Civil Service, but others were pulled from Egypt, Africa, the military ranks or civilian life.²⁷ Few of them had any prior knowledge of Iraqi culture and society and some lacked any colonial administrative experience at all. There was an effort to place civil administrators in positions where they had previous experience, but many officials were placed into positions which required them to master language skills and administrative tasks with little previous training or experience. The civil administration was headed by the Civil Commissioner, stationed in Baghdad; the commissioner was considered subordinate to the Commander in Chief of the expeditionary forces, but he also had direct contact with the India Office of London.²⁸ The Civil Administration created departments to manage the typical affairs of state, including revenue collection, policing, judicial affairs, education and health. These departments were managed by small leadership teams of British officials in Baghdad and employed a cadre of British, Iraqi, Indian and non-Iraqi Arab officials to carry out work throughout the country. Division Political Officers (and District Assistant Political Officers) were the cornerstone of the Civil Administration, overseeing the work of local officials in the various departments, establishing and maintaining, as much as

²⁷ In addition to British officials, the Civil Administration of Iraq also employed Indian officials drawn from the Indian civil service and Arab officials from the British protectorate of Egypt to perform lower-level office tasks.

²⁸ Gertrude Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1920), 74.

possible, friendly relations with local leaders, planning and overseeing public works projects and, in some areas, serving as courts of first instance for civil trials.²⁹

The ongoing debate about the future of the region meant that British officials lacked any definitive idea about Iraq's future. This uncertainty made it difficult for civil administrators to make any firm statements to the local population, but it did not stop them from envisioning what a future administration should look like. Drawing from the Indian experience, most civil administrators believed that Iraq would require an administration where virtually all decisions would be vested in British officials.³⁰ They developed a vision of Iraq and a narrative about their role in the new country to support their proposals for a long-term British presence. This approach ultimately clashed with the ideas of officials in the India and Foreign Offices in London, who decided that Iraq should be ruled by a nominally independent Iraqi government aided by British advisors. In the end, officials in London forced British officials in Iraq to alter their policy and their narrative about the British role in Iraq.³¹

1920 proved to be a pivotal year in the history of mandate Iraq. In April, Great Britain officially received the mandate for Iraq at the San Remo conference, leading to a new sense of urgency for both British officials and Iraqis. Acting Civil Commissioner A. T. Wilson and officials in the Foreign and India Offices of London continued to debate back and forth about the type of government that should be established in Iraq and about how British plans should be presented to Iraqis.³² In the meantime, various groups of Iraqis began to mobilize against the

²⁹ At the end of the war, Iraq was divided into 16 divisions, also referred to as Liwas and administered by POs. These divisions were in turn divided into districts (usually between two and four per division) administered by APOs. The exact size of a division or district could vary considerably in terms of land mass or population.

³⁰ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 36.

³¹ Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 8.

³² "Minutes of Inter-Departmental Conference on Middle Eastern Affairs," June 16, 1920, FO 371/5227/6830, United Kingdom National Archives.

mandate. During Ramadan, which roughly coincided with the month of June, Sunnis and Shi'is in Baghdad held a series of joint religious services where Anti-British speeches and poems were shared.³³ Early in July, several Shi'i tribes on the Middle Euphrates revolted against British authority. The initial revolt started in the town of Rumaiitha, where members of the Duwalim tribe attacked the town jail to free a tribal leader who had been imprisoned by the local Political Officer for debts owed to the government, but most scholars agree that a group of tribal leaders and other prominent Iraqis had already communicated and developed a loose plan for revolt.³⁴ The tribes cut telegraph wires and rail lines to interrupt British communications, assaulted British forces and put towns holding British political offices and garrisons under siege. Military attacks were carried out by tribal leaders, but Shi'i merchants and religious leaders also established an independent government which operated out of Karbala and sought to assert jurisdiction over all of the territory abandoned by the British.³⁵ The revolt gradually spread throughout and beyond the Middle Euphrates and for a time officials contemplated the possibility of a full-on withdrawal from most or all of Iraq, but ultimately, the British were able to bring in reinforcements from India and reestablish control over the country, gradually retaking ground through the fall of 1920.

In October 1920 Percy Cox arrived to take the position of High Commissioner and establish a nominally independent Iraqi government. He encouraged the remaining rebel forces to make peace, promising them that their demands for an Iraqi government were being implemented and giving lenient terms to the participants.³⁶ Cox dealt gracefully with the

³³ Sir Arnold T. Wilson, *Mesopotamia 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties; a Personal and Historical Record* (London: Oxford University Press, Humphrey Milford, 1931), 254.

³⁴ Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 70.

³⁵ Kadhim, 89–90.

³⁶ "Intelligence Report No. 1," November 15, 1920, 2, FO 371/6349/1011, United Kingdom National Archives.

rebellious tribes, but he refused to include Shi‘i religious leaders who wanted to play a role in the negotiations, establishing a precedent of exclusion that would continue over the rest of the mandate. In November of 1920, Cox established a provisional government led by a council of ministers under the Naqib of Baghdad, a widely respected Sunni religious leader that was generally willing to follow British instructions.³⁷ This government was nominally independent, but it was not representative, as Shi‘is were given only token levels of representation in the new provisional council and in appointments to local offices. In 1921 Cox maneuvered to establish the Sunni Faisal, son of the Sharif of Mecca, leader of the Arab revolt against the Ottomans, and briefly the leader of an independent Arab Syria, as King of Iraq under a proposed constitutional monarchy.³⁸ Faisal toured Iraq in the Summer of 1921, culminating in a referendum to elect him as King which was approved overwhelmingly throughout the country.³⁹ After Faisal’s coronation, British officials, the provisional government and the King worked together to draft an electoral law to govern the election of a Constituent Assembly and to draft a treaty that would govern the relationship between Iraq and Great Britain. Tensions rose throughout 1922 as the King, the cabinet and British officials debated the nature of the future relationship between the two countries amidst growing anti-British protests, but when Faisal was incapacitated by an appendicitis, Cox took direct action against prominent anti-treaty protestors (including two Shi‘i religious leaders) and forced the treaty through the cabinet. By the spring of 1923 the treaty was

³⁷ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 44.

³⁸ Faisal’s coronation as King was the culmination of years of debate between British officials in London and Iraq about the possibility of supporting Faisal or one of his brothers as King of Iraq; this debate was settled when the participants of the January 1921 Cairo Conference agreed to support his candidacy as part of a wider strategy to minimize costs across the new Middle Eastern imperial acquisitions. Timothy J. Paris, *Britain, the Hashemites and Arab Rule, 1920-1925: The Sherifian Solution* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 139.

³⁹ How this strategy was implemented and how Iraqis responded is difficult to ascertain. Charles Tripp refers to the referendum on Faisal as “bogus,” but he also notes that, “Despite the relative lack of enthusiasm for Faisal, there was little organized opposition, in part because there were no obvious alternatives.” Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 47.

signed and efforts to hold elections were underway. British officials had succeeded in creating a nominally independent constitutional monarchy, but they had also established precedents that led to a contentious relationship between a dominant Sunni minority, an underrepresented Shi'i majority and a Shi'i religious leadership that was excluded from the political discourse of Iraq.

Methodology and Source Base

This study analyzes the documents produced by British officials in Iraq to determine whether these officials shared consistent thought patterns in discussing Shi'i Iraqis and to explore how these thought patterns may have developed. In line with the approach of scholars like Cooper and Burke, this project looks at the specific historical context in which British officials were working in order to explore the factors that influenced their discourse. This involves looking at the situation on the ground in Iraq, the specific institutional context in which officials operated, and at cultural currents within Great Britain. Finally, the study looks at policy discussions to explore how the discourse influenced imperial policy.

To assess the British discourse on Shi'is in Iraq, this project analyzes a variety of documents produced by British officials working in Iraq from 1919 to early 1923. Many of these documents come from the Foreign Office files, held by the National Archives of the United Kingdom, some from requests for digitation and others from published collections of documents. Others come from the Colonial Office files, also held by the National Archives.⁴⁰ One major

⁴⁰ Prior to 1921, the India Office of London was directly responsible for British policy in Iraq, but it consulted closely with the Foreign, Colonial and War Offices because each of these offices had interests in the decision making surrounding Iraq. In 1921 the Colonial Office assumed responsibility for Iraq as part of a reorganization to consolidate Great Britain's Middle East presence into a single office, but it continued to share intelligence on Iraq with the Foreign Office.

category of documents are telegrams from the civil commissioner detailing the status of Iraq and discussing potential plans for its future, as well as telegrams and reports that the civil commissioner forwarded from division Political Officers. These documents provide valuable insights about how civil administrators viewed Shi'i Iraqis and especially on how they assessed any potential threat they posed to British plans. The bimonthly Intelligence Reports from the office of the High Commissioner are widely cited. These reports began in November 1920 and were distributed within Iraq, to pertinent departments in London and to other colonial administrations across the region. They included a summary of the activity of the indigenous government, a brief report on public opinion (usually focused on the capital), summaries of conditions in the divisions, updates on Iraq's relationships with its neighbors, pertinent excerpts from police intelligence reports and excerpts from local newspapers. This project also analyzes the annual division administrative reports. These reports were typically written by the Political Officers of their respective divisions and gave succinct overviews of major events that took place in the division throughout the year and summaries of the progress of efforts to improve revenue collection, ensure the rule of law, improve agriculture yields, provide education, improve public health and maintain the Awqaf system of revenue support for religious institutions.

The project also looks at several documents published by the British government. This study utilizes the October 1920 – March 1922 and April 1922 – March 1923 reports to the League of Nations on the progress of the mandate. These reports give a general summary of major events in Iraq and detail the decisions made by the Iraqi government. Since these reports were written for the League of Nations, their language is much more restrained than reports that were distributed within the imperial administration, but they still provide insight into how British officials choose to describe major events and how they choose to describe different actors within

the Iraqi government. The most extensively used document is the *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*. Written by Gertrude Bell as a command paper for Parliament during the summer of 1920, this document was commissioned in response to complaints in Parliament that the Civil Administration in Iraq was overbearing and incompetent, leading to increased tensions with Iraqis. This paper was intended to give a detailed account of both the situation in Iraq as the British found it, and of their actions from the beginning of the invasion until the time of its writing. As a member of the Civil Administration, Bell had every reason to paint the administration's decisions in a positive light, but nonetheless, this document is important because it gives a detailed description of Iraq from the Civil Administration's point of view and because it includes justifications for the Civil Administration's policy decisions up until that point. In particular, Bell goes to great lengths to describe the Shi'i ulama and the potential challenge that she felt they posed to British efforts to create modern institutions in Iraq.

Gertrude Bell is by far the most quoted figure in this study; this speaks to the relative availability of her writings compared to lower ranking officials who lacked Bell's celebrity status, but it also speaks to her prolific writing output. The scion of a wealthy steel magnate, Bell traveled widely in the Middle East as an amateur archeologist prior to the first world war. During the war she volunteered for service and because of her reputation as a Middle East expert and especially for her language skills and ability to interact with locals, she was stationed in Iraq. Being the only woman in an administration that was otherwise entirely male and coming from a civilian background, Bell can hardly be considered a typical official. On the other hand, she held an important position as Oriental Secretary, often serving as a point of contact between Iraqis and British officials and being responsible for writing, collating or editing many of the

documents created by the High Commissioner's Office. She was, in a sense, the mouthpiece of the British administration in Iraq, especially in regards to explaining Iraq to outside parties.

Memoirs and published personal papers also play an important role in this study. Officials' memoirs of time spent in Iraq often include more detailed accounts of their overall perceptions of Shi'i Iraqis and Shi'i Islam, since they focus on giving a general account of circumstances in Iraq. A. T. Wilson's *Mesopotamia 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties; a Personal and Historical Record* includes Wilson's thoughts about both the Shi'i ulama and the Shi'i umma and about the unique challenges that this community added to Britain's project in Iraq. Wilson used his memoirs to settle scores with other officials and to justify policy decisions that had come under criticism in Parliament and in the press, so there is certainly reason to doubt whether some elements accurately reflect his thoughts during his time as Civil Commissioner. However, his statements about the Shi'i ulama and umma in his memoirs are largely consistent with the telegrams to superiors that are analyzed in this study and his memoirs also include more detailed comments about the Shi'is than the brief messages to London. Bertram Thomas' *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia* includes an account of his time as an Assistant Political Officer in the Mutafiq division during the 1920 revolt. He goes into detail explaining the nature of his subjects' Shi'i beliefs and how these beliefs impacted his work as a colonial administrator. *An Administrator in the Making: James Saumarez Mann, 1893-1920*, is a unique and valuable source. James Mann was a young Assistant Political Officer who served in the predominantly Shi'i Eastern Shamiyah district and was killed during the 1920 revolt. His father assembled Mann's correspondence to friends and family, from his childhood up until the time of the revolt, to create a sort of autobiography through letters. This source must be approached with some caution, since it is the culmination of editorial choices made by Mann's father rather than

himself, but it is employed extensively in this study because it offers a rare glimpse into the background, training, and personal values of a lower-level officer in the civil administration. Gertrude Bell's extensive collection of letters to her family, available online through New Castle University's Gertrude Bell archive, represent another important source. From 1920 through 1922 Bell went into great detail explaining her work in the civil administration to her parents. These letters include frequent comments about the Shi'i ulama and Shi'i umma, describing both specific individuals and Shi'is as a group. In addition, Bell also commented extensively on British policy towards the Shi'i ulama and British policy towards Shi'i representation in the indigenous government.

This study also draws extensively on secondary literature on religion and civic culture in nineteenth and early twentieth century Great Britain. The works of Peter van der Veer, David Hempton, and Hugh McLeod are all employed to provide an idea of the general ideas and debates about religion, society and the state that were prevalent in Great Britain leading up to and during the period of this study. McLeod's work is especially helpful because of his detailed description of widespread ideas associated with anti-Catholicism and British Protestant identity. In addition, this study also uses biographies of Gertrude Bell and A. T. Wilson to offer more detail about their religious experiences and values.

Finally, this study draws from the secondary literature on Shi'i Islam in Iraq to describe the actual situation on the ground and compare it to the British discourse. Moojan Momen's *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* provides information about the development of Shi'i Islam from its origins to the early nineteenth century, while Yitzak Nakash's *The Shi'is of Iraq* provides a detailed description of Shi'i Islam in Iraq before, during and after the British occupation. Unfortunately, language barriers and access issues prevent the incorporation of Arab sources to

provide an alternative understanding of the situation on the ground. The secondary literature is used as an imperfect, but helpful substitute.

Organization

This thesis will be structured thematically. Chapter 1 will explore the influences that contributed to the British discourse on Shi'i Iraqis. It will begin by using the secondary literature on Shi'i Islam and Iraq to paint a clearer picture of the actual situation on the ground and to compare this situation with the British discourse. This discourse was not entirely detached from reality, but it also seriously mischaracterized the motivations and context of Shi'i actions. The chapter will then move on to explore the influence of metropolitan religious values and experiences on the discourse. It will use the secondary literature on religion, civic values and national identity in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Great Britain to establish the broad contours of a British discourse on the proper relationship between religion, society and the state that British officials serving in Iraq would have been familiar with and influenced by. Next, the chapter draws connections between this metropolitan discourse and the British discourse on Shi'i Iraqis, pointing out similarities in British descriptions and evaluations of Shi'i Islam and metropolitan descriptions of a Catholic 'other' that served as the basis for British Protestant identity and for ideas about the proper role of religion in society. Finally, this chapter concludes by using biographies and the personal writings of three British officials to explore how individual officials applied their personal ideas to the Iraqi context and used the symbols and ideas of the Protestant-Catholic binary to understand and explain the situation in Iraq.

Chapter 2 will situate the discourse on Shi‘i Iraqis within the evolving narrative that British officials used to explain their role in Iraq. British officials consistently described themselves as saviors, coming to remove the yoke of Turkish oppression and help Iraq develop a modern state and society; within this narrative, Iraqis were described as being incapable of self-government without British advice and support. The discourse on Shi‘i Iraqis fit within this broader narrative, as British officials often centered their criticisms of Shi‘i Islam’s theocratic tendencies, corruption, bigotry and moral deficiencies around the idea that the Shi‘i ulama and Shi‘i umma represented a threat to their civilizing mission. The civilizing mission narrative would evolve considerably after the arrival of Percy Cox in the fall of 1920; whereas before British officials in Iraq emphasized the need for a long term British administration until Iraqis were ready for self-government, after the change in leadership British officials sought to quickly establish an indigenous government and began to describe urban Sunnis as active partners in this project who could be entrusted with leadership of an indigenous Iraqi state (aided by British advice, of course). Despite this significant change in British officials’ overall goals and narratives, they continued to describe Shi‘i Iraqis as a threat to their project and as largely unfit for self-government.

Chapter 3 will explore the role of the discourse on Shi‘is in British policy decisions by looking at how British officials described and defended their policy decisions in formal reports and personal correspondence. British policy decisions were shaped by a number of factors, but the discourse on Shi‘i Iraqis played an important role in this process. Since British officials associated Sunni Islam with positive Protestant characteristics and associated Shi‘i Islam with negative Catholic characteristics, it should come as no surprise that British officials worked more closely with Sunnis and allowed them to dominate the state apparatus in spite of the fact that

Shi'is made up a majority of the overall population. British officials also consistently emphasized the need to exclude the Shi'i ulama from the political discourse of Iraq and they actively worked to achieve this goal by refusing to include the Shi'i ulama in political discussions, by employing subtle and not so subtle threats to deter the ulama's political activity and by working in cooperation with both Sunni and Shi'i Iraqis to counter the Shi'i ulama's influence.

A Note on Language

Since this study deals with cross-cultural contact and perceptions, careful language choice is essential. The variance in local dialects across the Arabic-speaking world also adds another layer of complexity. In general, this study uses the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Exceptions are made for certain terms where a particular transliteration has gained widespread acceptance in international discourse or specific instances where a particular transliteration has gained widespread acceptance in works focusing specifically on Iraq. All direct quotes include the original transliteration of the author.

When referring to the religious leadership of the Shi'i community in Iraq, this study uses the phrases 'Shi'i ulama' and 'Shi'i religious leadership' interchangeably, to refer to this body of actors as a collective group. It also uses 'Shi'i umma' and 'Shi'i population' interchangeably to refer to the Shi'i religious community as a whole. When referencing specific individuals or a smaller group within the Shi'i religious leadership, more specific titles (for example, the title 'mujtahid' for well-known experts in Shi'i religious law) are used where appropriate. As with transliterations, direct quotes of British officials retain the terms used by the author.

Around 1921 British officials transitioned from using the term ‘Mesopotamia’ to the term ‘Iraq’ to describe the country’s title and its population. This change was intended to reflect the actual words that Iraqis used to describe themselves and the boundaries of their new state.⁴¹ A similar, if more gradual change occurred in the middle of the decade, when British officials began to refer to ‘Persia’ and ‘Persians’ as ‘Iran’ and ‘Iranians.’ This study generally employs ‘Iraq’ and ‘Iran’ throughout, except for places where it deals specifically with British conceptions of national identity and when employed in direct quotes from British works.

On the British side, this project generally uses the term ‘British officials’ to refer to the British officials serving in Iraq, but it occasionally refers to them as ‘civil administrators’ especially when describing the period before the establishment of the Iraqi state in October of 1920. Officials in London are sometimes referred to by their office (India Office, Foreign Office, etc.), but they are also referred to simply as ‘officials in London.’ This vague word choice reflects the reality that decisions about the future of Iraq involved serious input from and dialog with a number of imperial actors, regardless of which office was officially responsible for Iraq policy.

⁴¹ The name ‘Mesopotamia’ came from Greek literature; when referring to themselves as a collective political community, Iraqis used ‘Iraq’ instead. In addition, Mesopotamia had traditionally been used to describe the plains around the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, excluding the mountainous region to the North (the Mosul region) that was ultimately incorporated into the new state.

Chapter 1: Observation and Interpretation: Influences on the British Discourse on Shi'is in Iraq

This chapter will explore the British discourse on Shi'i Iraqis and look at some of the influences that contributed to its development. It will begin by exploring the actual situation on the ground in Iraq, comparing the broad contours of the discourse to the reality on the ground using secondary literature on Shi'i Islam and Iraq. Then it will move on to describe the metropolitan discourses on religion and society that would have been familiar to the British officials who served in Iraq. Next it will describe the British discourse on Shi'is and draw connections between this discourse and metropolitan ideas and debates. Finally, it will conclude by looking at three individuals, analyzing how their personal religious and civic values and experiences influenced their individual perceptions and descriptions of Shi'i Islam in Iraq.

This chapter will argue that British officials interpreted Sunni and Shi'i Islam through a lens of Christian values and experiences that deeply impacted their perceptions and descriptions of Islam in Iraq. The British discourse on Shi'i Iraqis was not entirely removed from reality. Some, although not all, Shi'i religious leaders and Shi'i citizens were involved in acts of resistance to British rule. Meanwhile, urban Sunnis had educational opportunities that exposed them to Western ideas and helped them to develop a more secular vision for the future of Iraq. However, British officials also seriously misunderstood and misconstrued the complex reality of Shi'i Islam in Iraq, failing to recognize that the actions and ideas of the Shi'i ulama and Shi'i umma were part of a dynamic response to both Western ideas and the threat of Western imperialism. This discrepancy can be explained, at least in part, by the values and experiences that British officials brought with them to Iraq. For early twentieth century British officials, the

interaction between religion, civil society and the state was an important factor in a society's journey towards progress and modernity; they believed that a successful society required a strict separation of temporal and spiritual authority, an attitude of religious and intellectual tolerance and religious values that emphasized good moral character.⁴² These ideas had their origin in nineteenth century conceptions of a British Protestant identity that saw British success as a byproduct of Protestant religious values and defined itself against a negative Catholic other.⁴³ British officials in Iraq evaluated Sunni and Shi'i Islam based on these values and they also used the language and symbols of the Protestant-Catholic binary to describe differences between Sunnis and Shi'is. The result was a discourse on Shi'i Islam that emphasized its theocratic tendencies, accused Shi'i religious leaders of corruption and the abuse of their followers, portrayed the Shi'i ulama and umma as bigoted and closeminded, and described Shi'i values and character as morally deficient.

This chapter will greatly expand our understanding of British perceptions of Islam in Iraq. Most historians looking at mandate Iraq have ignored British perceptions, choosing instead to focus on British strategic concerns.⁴⁴ Toby Dodge did look extensively at British perceptions of Iraq and how these perceptions influenced policy decisions. Dodge briefly addressed British perceptions of Shi'is, arguing that British officials saw Shi'is as more Islamic and hence more backwards than Sunnis.⁴⁵ Here Dodge drew loosely from Edward Said's argument that European perceptions of Islam were based upon a set of shared assumptions that influenced the

⁴² Hugh McLeod, "Protestantism and British National Identity, 1815-1945," in *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, ed. Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 49.

⁴³ McLeod, 47.

⁴⁴ See for example, Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*.

⁴⁵ Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 67-68.

way that colonial officials (and other writers) described the Orient.⁴⁶ Dodge's line of reasoning does not hold up in light of an extensive look at civil administrators' thoughts about Shi'i Islam. In fact, officials tended to describe the Shi'i faith as a corruption of Islam. Gertrude Bell frequently pointed out that Sunnis saw Shi'is as heretics and explained differences in the Shi'i faith in terms of the Persian backgrounds of the Shi'i ulama, essentially stating that they had incorporated Persian religious ideas and practices to alter what had been an Arab religion.⁴⁷ James Saumarez Mann echoed these sentiments in his letters home, saying that for the Shi'is the once pure religion of Islam had been "spoilt" by "the worse side of Persian religiosity."⁴⁸ Negative perceptions of Shi'i Islam were not the byproduct of seeing Shi'is as more Islamic than Sunnis. Recently, scholars studying European perceptions of Islam have focused on looking at how conditions in both the colonies and the metropole influenced imperial officials' discourse on Islam.⁴⁹ This study will employ a similar approach, looking at some of the major currents in religious thought in Great Britain to explore how debates and ideas from the metropole influenced British officials' discourse on Islam; in the process, it will give us a more nuanced explanation for the British discourse on Shi'i Islam that aligns with officials' comments.

Reality and Perception

⁴⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

⁴⁷ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 27.

⁴⁸ James Saumarez Mann, *An Administrator in the Making: James Saumarez Mann, 1893-1920*, ed. James Saumarez Mann (London: Longmans, Green, 1921), 210.

⁴⁹ For example, Edmund Burke argues that French perceptions of Islam in Morocco were heavily influenced by debates about religion in France, and particularly by the Catholic church's connection with the royalist movement. Burke, *The Ethnographic State*, 181.

A brief survey of some of the secondary literature on the Shi'is of Iraq will give us a clearer picture of the actual situation on the ground and the motivations of the Shi'i ulama. Shi'i theology, practice, and political thought all evolved over the centuries, both in response to changes within the Shi'i community and evolving relations with the outside world.

Theoretically, Shi'is believed that the Imam, a religious leader with a special connection to God, was the rightful temporal and spiritual leader of the Islamic community.⁵⁰ However, the Twelver branch of Shi'i Islam experienced a significant evolution in political thought after the Occultation of the twelfth Imam around 874 C.E.⁵¹ Twelver thinkers developed a quietist political philosophy that forbid rebellion and allowed Shi'is to recognize the sovereignty of the state at a practical level while still denying the legitimacy of the state at a theological level.⁵² This quietist focus would remain the dominant trend in twelver Shi'i political thought and action until the nineteenth century.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw significant change in the religious and political roles of the Shi'i ulama. After the occultation, Shi'i religious leaders initially assumed that the duties of the Imam were to be left vacant until the Imam's return, but over time, the Shi'i ulama gradually assumed more of the duties of the Imam, expanding their role in the lives of the Shi'i umma in the process.⁵³ This influence expanded rapidly in the late nineteenth

⁵⁰ Ann K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists*, London Oriental Series 36 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 234.

⁵¹ Different branches of Shi'i Islam traced the lineage of the Imam from different descendants of Ali. Twelver Shi'i Islam was the most prevalent branch within Iraq and Iran. Twelvers traced the lineage of the Imams to Abu'l Qasim Muhammad, who was said to have disappeared into Occultation while he was still a boy. Essentially, twelvers believed that he became hidden, but was still alive and would eventually reappear to lead the Islamic community. Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 161–62; Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists*, 241.

⁵² Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists*, 263.

⁵³ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, 189, 191.

century, due to the widespread adoption of the Usuli school of Islamic jurisprudence, which emphasized the role of leading religious scholars in interpreting the Islamic law for the Shi‘i umma and due to an improvement in communication technologies which allowed Shi‘i religious leaders to share their rulings with a wider audience and in a more efficient time frame. These changes led to a greater concentration of power in the hands of a few leading religious officials, known as mujtahids.⁵⁴ As the mujtahids and lower level religious officials of Iraq and Iran gradually expanded in influence, they began to take a more active role in the political affairs of the Qajar empire (located in modern day Iran), criticizing the Qajar’s rule, especially the increasing economic and diplomatic penetration of Europeans.⁵⁵

Early in the twentieth century the Shi‘i ulama began to develop a new Shi‘i political theory wherein religious leaders served as a check against the autocratic authority of secular leaders. This theory was influenced by the writings of Sunni Modernist Islamic thinkers like Jamal al-din al Afghani and Muhammad ‘Abduh, who argued that Islam needed to reform and reconcile itself with modernity in order to face the challenge of European imperialism.⁵⁶ The new Shi‘i political theory was put into action during the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, as Shi‘i religious leaders joined with other reform-minded constituencies to launch massive protests and boycotts which forced the Qajar Shah to transition to a constitutional monarchy.⁵⁷ By the time of the British invasion of Iraq in 1914, the Shi‘i ulama of Iraq had developed a political

⁵⁴ Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi‘is of Iraq* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 49.

⁵⁵ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi‘ism*, 140.

⁵⁶ Nakash, *The Shi‘is of Iraq*, 50.

⁵⁷ William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 6th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017), 136.

theory in which they were to play an important role in the political process and, especially, to serve as leaders of the resistance against imperial encroachment from Europe.⁵⁸

During Great Britain's time in Iraq, some Shi'i religious leaders took an active role in resisting British authority while others sought to cooperate with the British. Some mujtahids were active in preaching a jihad against the invading British during the First World War and even served as military leaders during the conflict.⁵⁹ Resistance would continue after the war when Mirza Muhammad Taqi Shirazi, a leading mujtahid from Karbala, put forward a proposition for a constitutional monarchy under a son of the Sharif of Mecca (a proposition that the civil administration was strongly opposed to at the time) but with a system of checks dominated by religious leaders.⁶⁰ On the other hand, some ulama, particularly in Najaf, were willing to accept British supervision in exchange for a promise that the British would not interfere in religious matters and would not challenge the position of the mujtahids.⁶¹ Moreover, many Shi'i merchants and tribal leaders signed petitions in favor of British rule.⁶² In spite of the differing opinions within the Shi'i religious leadership and amongst their followers, a dedicated group of anti-British ulama and Shi'i tribal leaders ultimately succeeded in fomenting a widespread revolt on the Middle Euphrates during the summer of 1920, where Shi'i tribesmen destroyed British communications and transportation and also assaulted British garrisons and political offices.⁶³ Resistance on the part of the Shi'i ulama continued after 1920; when the

⁵⁸ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 60.

⁵⁹ Nakash, 60.

⁶⁰ Nakash, 64.

⁶¹ Nakash, 63.

⁶² Nakash, 63.

⁶³ Citing both Iraqi and British sources, Nakash argues that the Shi'i ulama played a major role in the 1920 revolt. Abbas Kadhim echoes these sentiments in his history of the 1920 revolt, using the memoirs of participants to argue that the Shi'i ulama, in conjunction with merchants and tribal leaders, were the primary instigators of the revolt and the leaders of a short lived independent Iraqi government. Nakash, 66; Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 70.

provisional Iraqi government, led by Faisal, set elections for the Constituent Assembly, a group of mujtahids declared the elections unlawful and ordered a boycott which led to a long delay in the election process.⁶⁴ However, throughout this period, some Shi'i religious leaders continued to take a neutral stance and many Shi'i tribal leaders and citizens ignored the Shi'i ulama's efforts to oppose British authority.⁶⁵

To understand British comparisons between Sunnis and Shi'is, we must also briefly look at major developments in Sunni Iraqi society prior to and during the British occupation. During the nineteenth century, the Ottoman state made a dedicated effort to embrace elements of modernity and reconcile them to Islam in order to create modern state institutions and a modern society that might be capable of resisting European imperialism. This period of reform saw the creation of a European-style military and the founding of European-style schools to provide a cadre of educated officials to fill the officer corps and civilian administrative positions.⁶⁶ Both of these reforms had a disproportionate impact on the urban, Sunni population of Iraq, since the state sponsored schools taught a state-approved form of Sunni Islam, leading most Shi'is to keep their children in private, religious schools.⁶⁷ Although many military and civilian government posts in Iraq were occupied by officials brought in from other parts of the empire, by the time of the first world war there was a small cadre of Sunni Iraqis who were educated in Western-style schools and had government experience. When the first world war broke out, some of these Iraqis joined the Sharif of Mecca's British-supported Arab revolt, and later they served under the Sharif of Mecca's son Faisal in his short-lived independent Syrian administration. From Syria

⁶⁴ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 79–80.

⁶⁵ Nakash, 84.

⁶⁶ Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 73–74.

⁶⁷ Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 229.

the Sunni Iraqis advocated for an independent Iraq working in cooperation with Great Britain, essentially the same sort of agreement that was in place in Syria until the British agreed to hand the territory over to the French. Because of their acquaintance with European languages and European ideas, the Sunni Iraqis who served with Faisal used European ideas and concepts to develop their vision for the future of Iraq, couching their calls for Iraqi independence in an ideology of secular Arab nationalism.⁶⁸ During A. T. Wilson's time as acting Civil Commissioner, British officials in Iraq had a contentious relationship with the Iraqi officers serving in Syria, but once Percy Cox replaced Wilson, the Iraqi officers were welcomed back and given important positions in the new indigenous Iraqi government.

This brief survey points towards the complexity of the situation in Iraq both before and during the British occupation. It is clear that members of the Shi'i religious leadership in Iraq were frequently involved in acts of resistance against British rule; when civil administrators commented on the threat posed by the Shi'i ulama, they were describing a potential reality. However, it is also clear that some Shi'i religious leaders were willing to cooperate with the British. In terms of Sunni-Shi'i comparisons, it is not surprising that British officials ultimately looked favorably upon urban Sunnis who had exposure to Western-style education and articulated their values using Western concepts. However, if British officials had delved more deeply into the origins and evolution of the Shi'i ulama's political theory, they would have seen a complex ideology that evolved to meet changing circumstances and was also influenced by Western ideas. Instead, British officials were content to take an overly simplistic view of Shi'i

⁶⁸ For example, when Nuri Pasha, an Iraqi serving in Faisal's brief post-war administration in Syria, sought to encourage British officials to set up an independent Iraqi government, he emphasized that he and his supporters were the same people who had participated in the British-supported Arab revolt against alleged Turkish oppression. By making this connection, he tied his desire for Iraqi independence to the concept of national self-determination, a concept that was gaining widespread support in the West. H. W. Young and Nouri Pasha, "Future of Mesopotamia," April 6, 1920, 4-5, FO 371/5226/2719, United Kingdom National Archives.

theology and Shi'i political theory and to describe Shi'i motivations in terms of 'backwardness' and 'fanaticism.' Why did British officials describe Shi'i motivations in terms of religious backwardness rather than a dynamic attempt to adjust to a rapidly changing sociopolitical environment and why did they often tie Sunni progressiveness and Shi'i backwardness to the nature of Sunni and Shi'i Islam rather than the specific lived circumstances of the respective communities? To answer these questions, we must consider the values that British officials brought with them to Iraq. British officials did not come to Iraq as blank slates, looking objectively at Sunni and Shi'i Islam. Instead, British officials came to Iraq with preconceived ideas about the proper interaction between religion, society and the state that were informed by their metropolitan ideas about and experiences with Christianity.

Religion, Society and the State in Great Britain

Religion was an important part of the civic discourse in nineteenth and early twentieth century Great Britain. In *Imperial Encounters*, Peter Van der Veer stresses that religion played an important role in the formation of a national culture during the rise of the modern nation-state in Great Britain.⁶⁹ He argues that the separation of church and state during the eighteenth century led not to a secular society, but to a repositioning of religion from the state to the public sphere.⁷⁰ Van der Veer also goes on to argue that religious movements played an important role in developing the public civic sphere of the modern nation-state.⁷¹ He cites specific examples such as the role of evangelical ideas in contributing to the moral uplift reform movements of the

⁶⁹ Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 30.

⁷⁰ van der Veer, 24.

⁷¹ van der Veer, 28.

nineteenth century.⁷² David Hempton echoes Van der Veer's arguments in *Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland*, saying that in the age of the industrial revolution successful churches sought to, "reflect and propagate the social, political, and cultural assumptions of their members."⁷³

Religion also played an important role in British conceptions of national identity and British ideas about what made Great Britain exceptional and successful. In "Protestantism and British Identity, 1815-1945," Hugh McLeod argues that Protestantism and its rivalry with Catholicism played an important role in defining British identity during the nineteenth century.⁷⁴ McLeod's work is valuable for understanding how nineteenth and early twentieth century Britons understood their identity and it is also valuable for understanding how they thought about the proper relationship between religion, society and the modern state. He argues that nineteenth century Britons saw their Protestant faith as an integral part of the unique civic virtues that set Great Britain apart from its rivals and led to Great Britain's economic success and imperial expansion.⁷⁵ British Protestants saw Catholic societies, such as Ireland, Spain and Italy, as plagued by the negative effects of Catholicism and its interaction with society, while Great Britain was successful because of the positive impact that Protestantism had on British society and the British state.⁷⁶ This Protestant-Catholic binary was reflected in school curriculums, the press, popular culture, and in the sermons and speeches of anti-Catholic activists.⁷⁷ These ideas were widely spread during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and it is reasonable to

⁷² van der Veer, 26.

⁷³ David Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture In Britain and Ireland: From the Glorious Revolution to the Decline of Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 178.

⁷⁴ McLeod, "Protestantism and British National Identity," 44.

⁷⁵ McLeod, 49.

⁷⁶ McLeod, 47-48.

⁷⁷ McLeod, 51-53.

assume that British officials serving in Iraq had either internalized them or were at least familiar with them.

Anticlericalism was an important aspect of the Protestant-Catholic binary. Protestant Britons looked down on what they saw as the interference of Catholic religious authorities in secular politics and secular governance. Anti-clericalism was often tied into the politics surrounding Ireland's place in the British empire; McLeod notes that British Protestants blamed the success of the Irish Nationalist Party on the undue influence of Catholic Priests on Irish voters.⁷⁸ Negative associations with the Catholic clergy extended to the Catholic societies of the Mediterranean as well. For example, McLeod suggests that Protestants used the Vatican's poor governance of the Papal states as evidence that the church was "ineffective and oppressive" when given secular authority.⁷⁹ Negative views of the Catholic clergy also extended beyond the issue of Church-State interaction. McLeod notes that British Protestants saw the Irish as "priest-ridden."⁸⁰ Irish Catholic priests were seen as abusive and corrupt, taking advantage of the generosity of their parishioners. They were also frequently described as "dirty, disreputable and cunning. . ." in the press, implying that they lacked moral character and were willing to exploit their followers.⁸¹

Negative perceptions of Catholicism also extended beyond the role of the clergy, as Protestants felt that Catholicism contributed to religious intolerance and intellectual close-mindedness, as well as a focus on external shows of piety over good moral character. British Protestants focused in on examples of intolerance towards religious dissent in the Mediterranean

⁷⁸ McLeod, 47.

⁷⁹ McLeod, 48.

⁸⁰ McLeod, 47.

⁸¹ McLeod, 53.

Catholic states and also continued to associate the Catholic church with the inquisition, even long after its conclusion.⁸² Indeed, many anti-Catholics saw the issue of tolerance as key to explaining the perceived success of Great Britain and the stagnation of Catholic communities. The Reverend J. E. C. Welldon explained the Protestant nations' success as a byproduct of "the love of truth, intellectual freedom, religious equality, the right of private judgment, and the sense of personal, direct responsibility to God, which produce a more robust and virile type of national character than has been, or can be the product of sacerdotal authority."⁸³ Protestants also felt that Catholicism emphasized the wrong values, leading to a less virtuous society. McLeod states that, "Catholicism was seen as a false religion, which placed exaggerated stress on showy externals of piety but bore none of the good fruit of sobriety, thrift, and industry by which a true religion was to be judged."⁸⁴ All of the criticisms leveled against Catholicism by British Protestants correspond to similar criticisms leveled against Shi'is by British officials in Iraq.

On the other hand, we must be careful not to overstate the monolithic nature of these binaries. In *Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland*, David Hempton points out that while Protestantism did contribute to a common British identity, religion was also used to construct distinct English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish-Catholic and Irish-Protestant identities.⁸⁵ Moreover, even within specific denominations there could be significant debate about the nature of Protestant identity.⁸⁶ McLeod also acknowledges that Protestant identity was complex and bitterly contested.⁸⁷ He argues that Protestant identity helped unite disparate groups within

⁸² McLeod, 48.

⁸³ McLeod, 48.

⁸⁴ McLeod, 47.

⁸⁵ Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture In Britain and Ireland*, 173.

⁸⁶ Hempton, 174.

⁸⁷ McLeod, "Protestantism and British National Identity," 46.

Britain against a perceived common enemy, but it was also used by various religious and national groups within Great Britain to define themselves against each other.⁸⁸

The situation becomes even more complicated when we consider that most scholars acknowledge that anti-Catholic sentiment was already in decline in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth.⁸⁹ McLeod cites several reasons for the gradual decline of anti-Catholic sentiment and a corresponding decline in Protestantism's importance for British identity. One major change was the rise of the Anglo-Catholic movement within the Church of England. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, some upper and middle class Protestants began to reject the evangelical ideas which had come to dominate religious thought in Great Britain and instead embraced elements of Catholicism, especially its focus on rituals and liturgy.⁹⁰ This change was the byproduct of a rejection of the strict moral code of the evangelical movement. It was also influenced by a growing appreciation for the artistic achievements of Catholic societies and a corresponding inferiority complex about British artistic achievements.⁹¹ The first world war was another important factor in declining anti-Catholicism. McLeod argues that the fact that Protestants and Catholics were aligned together on either side of the conflict diminished anti-Catholic sentiment and furthermore, the participation of Catholics in the war led more British Protestants to see them as true members in the British nation.⁹² Indeed, McLeod also notes that even anti-Catholic polemicists came to

⁸⁸ McLeod, 47.

⁸⁹ McLeod, 55; Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture In Britain and Ireland*, 150.

⁹⁰ McLeod, "Protestantism and British National Identity," 58.

⁹¹ McLeod, 58.

⁹² McLeod, 63.

adopt a more ambivalent attitude, focusing their criticisms on the current Catholic leadership while allowing that the faith itself was not inherently regressive.⁹³

While anti-Catholic sentiment was clearly in decline by the time that British officials arrived in Iraq, many of the ideas that the Protestant-Catholic binary was based upon could continue to be influential even after the binary began to decline in significance. McLeod does not devote considerable time to how conceptions of British civic virtue changed once the Catholic-Protestant binary ceased to play a dominant role in defining British identity, but it is reasonable to assume that many of the ideas about the specific virtues of Britishness remained or were repurposed, even as the basis for comparison evolved. Indeed, it is only logical that the emphasis on religious and intellectual tolerance and the emphasis on a separation between ecclesiastical and temporal authority would remain and perhaps become even more significant as anti-Catholic sentiment waned and was replaced by a widening embrace of religious pluralism and a more general Christian identity. Some British officials serving in Iraq may have thought of Great Britain's civic values in explicitly anti-Catholic terms while others may have thought of them in terms of a more general modern Christian civic ethic. Whether or not British officials in Iraq thought about these ideas in anti-Catholic terms, there is good reason to believe that these ideas influenced officials' discourse on Shi'i Islam.

Metropolitan Ideas and Interpreting Islam

Several historians have noted the important role that religious ideas played in defining the civilizing mission narrative of nineteenth and early twentieth century British imperialism. Peter

⁹³ McLeod, 57.

van der Veer argues that the colonial encounter was inherently connected to the development of the concept of national culture and to evolving ideas about the connection between religion, society and the state.⁹⁴ He describes a relationship where discourse on the colonies (India in particular) influenced ideas in Great Britain and ideas in Great Britain in turn influenced the thoughts of both colonial administrators and colonial subjects.⁹⁵ Christian ideas either consciously or unconsciously influenced the imperial project in a number of ways. Van der Veer notes that nineteenth and twentieth century notions of progress, which were an important component of the civilizing mission, were a byproduct of medieval Christian perceptions of the linear nature of time.⁹⁶ Moreover, he goes on to note that the idea of the civilizing mission was influenced by the rise of evangelicalism with its emphasis on missions and social improvement.⁹⁷ McLeod and Hempton both echo this sentiment in their own work.⁹⁸ As we will see in chapter two, the concept of the civilizing mission was central to British officials' conceptions of their role in Iraq. British officials in Iraq described themselves as saviors, bringing social improvement by introducing new technologies, ideas and institutions and also working to transform the mindsets of Iraqis.

One important aspect of this project was to promote a relationship between religion, society and the state that would be conducive to the creation of a successful modern Iraq. British officials repeatedly emphasized the need for a separation between temporal and spiritual authority and a need to convince Iraqis to be open-minded and willing to work with the British

⁹⁴ van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, 3.

⁹⁵ van der Veer, 6.

⁹⁶ van der Veer, 25.

⁹⁷ van der Veer, 37.

⁹⁸ McLeod, "Protestantism and British National Identity," 52, 58; Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture In Britain and Ireland*, 159.

Christians and embrace their ideas and institutions. All of these ideas have corollaries in the Protestant-Catholic binary described by McLeod. The British discourse on Shi‘i Iraqis often revolved around these themes, making comparisons between Shi‘is and Sunnis that were always unfavorable to Shi‘is. At times, British officials seem to have made very explicit connections between Protestantism and Sunni Islam and between Catholicism and Shi‘i Islam.

British officials often used terms associated with Catholicism to describe Shi‘i institutions and the Shi‘i ulama. Intelligence Reports often referred to the Shi‘i religious leadership as “the Shi‘ah Vatican.”⁹⁹ Bertam Thomas also used this term to describe the Shi‘i ulama in his memoirs on his time in the Muntafiq, describing the shrine cities by saying that, “The Shi‘ah holy places of Najaf and Karbala, the Vatican of Iraq, thus held for the tribesmen the keys of heaven and hell.”¹⁰⁰ Officials also specifically referenced the Pope in describing the Shi‘i ulama. In one letter to her father, Gertrude Bell explained the situation in Iraq by comparing it to, “a number of alien Popes permanently settled at Canterbury and issuing edicts which take precedence of the law of the land.”¹⁰¹ She made an even more explicit connection when she told her father that, “It’s one eternal struggle with the clerical who wishes to usurp the functions of the civil administration if you’ll let him. And if you do let him you become like Spain, or Papal Italy – a dry stick that breaks over the back of the enemy you want to beat.”¹⁰² It is no coincidence that many of these references to Catholic institutions were connected to concerns about the Shi‘i ulama playing a prominent role in the political sphere.

⁹⁹ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 5; “Intelligence Report No. 4,” December 31, 1920, 4, FO 371/6348/2904, United Kingdom National Archives.

¹⁰⁰ Bertram Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1931), 83.

¹⁰¹ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 23 August 1920,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

¹⁰² “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 17 September 1921,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University.

The role of clergy in the political discourse was an important aspect of both the Catholic-Protestant binary in Great Britain and descriptions of Shi‘i-Sunni differences in Iraq. Civil administrators were often critical of what they saw as the Shi‘i ulama’s efforts to exert a political role and undermine the state. A. T. Wilson complained that, “The priesthood of Karbala, Najaf and Kadhimain were, with notable exceptions, frankly hostile to secular government of whatever kind,” suggesting that a disregard for secular authority was a normal tendency of the Shi‘i ulama.¹⁰³ Officials frequently commented on the potential for religious decrees to interfere with state authority. Bertram Thomas told his readers that, “the Mesopotamian tribesman, in the nature of his mystical creed and by reason of his illiteracy, had come to take his politics from its hierarchy,” suggesting that the mystical nature of Shi‘i Islam and the backwardness of its followers led them to follow the lead of the Shi‘i ulama.¹⁰⁴ In the *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, Gertrude Bell gave the specific example of a fatwa against a British tobacco monopoly in Iran which led Iranians to boycott tobacco and ultimately forced the Shah to cancel the concession.¹⁰⁵ Officials also expressed concerns about the ulama’s influence over Shi‘i Iraqis in the electoral process. Speaking about the possibility of an electoral assembly in a letter to her father, Bell warned that, “if you’re going to have anything like really representative institutions... you would have a majority of Shi‘ahs. . . I don’t for a moment doubt that the final authority must be in the hands of the Sunnis, in spite of their numerical inferiority; otherwise you will have a mujtahid-run theocratic state, which is the very devil.”¹⁰⁶ Bell essentially argued that Shi‘is’ political decisions would be determined by their religious

¹⁰³ Wilson, *Mesopotamia 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties; a Personal and Historical Record*, 253.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia*, 83.

¹⁰⁵ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 28.

¹⁰⁶ “Gertrude Bell to Sir. Hugh Bell, 3 October 1920,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

leaders, not unlike anti-home rule British Protestants who blamed the Catholic clergy for the rise of home-rule politics in Ireland.

Civil administrators' criticisms of the Shi'i ulama went beyond their potential interference in the new secular state to include more general criticisms about their abusive influence over their followers. Here again, officials' descriptions of Shi'i Islam bear similarities to British Protestants' descriptions of Catholics. In the 1919 Annual Report for the Hillah Division, the Assistant Political Officer for Karbala accused Shi'i mujtahids of, "an avarice and lack of scruple in the performance of their semi-judicial functions."¹⁰⁷ He went on to give the example of the practice of "prayer money," where Shi'is who failed to say their prayers could pay a fee to a Mujtahid to have him arrange for others to say the prayers in their place, making them right with God. He noted that, "on the death of one of the predecessors of the present chief Mujtahid, his account books showed a debit of 6000 years of prayers paid for but still unsaid! A sum of L. 40,000 in gold... represented the cash equivalent of some, at any rate unfulfilled hopes of the souls of the damned, for such they must now considered to be."¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, Bertram Thomas echoed McLeod's description of British Protestants' attitudes towards the Irish when he referred to the tribes of his Shatrah district as "being the most priest-ridden of men."¹⁰⁹

The Shi'i ulama (and umma) were also accused of being intolerant and close minded, criticisms that were frequently directed at the Catholic Church. The phrase 'bigotry' was frequently used in British officials' descriptions of the Shi'i ulama, often with an implicit or explicit association to how these attitudes would negatively impact the development of Iraq.

¹⁰⁷ "Advanced Extract from Administrative Report of Political Officer Hillah Regarding Karbala and Status of Mujtahids.," April 5, 1920, 2, FO 371/5074/5285, United Kingdom National Archives.

¹⁰⁸ "Status of Mujhatids," 3.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia*, 83.

Before accusing the Shi‘i ulama of corruption, the APO of Karbala also stated that, “Living in a state of proclaimed seclusion from the affairs of the non-religious world, it would be surprising if the outlook of the Mujtahids were not confined within the narrow and constraining lines of intense and self-satisfied bigotry. . . .”¹¹⁰ Here the APO focused specifically on the Shi‘i ulama, suggesting that their seclusion led to a bigoted outlook. A. H. Ditchburn, the Political Officer for the Muntafiq division, expressed similar sentiments when he blamed the intensity of the 1920 revolt on the “bigotry and fanaticism of the anti-British ‘Ulama at Najaf.”¹¹¹ Here the bigotry of the ulama was specifically tied to their anti-British activity, as was often, but not always the case in British officials’ comments about bigotry amongst the Shi‘i population. The theme of bigotry and closed-mindedness was also present in personal correspondence. James Mann, Assistant Political Officer for the Eastern Shamiyah district, described the nearby city of Najaf by saying that it, “contains one of the most bigoted and stiff-necked populations of all the cities of Iraq.”¹¹² Finally, this theme was also present in Intelligence Reports; in April of 1922 a report lamented that the newspaper *Lisan al Arab* was forced to close down after the Shi‘i religious leader Shaikh Mahdi al Khalisi issued a fatwa against the newspaper because of favorable coverage of the Bahai sect, a religious movement that the Shi‘i religious leadership was deeply opposed to.¹¹³ The report spoke negatively about the religious intolerance of the Shi‘is and also expressed disapproval that Khalisi was able to use his authority against the press.

¹¹⁰ “Status of Mujhatids,” 2.

¹¹¹ A. H. Ditchburn, “A History of the Muntafiq during the Mesopotamian Disturbances of 1920,” 1921, 19, CO 696/3, United Kingdom National Archives.

¹¹² Mann, *Mann*, 142.

¹¹³ “Intelligence Report No. 7, 1 April 1922,” in *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq Volume 2 1922-1923*, vol. 2, *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq* (London: Archive Editions Limited, 1998), 4.

Finally, Civil Administrators described Shi‘i Islam as overly focused on rituals and external shows of piety while ignoring moral character. James Saumerez Mann wrote to his father that, “The only place where vice is beastly and intolerable is Najaf, because it is combined there with the quintessence of Pharisaism and a blasphemous parody of holiness, and that I must say I can’t stand.”¹¹⁴ He implied that a focus on appearing holy actually led to poorer moral character. Mann used a similar logic in another letter, telling a friend that, “nobody takes any stock by the name of God, perhaps because it is so commonly on their lips;” suggesting that in spite of, or indeed because of, the unrelenting focus on God, the Shi‘is were lacking in true religion and good moral character.¹¹⁵ Gertrude Bell focused specifically on the rituals surrounding Muharram in a 1921 letter to her father.¹¹⁶ Bell described Shi‘is beating and cutting themselves, noting that government officials had to intervene to keep them from doing excessive harm to themselves or even committing suicide.¹¹⁷ An Intelligence Report from around the same time also commented on the Muharram festivities and went on to make an implicit comparison with Sunnis by noting that Sunnis “regard the antics of the Shi‘ahs as contrary to the faith, and of they are more enlightened look on them as a shameful exhibition of fanatical ignorance.”¹¹⁸

Civil Administrators placed more focus on the negative qualities of Shi‘is than they did on the positive qualities of Sunnis, but they did sometimes make direct or indirect comparisons between the two groups. Bell concluded her remarks about the Muharram festivities by telling

¹¹⁴ Mann, *Mann*, 193.

¹¹⁵ Mann, 210.

¹¹⁶ During the first ten days of the month of Muharram Shi‘i Muslims commemorate the death of the Imam Hussein, who was killed after initiating a revolt against the ruling Umayyad dynasty. During this period Shi‘is hold street processions that imitate a funeral procession. These commemorations include eulogies for Hussein and men sometimes beat themselves to express their grief. Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi‘ism*, 240.

¹¹⁷ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 17 September 1921.”

¹¹⁸ “Intelligence Report No. 21, 15 September 1921,” in *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq Volume 1 1920-1921*, vol. 1, *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq* (London: Archive Editions Limited, 1998), 18.

her father that, “It’s all extraordinarily savage and the Sunnis hate it, thinking it a disgrace to Islam. So, in a way it is.”¹¹⁹ Bell made an implicit comparison by using Sunnis’ sentiments to critique Shi‘is. A 1 March 1922 Intelligence Report made a similar comparison when it described the controversy surrounding the *Lisan al Arab*’s comments about the Bahai sect, concluding by saying that, “Both the King and the naqib are greatly annoyed by this exhibition of ignorant fanaticism which Sunnis in general qualify as characteristic of the mentality of the Shi‘ah sect.”¹²⁰

British descriptions of Sunni and Shi‘i leaders also demonstrate that British officials saw differences in the two groups. British officials were much less likely to discuss Sunni religious leaders, possibly because they saw them as less of a threat than the Shi‘i ulama. This fact in itself suggests that British officials saw the Shi‘i ulama as more threatening than their Sunni counterparts. The Naqib of Baghdad was one religious official who was discussed extensively, partially because he would later become the first Prime Minister of Iraq. Gertrude Bell spoke positively about the Naqib’s desire to separate politics from religion, saying that “Age and the temperament befitting a darwish, as he is fond of calling himself, disincline him from compromising himself by the public expression of clearly-defined opinions on politics, but his good will has not failed us.”¹²¹ Bell also praised Sunni secular leaders, speaking positively about Faisal and the Sunni Arab Iraqis who served with him in the Arab Revolt and his administration of Syria. She often emphasized the more modern mindsets of Faisal and his followers. Before Faisal was removed from his position in Syria, she suggested that his brother Abdullah would

¹¹⁹ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 17 September 1921.”

¹²⁰ “Intelligence Report No. 5, 1 March 1922,” in *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq Volume 2 1922-1923*, vol. 2, *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq* (London: Archive Editions Limited, 1998), 4.

¹²¹ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 32.

make a good King for Iraq, citing the fact that he liked to read the *Figaro*, a well-respected French newspaper, as reason why he was a good candidate to be the King of Iraq.¹²² These descriptions contrast with the much more negative descriptions that Bell and other British officials used to describe Shi‘i leaders.

The Sunni-Shi‘i comparison went much deeper than describing the traits of individuals and patterns amongst groups. Ultimately, civil administrators saw the differences they described as an inherent byproduct of the tenants and practices of each branch of Islam. Bertram Thomas explained to his readers that, “The Imamate conception stands for a theocracy and excludes the sanctity of other temporal power.”¹²³ Here Thomas tied the theocratic tendencies of the ulama to the Shi‘i belief in a line of Imams, descended from Ali, the son in law of the Prophet Muhammad, who were seen as the rightful political and spiritual heirs to Muhammad’s role as the leader of the Islamic community. In the *Review*, Gertrude Bell focused on how religious tenants and practices were set in each community, comparing the role of religious leaders in Sunni and Shi‘i Islam and noting that Sunni interpretations of Islamic law were tied up in different schools of thought that were not subject to alteration, whereas Shi‘i mujtahids had the authority to interpret and alter Islamic law and to give binding decrees which touched on all aspects of life “as they see fit.”¹²⁴ Both of these explanations were based on an oversimplified understanding of a Shi‘i theology that failed to grasp the diverse, complex and evolving nature of Shi‘i spiritual and political thought. The takeaway for many officials was that the Shi‘i faith was less compatible with modern society and self-governance. In a letter to her father, Gertrude Bell

¹²² “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 14 June 1920,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

¹²³ Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia*, 84.

¹²⁴ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 28.

said that, “The truth is I’m becoming a Sunni myself; you know where you are with them, they are staunch and they are guided, according to their lights, by reason; whereas with the Shi‘ahs, however well intentioned they may be, at any moment some ignorant fanatic of an ‘alim may tell them that by the order of God and himself they are to think differently.”¹²⁵ Bell’s choice of words here are telling. She not only saw Sunnis as superior, she identified with them. In light of McLeod’s arguments about the civic-religious values prevalent in Great Britain, this should not come as a surprise. Sunnis, “guided. . . by reason” were a much closer approximation of these officials’ visions of themselves than the Shi‘is guided by “some ignorant fanatic.”¹²⁶

British officials interpreted and evaluated Sunni and Shi‘i Islam based on their own metropole-inspired ideas about the proper role of religion, but these interpretations and evaluations also overlapped with officials’ ideas about both race and class. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed analysis of British officials’ conceptions of race and class, but some brief comments will help us to understand how religion, race and class all came together in British descriptions of Islam in Iraq. Race was an important, if ill-defined concept for British officials working in Iraq. British officials made clear distinctions between the Arab race, the Turkish race and the Persian race.¹²⁷ British conceptions of all three races were in turn impacted by emerging racial pseudoscience, conceptions of class and orientalist motifs. Priya Satia argues that British intelligence gatherers and imperial officials developed an affinity for Arabs because of a romantic image of the “noble Arab savage” that was set against their own

¹²⁵ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 31 July 1921,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

¹²⁶ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 31 July 1921.”

¹²⁷ For example, Gertrude Bell and A. T. Wilson frequently used racial language when comparing the potential of “Indian” and “Arab” labor. Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 20; Wilson, *Mesopotamia 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties; a Personal and Historical Record*, 48.

concerns about and alienation from modern society in Great Britain.¹²⁸ Toby Dodge echoes this idea in *Inventing Iraq*, arguing that British officials identified with rural, Arab Iraqis and also arguing that British officials associated the Ottoman administration of Iraq with the image of the corrupt, despotic urban ‘oriental.’¹²⁹

This contrast between the romantic tribal Arab and the corrupt Turkish or Persian ‘oriental’ informed the way that British officials thought about and described Islam. Sunni Islam was associated with the pure, Arab tribal nomad while Shi‘i Islam was associated with the corrupt Persian oriental. After describing the Quran to a friend, Mann said that in Shi‘i Islam, “Not one scrap of the ethics of the Prophet is remembered, God is a meaningless term, and all the expressions that I’ve quoted are survivals of the free desert speech of the Arab before he was spoilt by the fruits of his conquests and particularly the worse side of Persian religiosity.”¹³⁰ For Mann, Sunni Islam was a pure, tribal faith, while Shi‘i Islam suffered from both the contamination of a more settled, decadent culture and the contamination of Persian influence. Gertrude Bell echoed these ideas when she explained that, “The strong infusion of Persian blood had introduced a Persian turn of thought. . . fostering the mysticism, remote from the Semitic mind, which underlies Shi‘ah doctrines.”¹³¹ Once again, Shi‘i Islam was described as a corruption of Sunni Islam, influenced by Persian ideas and culture.

Individuals and the Discourse on Shi‘i Islam

¹²⁸ Priya Satia, “The Defense of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia,” *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 1 (February 2006): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.111.1.16>.

¹²⁹ Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 83–84.

¹³⁰ Mann, *Mann*, 210.

¹³¹ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 27.

There are striking similarities between the Protestant-Catholic binary of Great Britain and the ideas about the proper relationship between religion, society and state that were tied to it, and British descriptions of Sunni and Shi'i Iraqis. What is less clear is how these metropolitan ideas actually played out in the thought processes of individual officials. It is difficult to gauge the religious values of individual officials, since they tended not to talk explicitly about these values in their official writing and since intra-denominational disagreements make it difficult to use denominational affiliation as a way to understand an individual's religious experiences and values. However, a closer look at the backgrounds and comments of a few specific individuals can give us a better idea of how they applied metropolitan ideas to the Iraq context.

Before considering the thought processes of individual officials, it will help to explore the unique background of officials working in Iraq. The invasion and occupation of Iraq resulted in a mass exodus of Turkish officials (along with state records), leading to the effective evaporation of state institutions.¹³² This situation was very different from previous colonial encounters in places like Egypt and India, where Great Britain gradually developed authority over time, often by coopting preexisting institutions. The power vacuum in Iraq meant that British officials did not have the opportunity to coopt preexisting local institutions and instead had to create them in some cases virtually from scratch. To accomplish this task, the civil commissioners were forced to rely on an assortment of officials from various posts, many of whom lacked any administrative experience or knowledge of local language and customs. Political Officers S. E. Hedgecock and A. H. Ditchburn both complained about a lack of experienced officials in their 1920 annual

¹³² Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 12.

reports.¹³³ James Mann frequently commented on his lack of experience and lack of contact with other officials in letters home, noting that he was the only Englishman stationed within his remote district and that his knowledge of Arabic was inadequate for both speaking and writing at the time of his arrival.¹³⁴ For an administration where many officials lacked extensive local knowledge, were operating in very isolated environments and, in the case of higher-ranking officials, needed to make quick decisions with serious long-term implications, the Protestant-Catholic binary may have represented a helpful sort of shorthand for understanding the general differences between Sunnis and Shi'is. This shorthand could also prove valuable for explaining local conditions to officials and acquaintances back in Great Britain who were unlikely to have an extensive knowledge of the sectarian divisions within Islam.

The unique relationship between Sunnis and Shi'is in Iraq also gave the Sunni-Shi'i split a greater salience than in other parts of the empire. In Iraq, civil administrators found a considerable population of both Sunnis and Shi'is, a long history of Sunni dominance over a Shi'i majority, and a deep-seated sense of mistrust between the two communities. This situation gave the Sunni-Shi'i split a salience that was lacking in previous contexts, such as India, where Shi'is represented a small and compact part of a population that was already divided between Muslims and Hindus and Iran where Shi'is were a large majority. The fact that the Shi'i ulama were frequently involved in resistance to British authority would only add to the sense of urgency about the need to explain Sunni-Shi'i differences. Civil administrators frequently commented on the importance of recognizing the Sunni-Shi'i split and its potential impact on the

¹³³ Major S. E. Hedgcock, "Administrative Report for the 'Amara Division, For The Year 1920-1921," 1, CO 696/3, United Kingdom National Archives; Ditchburn, "A History of the Muntafiq during the Mesopotamian Disturbances of 1920," 2.

¹³⁴ Mann, *Mann*, 152–53.

future Iraqi state and civil society. The Bonham-Carter Constitution Committee made a special note of this division, emphasizing that conflict between the two groups was likely once the British began to withdraw their authority.¹³⁵ A. T. Wilson also emphasized the important implications of the split throughout his memoirs, saying that it was one of the major reasons that he did not believe an Arab Amir or King would be successful and also complaining that British supporters of an indigenous government failed to realize the immense religious and ethnic diversity in Iraq and the challenges this diversity would bring in forming a native government.¹³⁶ In light of this context, it is not surprising that civil administrators sought out a framework that could help them quickly understand and explain the Sunni-Shi'i division.

No British official in Iraq was more explicit about a desire to apply Christian values and ideas than acting Civil Commissioner A. T. Wilson. In his memoirs, Wilson stated that “The faith that was in us was this, that Britain’s contribution to the welfare of mankind is to infuse the principles of Christianity into its governance.”¹³⁷ This infusion was necessary because, “We believed that till ‘Iraq was leavened with the principles of Christianity she would be unfit for the exercise of freedom.”¹³⁸ He felt that Christian values were a prerequisite for freedom and once these values were instilled, “We could then leave the country with its resources developed, its peoples awakened and enlightened with wider and nobler ideals, no longer isolated but linked with the civilized races of the world.”¹³⁹ For Wilson, Christian values, freedom, civilization and

¹³⁵ The Bonham-Carter Committee was made up of officials serving in different branches of the Civil Administration and was responsible for writing a constitution for the new Anglo-Iraqi state. In communications with the India and Foreign Offices in London, the committee made several observations about potential obstacles before going on to give its recommendation for the future constitution. “Future Constitution of Mesopotamia,” May 1, 1920, FO371/5226/4038, United Kingdom National Archives.

¹³⁶ Wilson, *Mesopotamia 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties; a Personal and Historical Record*, 113, 116.

¹³⁷ Wilson, 193.

¹³⁸ Wilson, 193.

¹³⁹ Wilson, 193.

participation in the brotherhood of nations were all mutually related. He was probably not thinking of conversion when he made these comments. There is no record of any serious effort to promote proselytization amongst Iraq's Muslim population.

A quick look at Wilson's religious upbringing and his personal values will prove useful in understanding what Wilson meant by "the principals of Christianity." The religious lineage of the Wilson family speaks to the complex, dynamic nature of religious belief in nineteenth and early twentieth century Great Britain. A. T. Wilson's father and grandfather both served in the Church of England. His grandfather was an ardent evangelical, but A. T.'s father was an early advocate for adopting higher criticism and developing a new modernist Christian worldview.¹⁴⁰ A. T. Wilson did not follow his father into the ministry, although he did join the Modern Churchmen's Union, where he helped to write a book of common prayer based around a modernist interpretation of Christianity.¹⁴¹ A. T.'s biographer summed up Wilson's religious views by saying that he, "emerged as a 'modern churchman' in the same tradition as his father, a man somewhat impatient of doctrine and dogma, somewhat contemptuous of priesthoods and hierarchies, intent on a reconciliation between the truths of Christianity and the discoveries of science, and interested primarily in Christianity as a basis for individual conduct and, through individual conduct, as an ethical basis for social life."¹⁴² Even though Wilson's views were a departure from traditional British Protestantism in some regards, these values still largely aligned with the values that McLeod argues were associated with Protestant identity.

Wilson's religious values map on to his criticisms of Shi'i Islam and the potential threat that it posed to his vision for the future of Iraq. Wilson was often highly critical of the Shi'i

¹⁴⁰ John Marlowe, *Late Victorian: The Life of Sir Arnold Talbot Wilson* (London: The Cresset Press, 1967), 3, 5.

¹⁴¹ Marlowe, 275.

¹⁴² Marlowe, 275.

ulama, calling them “spiritual tyrants” in his memoirs and raising concerns about their political influence in communications to London, sentiments that make sense in light of his low view of “priesthoods and hierarchies.”¹⁴³ He also complained about the Shi‘i religious leadership’s efforts to resist British intervention and repeatedly stressed the need to get Iraqis to embrace Western innovations, concerns that make sense in light of his “intent on a reconciliation between the truth of Christianity and the discoveries of science.”¹⁴⁴ These criticisms and concerns about Shi‘i Islam were significant for Wilson, since he saw religion as the basis for personal conduct and social life. In order for Iraq to develop a successful modern state and society, Iraq would also have to develop a modern Islam, one that was analogous to Wilson’s vision for a modern Christianity. The “Christian principals” that Wilson sought to instill were not beliefs about God, but a way of thinking about and applying religious values and ideas.

As a lower-ranking official, James Saumerez Mann did not make as many comments about British policy, but he did make frequent direct comparisons between his view of Christianity and his view of Islam. In *An Administrator in the Making*, Mann’s father created a sort of autobiography of his deceased son by editing together letters from Mann to family and friends back home. This book is a valuable resource, since it contains descriptions of Mann’s experiences at home and also because of the very explicit way that Mann discussed his views of Christianity and Islam. Mann’s father describes him as “brought up in the Church of England, in an atmosphere which may be described as Liberal and Evangelical.”¹⁴⁵ However, the father also

¹⁴³ Wilson, *Mesopotamia 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties; a Personal and Historical Record*, x; “Anti-British Attitude of Chief Mujhatid of Kerbala,” April 8, 1920, FO 371/5071/2565, United Kingdom National Archives; Marlowe, *Late Victorian*, 275.

¹⁴⁴ Wilson, *Mesopotamia 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties; a Personal and Historical Record*, 253; Marlowe, *Late Victorian*, 275.

¹⁴⁵ Mann, *Mann*, 3.

goes on to note that “when twelve years old he joined a small unsectarian class of boys. . .”¹⁴⁶

This interdenominational focus would be a theme throughout Mann’s education. At Oxford, he participated in the Christian Union, a group that a fellow student described as, “a wonderful set of people, composed of very various elements, extreme Catholic to extreme Evangelical, practical men some, visionaries some, and some very theological.”¹⁴⁷ The friend would go on to emphasize Mann’s distaste for sectarian divisions and rule-heavy religion, pointing out that, “He disliked dogmatism of any kind, religious or political, and he particularly disliked the compulsory division of present-day Christians into sections as the result of historical accidents.”¹⁴⁸

Mann’s dislike of ‘dogmatism’ and divisions would play an important role in how he thought about and described Islam in Iraq. He often made very explicit connections between his views on Christianity and his views on other faiths. When complaining about a Jewish British official who refused to dine with him, he stated that, “I get very clear glimpses of the fatuity of the ‘religious’ part of all religions – from which emphatically I do not except any Christian Church except the Quakers, who have none – in my encounters with Jews and Muslims.”¹⁴⁹ Mann made frequent comparisons between Islam and Christianity. For the most part, these comparisons centered on what he saw as positive and negative interpretations of each religion, rather than on comparing Christianity and Islam as a whole. In a letter to a friend he compared the difference between scripture and practice in both faiths, quoting a verse from the Quran, and then saying that it, “Doesn’t sound much like a ‘jihad,’ does it; nor do the Beatitudes suggest a

¹⁴⁶ Mann, 3.

¹⁴⁷ Mann, 304.

¹⁴⁸ Mann, 304.

¹⁴⁹ Mann, 193.

European war.”¹⁵⁰ Dogmatism, in particular, continued to be an important theme for Mann, one that would influence his view of Shi‘i Iraqis. He told his mother that, “They say all pilgrim cities are foul, and that there is little to choose between Mecca, Karbala, Najaf, and Jerusalem. The religious life certainly seems to breed the beastlier vices, and it is precisely among the holiest men that the worst abominations are rampant.”¹⁵¹ Here he tied the moral bankruptcy of pilgrim cities to their focus on rules, rituals and doctrine over character. Mann’s distaste for dogmatism also extended into his comparisons of Shi‘i and Sunni Islam. He went on to tell his mother that, “And yet Islam, cleared of the post-Koranic accretions and all these hateful Shi‘ah traditions, is on the whole a clean and decent religion. . .”¹⁵² For Mann, Shi‘i Islam was a corruption of a simpler, purer faith. Ultimately, Mann’s view of Shi‘i Islam impacted his overall perceptions of Shi‘i Iraqis as a group; in one of his later letters Mann told a friend frankly that, “The Qu’ran is in parts magnificent, and there is hope for the Sunni: but the Shi‘ah seems to me to be blighted from birth.”¹⁵³

Mann’s letters exhibit many of the themes that informed the Protestant-Catholic binary, such as a disdain for a politically active religious leadership, and a low view of perceived intellectual and religious intolerance. On the other hand, Mann’s strong anti-sectarian ideas and his participation in interdenominational organizations suggest that he was probably not explicitly anti-Catholic. Like many people of his generation, Mann was probably influenced by values that were originally tied into the Protestant-Catholic binary, even as the binary itself was gradually replaced with a more general Christian-non-Christian binary. Interestingly, although Mann

¹⁵⁰ Mann, 232.

¹⁵¹ Mann, 169.

¹⁵² Mann, 169.

¹⁵³ Mann, 210–11.

probably did not think of his Christian values in terms of a Catholic other, he still occasionally used Catholic terms to describe Shi‘is in Iraq. In an early letter to a friend he referred to Najaf as, “the seat of the Mujtahids who are the Shi‘ah Vatican. . .”¹⁵⁴ Even though he was not anti-Catholic, Mann may have seen the term ‘Vatican’ as a quick short-hand to explain the city to a friend who probably had no knowledge of Islam or Iraq. This approach was much quicker and simpler than explaining the Islamic history that gave Najaf significance or the actual individuals and institutions that made Najaf an important center for Shi‘i Islam.

Gertrude Bell was another official who probably embraced some of the ideas related to the Protestant-Catholic rivalry even though she did not fully embrace the Protestant-Catholic rivalry. Bell rarely discussed her religious values explicitly in her official or unofficial writing during her time in Iraq, but biographer Georgina Howell discovered several letters from both Bell and her family which suggest that Bell was an atheist.¹⁵⁵ As with Mann, it is not surprising that Bell embraced some of the ideas that were related to the Protestant-Catholic binary. The emphasis on separating temporal and spiritual authority would still make sense within an atheist world view, as would the value placed on intellectual open-mindedness. However, it is interesting that she often chose to use explicitly anti-Catholic references to explain her criticisms of Shi‘i Iraqis. It is helpful to remember how widespread anti-Catholic ideas were in late nineteenth century Great Britain. As we have already seen, McLeod notes that anti-Catholic images and ideas were ubiquitous in the press and in the curriculum of British schools.¹⁵⁶ When Bell used phrases like ‘Pope’ or ‘Vatican’ and even made specific references to critiques of the

¹⁵⁴ Mann, 149.

¹⁵⁵ Georgina Howell, *Daughter of the Desert: The Remarkable Life of Gertrude Bell* (London: Macmillan, 2006), 31, 66.

¹⁵⁶ McLeod, “Protestantism and British National Identity,” 51, 53.

Catholic clergy's involvement in politics, she was drawing on a set of ideas and images that most Britons could understand. Explaining the interference of Shi'i mujtahids in reference to the common image of the Pope or a priest interfering in secular affairs represented a simpler rhetorical device than going into a detailed explanation of Shi'i theology, institutional structure and practice.

The Protestant-Catholic binary was a valuable aid in understanding and explaining Great Britain's new imperial project in Iraq since it represented a set of widely known symbols and ideas that could be used to quickly make sense of a new and often chaotic environment. The Protestant-Catholic binary was also valuable since it tied into a set of ideas about the proper relationship between religion, society and the state that British officials employed in evaluating Sunni and Shi'i Iraqis. Regardless of whether British officials in Iraq were explicitly anti-Catholic (or even religious at all), they still shared ideas about the need for a separation between political and religious authority and a need for religious and intellectual open-mindedness. These values led British officials to look at the Shi'i ulama and the Shi'i umma in a negative light. As we will see in the next chapter, these values also led British officials to consistently describe Shi'i Iraqis as a threat to their mission in Iraq, even as the narrative surrounding that mission evolved to meet changing circumstances.

Chapter 2: An Evolving Mission: The Discourse on Shi'is and the Overarching Narrative of Great Britain's Mission in Iraq

This chapter will situate the British discourse on Shi'i Iraqis within the broader narrative of Great Britain's role in Iraq. It will also explore changes and continuities within the broader narrative and the discourse on Shi'is over time, focusing specifically on changes following Percy Cox's arrival to assume the post of High Commissioner in October of 1920. This chapter will show that even though the discourse on Shi'i Iraqis was intertwined with a broader civilizing mission narrative that saw Iraqis as needing British help to achieve modernity, British officials continued to see Shi'is as a threat to their modernizing mission, even after these officials came to see urban Sunnis as potential partners in the mission.

British officials described themselves as saviors, coming to rescue Iraq from the backwards rule of the Ottoman Turks and to develop Iraq into a modern, civilized nation. Consistent with this civilizing mission narrative of the British as saviors, officials argued that Iraqis were not ready for self-government and in fact preferred to have a long-term British led administration. The British discourse on Shi'i Iraqis fit within this broader narrative. The Shi'i ulama and Shi'i umma were consistently portrayed as a threat to British officials' mission to create a successful modern state in Iraq. However, consistent with the civilizing mission narrative, British officials did express hope that the backwardness of the Shi'i umma and the threat of the ulama might decline over time; British officials also described themselves as saving Iraqi Shi'is from Sunni Ottoman domination.

Ultimately, elements of the overarching narrative about British officials' role in Iraq would be altered when officials in London made a concerted effort to reorient the civil

administration towards quickly developing a nominally independent Iraqi state. In October 1920, Percy Cox arrived in Iraq to take the role of High Commissioner and implement orders from London to create an indigenous Iraqi government. Along with this change in policy, civil administrators began to describe urban Sunni Iraqis in a more favorable light, referring to them as partners in an effort to create a modern state, rather than subjects who were not yet fit to take part in their own governance. However, the British discourse on Shi'is remained largely unchanged, even as the broader narrative about Iraq as a whole was transformed.

Civil administrators' mission in Iraq

British officials in Iraq described their roles in terms of a civilizing mission narrative, where they saw themselves as saviors, rescuing Iraqis from Ottoman oppression and misrule and helping them to develop a modern state and society. This savior narrative was reflected in British comments about the improvement of Iraq under British rule, as well as British comments about the inability of Iraqis to govern themselves without British assistance. No single document better encapsulates the overarching savior narrative of British officials than Gertrude Bell's *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*. Commissioned as a command paper in response to criticisms of the Civil Administration in Parliament and the press during the summer of 1920, this report was an attempt to explain Iraqi society and British policy in Iraq to a metropolitan audience that had little knowledge of either. To Bell and her superior, A. T. Wilson, it was probably also seen as a space to justify British policy to a critical metropolitan audience and to articulate a vision for Great Britain's policy in Iraq at a time when important

decisions about the future of the mandate were being made.¹⁵⁷ Bell was quick to emphasize the selfless motivations of British officials, saying early on that “We upheld steadfastly the theory . . . that we were not at war with the Arab race, but were co-operating with them for their liberation from Turkish tyranny.”¹⁵⁸ This comment clearly articulated a vision of British officials as saviors, coming to liberate and aid “the Arab race” rather than simply occupy and rule. This narrative extended from past actions into a vision for the future. Speaking about the ongoing process of immigration of tribal Arabs from an overcrowded central Arabia into Iraq, Bell said that, “Instead of devastating hordes, sweeping like locusts over cornfield and pasture, the surplus population of Arabia may find in Mesopotamia reconstituted by good administration, not only abundant means of livelihood, but far-reaching possibilities of social and intellectual advance.”¹⁵⁹ This statement gets to the heart of the British vision of Iraq, a vision which saw British officials transforming Iraq from a state of chaos, violence and oppression, to a state of order and advancement. Bell would go on to give numerous examples of improvements that British officials brought to Iraq, including more effective court systems, improved agriculture and more advanced medicine.

¹⁵⁷ 1920 was a crucial year in the development of British policy towards Iraq. In April, Great Britain was officially granted the mandate for Iraq and during the summer, the revolt on the Middle Euphrates and growing criticism of British policy in the press brought an intense pressure to formulate a long term strategy for the region. The viewpoint of this document raises some interesting issues. By 1920, Bell and Wilson had developed different ideas about the future of Iraq; both saw Great Britain’s role in Iraq as a modernizing savior, but Bell felt that some Iraqis, particularly urban, Sunni Nationalists, were capable of administering Iraq with significant aid and advice from British officials, while Wilson was adamant that British officials would need to be directly responsible for the governance of Iraq for an extended period of time. Wilson delegated the writing of the Review to Bell, but it tends to reflect Wilson’s view of the situation in Iraq. Bell probably tailored elements of the document to meet Wilson’s approval or the document may have been edited by him after the fact. After sending a portion of the draft to her mother, Bell told her that, “I don’t believe HMG will let the chapter be published as I have written it.” “Gertrude Bell to Dame Florence Bell, 7 September 1920,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

¹⁵⁸ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 24.

¹⁵⁹ Bell, 20.

Division Political Officers also articulated the savior narrative, frequently commenting on the positive impacts of British rule in their annual reports. It is not surprising that they choose to speak glowingly about the successes of the local governments, since this reflected positively on their role as Political Officers, but regardless of the accuracy of their statements, the way they choose to define and frame their success offers insight into how they saw their role in Iraq. Major Pulley summarized his 1919 report on the Hillah Division by saying that, “Progress and consolidation have been the main feature of the past year, which has marked another forward step in the regeneration of this ancient land.”¹⁶⁰ ‘Progress’ and ‘regeneration’ were common themes in annual reports, as Political Officers emphasized the degradation of Iraq under Ottoman rule and compared this state to improvements provided by British rule. The 1920 annual report of Samarra employed a similar framework, saying that, “on many occasions comparison between the former and present conditions were made, very favorable to present times.”¹⁶¹ Once again, the Political Officer emphasized the improvements in Iraq compared to the backwardness of Ottoman rule.

The specific types of ‘progress’ mentioned in these annuals reports speak to how British officials in Iraq defined their goals and their mission. Major Pulley emphasized improvements in sanitation, pointing out that Karbala remained free of epidemics during the pilgrimage season and that when plague broke out in another part of the district, Iraqis were encouraged to embrace modern medicine when they saw the success of inoculations.¹⁶² The 1920 Samarra report also emphasized sanitary improvements, noting that sanitation in the towns was improving, and that

¹⁶⁰ H. C. Pulley, “Administrative Report of the Hillah Division For the Year 1919,” April 9, 1920, 25, FO 371/5080/13054, United Kingdom National Archives.

¹⁶¹ Major E. S. Berry, “Administrative Report for the Samarra Division, For The Year 1920,” January 18, 1921, 1, CO 696/3, United Kingdom National Archives.

¹⁶² Pulley, “1919 Hillah Report,” 15.

“The Civil Surgeon and his present staff are very popular with the public, and their efforts are well appreciated.”¹⁶³ Medicine and sanitation were major points of emphasis in division annual reports, with Political Officers measuring themselves in terms of their ability to implement Western medical practices, and, especially, their ability to convince Iraqis to adopt these practices. Here, progress was defined in terms of implementing Western practices and encouraging Iraqis to develop a mindset that was conducive to accepting these practices.

The savior narrative was also present in British officials’ personal correspondence to family and friends. Like the Political Officers in their annual reports, Assistant Political Officer James Saumerez Mann also made frequent reference to the benefits that the administration was bringing to his district. He placed a special interest on the canal and irrigation systems that had the potential to dramatically increase Iraqis’ agricultural yields, repeatedly extoling the virtues of these projects to friends and family back home.¹⁶⁴ Mann frequently emphasized the selflessness and virtue of the civil administration’s approach, often responding to friends who questioned the true motivations of Britain’s occupation of Iraq. In a letter to Lady Murray, he said that, “. . . I don’t think our administration here is very Imperialistic . . . and if it wasn’t that we never know what [certain financial magnates] have been manipulating in deals with the Government at home, we could honestly state that we are running the country solely in the interests of its people. . . .”¹⁶⁵ This was one of several letters where Mann defended the civil administration and argued for the selflessness of its efforts to bring progress to Iraq. Gertrude Bell also emphasized the progress brought by British occupation in letters to her parents. In March of 1920, she said of Basra that, “I rub my eyes and wonder how such changes can possibly have been accomplished

¹⁶³ Berry, “Administrative Report for the Samarra Division, For The Year 1920,” 12.

¹⁶⁴ Mann, *Mann*, 207.

¹⁶⁵ Mann, 251.

in 3 years.”¹⁶⁶ A month later, as civil administrators and officials in London argued about the future administration of Iraq and even considered the possibility of a withdrawal, she said that, “But what I do feel pretty sure of is that if we leave this country to go to the dogs . . . the place which we leave empty will be occupied by seven devils a good deal worse than any which existed before we came.”¹⁶⁷ For Bell, Mann and many other civil administrators, the British presence in Iraq was about more than imperial gain, it was about creating a new nation and bringing it into the modern world.

The savior narrative of civil administrators implicitly suggested that Iraqis were incapable of achieving success on their own and prior to the change in administration in October of 1920, most officials argued that a long-term British administration was necessary because Iraqis were presently incapable of modern self-governance. The Bonham-Carter Committee commented on the lack of Iraqis with experience working in government in its report on a proposed constitution for the mandate Iraqi state, pointing out that before the war Turks held most of the higher ranking positions, and, “therefore, at present [Iraq] is almost devoid of natives who have had previous administrative experience of any value.”¹⁶⁸ The committee also questioned whether Iraqis could work together under a common banner, stating that, “Tribesmen despise townspeople who reciprocate.”¹⁶⁹ This belief in a mutual mistrust between urban and rural Iraqis was common amongst civil administrators. In the *Review*, Bell stated that, “the

¹⁶⁶ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 24 March 1920,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

¹⁶⁷ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 10 April 1920,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

¹⁶⁸ “Future Constitution of Mesopotamia,” May 1, 1920, The Bonham-Carter Committee was made up of British officials working in the various departments of the Iraq administration. It was chaired by Edgar Bonham-Carter, who was the head of the judicial depart and it was tasked with writing a constitution for the new mandate state. It’s recommendations were ultimately rejected by officials in London because they felt that it gave Iraqis too little authority in the government. FO 371/5226/4038, United Kingdom National Archives.

¹⁶⁹ “Future Constitution of Mesopotamia.”

intelligenza from top to bottom neither have any knowledge of rural conditions . . . and those who talk loudest in the coffee-shops concerning Arab liberties have in their mind only the liberties of the frequenters of coffee-shops.”¹⁷⁰ Bell questioned whether urban Iraqis really cared about the welfare of rural Iraqis and whether they would really work to create a government where the interests of all Iraqis were represented. James Saumerez Mann discussed this issue from the rural perspective, saying that, “to the landowners, settled Government has its disadvantages; and to some of the desert sheikhs the idea of law and order for any unit larger than their own tribe is quite unintelligible.”¹⁷¹ Once again, the implication was that Iraqis only saw politics and governance in terms of their personal interests and their local perspective.

Civil administrators were not content with demonstrating that Iraqis were not fit for self-government. In fact, officials often argued that Iraqis themselves felt unfit to govern and demanded a long term British administration. Major Daly, the PO for the Diwaniyah division, reported a conversation with a large gathering of tribal sheikhs who, “were most emphatic that the present form should continue and that the inhabitants of this country should be educated up and gradually admitted into the Government of the country.”¹⁷² He would go on to say that, “Any attempt to appoint Arabs to high posts at present they regard, as disastrous, and as putting the ‘cart before the horse’.”¹⁷³ One could certainly question the validity of this statement, since a long term British administration would mean better odds that Daly would have a long term position within the empire, but regardless of his personal motives, his reasoning still fits within the civilizing mission’s emphasis on the idea that Iraqis were not yet ready for self-government.

¹⁷⁰ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 129.

¹⁷¹ Mann, *Mann*, 147.

¹⁷² Major C. K. Daly, “Future Constitution of Mesopotamia,” June 3, 1920, 1, FO 371/5226/5723, United Kingdom National Archives.

¹⁷³ Daly, 1.

Gertrude Bell expressed similar sentiments in the *Review*, saying that, “On the whole the people adapted themselves with surprising alacrity to the new order. . . It was the best answer to Turkish propoganda.”¹⁷⁴ Here again, a British official emphasized that most Iraqis were happy with the British administration.

Officials were also quick to discredit those Iraqis that did speak up against the administration. Bell blamed nationalist agitation on the self-centered motives of former Ottoman officials, implying that they sought an independent Arab administration because they were “unemployed, and to a great extent unemployable.”¹⁷⁵ A. T. Wilson, meanwhile, emphasized that nationalists were, “stimulated as regards their strength and direction by external rather than internal happenings,” implying that the nationalist movement within Iraq was being directed and funded by outside parties.¹⁷⁶ Civil administrators came up with numerous reasons to explain nationalist agitation, as long as the reason did not challenge the administrators’ narratives about the role they should play in Iraq.

The Mission in Iraq and the Discourse on Shi‘is

The British discourse on Shi‘i Iraqis fit well within the broader civilizing mission narrative that guided the thought processes and actions of civil administrators in Iraq. Indeed, negative comments about the political influence and theocratic goals of the Shi‘i ulama were usually described in terms of the threat that Shi‘is might pose to British efforts to create a modern state in Iraq. Concerns about Shi‘i religious leaders’ desire to play an active role in the

¹⁷⁴ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 6.

¹⁷⁵ Bell, 127.

¹⁷⁶ Sir Arnold T. Wilson, “Political Situation in Mesopotamia,” July 4, 1920, FO 371/5227/7826, United Kingdom National Archives.

political discourse and the willingness of many in the Shi‘i umma to follow their lead led civil administrators to express concern about the future of a modern, secular Iraq. British officials often commented on the potential political power of the Shi‘i ulama. In the 1919 annual report on the Hillah division, the British APO responsible for Karbala (an important religious center for Shi‘i Iraqis) pointed out that, “Among Shia’ahs [the ulama’s] word is law. . . and occasionally they exercise strong political influence, even in opposition to the established government of the country.”¹⁷⁷ James Mann echoed this sentiment when he told his father that, “it is said that the more powerful of them [the mujtahids of Najaf] could excommunicate the Shah of Persia himself.”¹⁷⁸ Both of these statements emphasized the power of the Shi‘i ulama and their ability to potentially threaten the sovereignty of the new administration that British officials hoped to build. Concerns about the potential interference of the Shi‘i religious leadership was only heightened by British officials’ assumptions about the ulama’s goals and mindsets. In his memoirs, A. T. Wilson complained that the Shi‘i ulama sought to “stem the rising tide of emancipation,” and were opposed to British innovations such as girls’ schools, public hospitals, and sanitation codes.¹⁷⁹ Wilson and other civil administrators saw the Shi‘i ulama as fundamentally opposed to the Western institutions and mindsets that British officials were attempting to implement and expressed concern that the Shi‘i ulama would attempt to use their authority amongst their followers to challenge the British presence in Iraq.

British concerns about conflict with the Shi‘i ulama were not just hypothetical, as Shi‘i religious leaders did often attempt to challenge specific British policies and Britain’s position as

¹⁷⁷ “Advanced Extract from Administrative Report of Political Officer Hillah Regarding Karbala and Status of Mujtahids,” April 5, 1920, 1, FO371/5074/5285, United Kingdom National Archives.

¹⁷⁸ Mann, *Mann*, 149.

¹⁷⁹ Wilson, *Mesopotamia 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties; a Personal and Historical Record*, x, 300.

the mandatory power over Iraq. On 18 March 1920, A. T. Wilson informed the Secretary of State for India that the chief Mujtahid of Karbala had issued a fatwa against serving in the British administration.¹⁸⁰ Wilson went on to point out the practical impact of this act, noting that a Shi'i serving in the Arab Levies had been refused burial rights by a Shi'i religious leader and that if word of this spread, recruitment would suffer.¹⁸¹ Gertrude Bell also gave an example from Iraq, pointing out that when the British posed the question of what form the future government of Iraq should take, "In Karbala and Kadhimain the mujtahids forbade believers to pronounce in favour of anything but an Islamic government, and controversy ran so high that enquiries were broken off. . ."¹⁸² Both of these examples indicated that the Shi'i ulama could potentially force a government to change its course of action. British officials were quick to emphasize this potential threat to their superiors back in Great Britain. In fact, when the Bonham-Carter Committee submitted its proposal for a constitution for mandate Iraq, it stated that, "Shiah tenets are, however, a potential source of difficulty to any Government, for it is claimed that decisions of Mujtahids transcend those of any secular authority."¹⁸³ The discourse on Shi'i Iraqis was not just about comparing the relative merits of different Islamic groups; it was ultimately tied to assessing potential threats to the British project in Iraq.

British officials also described the threat of the Shi'i ulama in terms of what they saw as the religious leaders' moral corruption. When talking about specific individuals, British officials often described a Shi'i religious leader's anti-British activity as tied to their personal desire for

¹⁸⁰ A Mujtahid was a highly respected religious scholar with the authority to interpret the religious law and give rulings on how the law applied to contemporary issues. British officials sometimes referred to the Mujtahids specifically when describing the Shi'i threat and sometimes referred to the Shi'i religious leadership as a whole. "Anti-British Attitude of Chief Mujhatid of Kerbala."

¹⁸¹ "Anti-British Attitude of Chief Mujhatid of Kerbala."

¹⁸² Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 128.

¹⁸³ "Future Constitution of Mesopotamia."

fame. For example, Gertrude Bell blamed the anti-British activity of Sayyad Muhammad al Sadr, a low-ranking Shi‘i religious leader who played a role in organizing and encouraging anti-British gatherings and violence in 1920, on his desire for personal fame, telling her father that he “was little more than the son of Saiyid Hasan, but a month later he leapt into an evil prominence as the chief agitator in the disturbances. In those insane days he was treated like a divinity.”¹⁸⁴ Here Bell implied that Sadr’s efforts against the British were inspired by a desire for personal fame rather than genuine religious sentiment. A. T. Wilson also emphasized the personal motives of the Shi‘i religious leadership in his memoirs, saying that “they were clear-sighted enough to see that the existence of a well-organized and efficient administration, bent on bettering the lot of the masses, and with a liberal education policy, would ere long undermine their influence, and imperil their conception of a theocratic government.”¹⁸⁵ Once again, a civil administrator pointed out a conflict between the goals of British officials and the Shi‘i ulama, this time with an emphasis on the selfish motives of religious officials who were concerned about whether they could maintain their influence in a modern society.

British officials also tied resistance to what they described as the Shi‘i ulama’s desire to protect opportunities to take advantage of their followers financially. After describing the practice of prayer money in the 1919 Annual Report for the Hillah Division, the APO of Karbala explained that, “It will be sufficiently clear that persons of this character, would find much in the methods of an infidel Government, to arouse their natural opposition to all constituted authorities other than their own.”¹⁸⁶ Essentially, the APO argued that Shi‘i religious leaders were worried

¹⁸⁴ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 20 July 1921,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

¹⁸⁵ Wilson, *Mesopotamia 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties; a Personal and Historical Record*, 253.

¹⁸⁶ “Status of Mujhatids,” 3.

that a modern government and society would undermine their opportunities for graft. The APO's superior, Major Pulley, would echo the same sentiments in another part of the report, when he said that "Some of the less reputable members of the Mujtahid fraternity had undoubtedly abused their position to the benefit of their own pockets, and a not unnatural disinclination to disgorge their illgotten gains caused them to view the Anti-British intrigue with equanimity, if not to accord it their avowed support."¹⁸⁷

The Iranian nationality of many Shi'i religious leaders and Shi'i citizens residing in the shrine cities was also frequently mentioned as a potential threat to the British modernizing project. This particular concern was not entirely unfounded, since there was a regular flow of both pilgrims and financial gifts from Iran into the shrine cities and some of the leading Shi'i religious scholars of these cities were originally from Iran and considered themselves to be Iranian subjects.¹⁸⁸ British comments about the nationality of Shi'i religious leaders and Shi'i citizens of the shrine cities focused on the issue of how to create a modern state with modern borders and a modern political sphere in a place where personal identities and relationships defied the clear cut boundaries of modern nation-states. As the civil administration worked to create an indigenous Iraqi cabinet, Gertrude Bell complained to her father that, "One of the difficulties is that all or nearly all the leading men of the Shi'ah towns are Persian subjects and must be made to adopt Mesopotamian nationality before they had take official positions in the Mesopotamian state."¹⁸⁹ Around the same time, an intelligence report expressed the concern that Shi'i religious leaders were, "accustomed to seek support by an appeal to Persian opinion. Thus

¹⁸⁷ Pulley, "1919 Hillah Report," 5.

¹⁸⁸ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 21.

¹⁸⁹ "Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 1 November 1920," Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

their political influence cuts across established authority in the ‘Iraq and as the Turks were fully aware, constitute a danger to the State.’¹⁹⁰ Both of these comments dealt with practical issues related to the complex identity of some Shi‘is, one in terms of how they would be incorporated into the body politic and one in terms of their potential to complicate state sovereignty by seeking the intervention of a neighboring state. However, this concern about the trans-national nature of the Shi‘i religious community also parallels British comments about the ‘Persian corruption’ of Shi‘i Islam and the purity of Arab Sunni Islam.

Caveats in the discourse

British officials were highly critical of the Shi‘i ulama, the Shi‘i umma and Shi‘i Islam as a whole, but they also expressed a hopefulness that the Shi‘i ulama could be disempowered and the Shi‘i umma could become more progressive. This hopefulness is understandable in light of the civilizing mission narrative; this mission would make little sense if British officials did not believe that they were capable of changing Iraqis’ mindsets, even though this change might play out over the course of generations. British officials also described themselves as saviors rescuing Shi‘i Iraqis from Sunni domination, yet another idea that ties into the overarching narrative about the British role in Iraq.

Civil administrators often remained ambivalent about the extent of the power of the Shi‘i ulama, even as they made statements outlining that potential threat. The 1919 Hillah annual report included extended comments from the Assistant Political Officer for Karbala about the potential threat of Shi‘i mujtahids, but it would also go on to note that, “It is fortunate for the

¹⁹⁰ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 5.

peace and order of the country that the influence of the Mujtahids in the Hillah Division, outside Karbala, is small. The mundane characteristics which many of them exhibit, coupled with their foreign origin, go far to counteract their importance as religious leaders, and outweigh the political influence which they otherwise might yield.”¹⁹¹ The report would also go on to note that Shi‘i tribesmen sided with Great Britain and against their religious leaders when asked about whether they wished to see the British presence in Iraq remain. For all of its negative statements about the potential threat of the Shi‘i ulama, the *Review of the Civil Administration* expressed an ambivalent and even hopeful attitude about the future, saying, “On the other hand, the longer peaceful progress is maintained, the more will the people of the country learn to value it in terms of cash, and the less disposed will they be to see it interrupted by the prejudice or indocility of any class, however holy.”¹⁹² Bell focused her hope for the future of Iraq on the theory that Shi‘i Iraqis would see the benefits of progress that Great Britain was bringing to Iraq and ultimately reject the backwards outlook of their religious leaders.

The revolt during the summer of 1920 certainly had the potential to check the optimism of civil administrators, but once victory was assured, officials began to express a hope that the failure of the Shi‘i ulama’s efforts would quicken the pace of their decline. In early October, Gertrude bell told her father that, “the failure of the rising, which as far as the tribes are concerned, was all due directly to mujtahid incitement, may considerably discredit those worthies as temporal guides.”¹⁹³ This sentiment would be echoed as the last pockets of resistance surrendered. In November, an Intelligence Report would note that, “After the

¹⁹¹ Pulley, “1919 Hillah Report,” 3–4.

¹⁹² Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 40.

¹⁹³ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 3 October 1920,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

surrender of [Najaf] the inhabitants showed themselves eager to persuade the tribes to abandon resistance and the trend of public opinion against the Shi‘ah clergy, who had led the people into error, was strongly marked.”¹⁹⁴

Officials also took the time to note when Shi‘i religious leaders and citizens did not fit in to officials’ broad descriptions of Shi‘is as a whole. During a period of unrest in Baghdad, Gertrude Bell referred to Sayyad Muhammad al Sadr as, “the leading figure in the present disturbances. . . I believe him to be a shrewd and sensible man and I can’t think that we could not come to a working agreement with him if we tried.”¹⁹⁵ Bell would later change her opinion of Sadr, as he proved himself to be a consistent thorn in the side of British officials, but her hope for finding Shi‘i leaders she could work with persisted. In an October letter to her father she spoke hopefully in saying that, “the present premier mujtahid is tottering into his grave . . . and may be succeeded by someone more enlightened. There are such, even among mujtahids.”¹⁹⁶ Intelligence Reports also made a point of acknowledging Shi‘i religious leaders who abstained from the revolt and took time to note the viewpoints and reputations of candidates for major religious offices, implying that British officials saw Shi‘i religious leaders as individual actors rather than a monolithic bloc.¹⁹⁷

British officials also described themselves as saviors, rescuing Shi‘i Iraqis from Sunni Ottoman oppression. This narrative was a consistent theme running throughout the *Review of the Civil Administration*. Speaking about the Awqaf, the government department that administered

¹⁹⁴ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 6.

¹⁹⁵ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 14 June 1920.”

¹⁹⁶ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 3 October 1920.”

¹⁹⁷ The 15 November 1920 report would list Shi‘i leaders from Karbala who abstained from the revolt while a 31 January 1921 report discussed the political views of numerous candidates for the office of “Shaikh al Shari’ah.” “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 5; “Intelligence Report No. 6,” January 31, 1921, 5, FO 371/6350/3824, United Kingdom National Archives.

lands that were held in trust for religious purposes, Bell said that, “It must be borne in mind that the Auqf Department under the Turks was administered by Sunnis almost exclusively for the benefit of Sunnis,” meaning that Shi‘i shrines and mosques were allowed to fall into ruin while Sunni sites were well cared for.¹⁹⁸ In 1920, the Political Officer of the Samarra division, which included shrines for several of the later Imams in the Twelver tradition, pointed out the widespread disrepair of Shi‘i sites and went into detail in describing issues within the Awqaf administration and some potential solutions.¹⁹⁹ Education and the judicial system were other areas where British officials pointed out the inequities of the Ottoman system, as well as British attempts to redress imbalances. Bell noted that under Ottoman rule, Shi‘is were not allowed to teach in state-sponsored schools, leading Shi‘i students to abstain from them.²⁰⁰ She would go on to say that the British were endeavoring to provide education to Shi‘is, but the process was slow due to a lack of properly trained teachers. In the 1920 Amara Division annual report, the education officer for Amara also noted the lack of Western-style education for Shi‘is and British efforts to improve access to education.²⁰¹ Finally, Bell would also discuss the court system, pointing out that the British had incorporated Shi‘i jurists into the “Shar’ah Court” system, whereas the Ottomans had required the Shi‘is to go before Sunni judges.²⁰² Taken together, these comments suggest that giving Shi‘is improved access to government-run institutions was an important aspect of the overall savior narrative of British officials.

¹⁹⁸ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 9–10.

¹⁹⁹ Berry, “Administrative Report for the Samarra Division, For The Year 1920,” 10.

²⁰⁰ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 11.

²⁰¹ Major S. E. Hedgcock, “Administrative Report for the ‘Amara Division, For The Year 1920-1921,” 14, CO 696/3, United Kingdom National Archives.

²⁰² Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 15.

An evolving narrative and a consistent discourse

The year 1920 marked a point of significant change for the civil administration's overarching narrative about Iraq, but in spite of this change, the discourse on Shi'i Iraqis remained consistent. Contrary to the views of most civil administrators in Iraq, officials in London ultimately decided that some Iraqis were capable of self-government and that the immediate creation of a nominally independent Iraqi state should be the centerpiece of British policy in Iraq.²⁰³ Officials in London had to contend with a war-weary, empire-questioning public that was reluctant to approve large expenditures in both manpower and money to support imperial expansion. They were also influenced by changing international opinions on empire in the wake of Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points. Finally, they were influenced by a public campaign led by celebrity Middle East veteran T. E. Lawrence, as well as an internal campaign on the part of the Foreign Office's H. W. Young, who was one of the only officials in London with first-hand experience in Iraq.²⁰⁴ Lawrence, Young, and a growing course of complaints about expenditures on Iraq convinced India Office officials that Great Britain needed to quickly create an indigenous government which would be assisted by British advisors and a minimal level of military and financial support.

From the end of the war until the San Remo conference in April of 1920, officials in London were reluctant to make any long-term policy decisions, as they waited for official international approval of Great Britain's mandate over Iraq. Once the mandate was officially granted, officials in London and Iraq both sought to implement their visions for the future of the country. During the spring and early summer, Civil Commissioner A. T. Wilson and officials in

²⁰³ The India Office of London was officially responsible for policy in Iraq, but it consulted with the Foreign, Colonial, and War Offices and major policy decisions were often made in inter-departmental committees.

²⁰⁴ Paris, *Britain, the Hashemites and Arab Rule, 1920-1925: The Sherifian Solution*, 368.

the India Office debated back and forth about Great Britain's plans for the future of Iraq and how those plans would be communicated to Iraqis. In October, Percy Cox arrived in Iraq to take Wilson's place at the head of the administration with a clear mandate to create an indigenous Iraqi government.²⁰⁵

Percy Cox was given a very clear goal: create an indigenous government, but he was also given considerable latitude in working out the details of this policy. Cox's instructions from the India Office clearly stated that, "the personnel of the Government must from the first be as completely Arab as possible, i.e., it must be composed as far as, and as soon as, practicable of Arab Ministers of State for each Department."²⁰⁶ London's priority was to create a government where Iraqi officials wielded real power (or at least could be made to appear to wield it). In terms of how this policy was carried out, Cox seems to have had considerable discretion. There were frequent discussions in London about the possibility of having a son of the Sharif of Mecca serve as Amir, but Cox was already advocating for this policy by the time that officials in London finally came to a consensus in March of 1921.²⁰⁷ H. W. Young also advocated for employing the Iraqi officers who had served with Faisal in the Arab Revolt and in his Syrian government, although he made no statements about excluding other actors.²⁰⁸ It is likely that Cox would have followed this policy anyway since the few members of the civil administration

²⁰⁵ Cox was already expected to assume the role of High Commissioner eventually, but the India Office expedited his return once they became concerned that Wilson would not begin the process of creating an indigenous government. It is unclear whether officials in London chose Cox because he already shared their vision or because they expected him to be more open-minded to their proposals than the recalcitrant Cox. During a meeting of the Interdepartmental Conference on Middle East Affairs, officials from the India and Foreign Offices expressed concern about whether Cox shared their vision and also insisted that he come to London before assuming control in Iraq to make sure that they were in agreement. Regardless, once in office Cox worked swiftly to create an indigenous government. "Minutes of Inter-Departmental Conference on Middle Eastern Affairs," 4–5.

²⁰⁶ "Appointment of Sir Percy Cox as High Commissioner: Instructions of His Majesty's Government," August 28, 1920, 3, IOR/L/PS/18/B347, British Library.

²⁰⁷ Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 38.

²⁰⁸ "Future Constitution of Mesopotamia."

that were already in favor of indigenous government were also advocates for employing the Iraqi Arab Revolt veterans.²⁰⁹

Officials in London rarely commented on the sectarian divisions within Iraq, or on how these divisions might impact decisions about the new Iraqi state. When they did, they tended to describe the divisions as an issue that could be overcome with the right leadership. It is not entirely clear why officials in London underestimated the significance of sectarian divisions in Iraq. These officials may have ignored civil administrators' warnings because they thought that the administrators were overemphasizing the problem to justify their policy of a long-term British administration or officials in London may have felt that any issues with Iraq were inconsequential in light of the need to decrease expenses to avoid public vitriol and unsustainable expenses. Regardless, it is clear that officials in London were prepared to give Percy Cox and his administration wide latitude in deciding who to include and exclude, as long as an indigenous government was established.

Before the arrival of Percy Cox, a small group of civil administrators were already developing an alternative savior narrative that saw some indigenous Iraqis as capable of taking a more active role in creating the new, modern Iraq. Early on during the occupation, Gertrude Bell felt strongly that Iraqis were incapable of self-government and required a long-term British administration.²¹⁰ By the summer of 1920, her views had evolved considerably. While other officials were highly critical of the independent Arab administration in Syria, Bell suggested that appointing an Arab monarch and bringing back Iraqis who were serving in Syria would deflate

²⁰⁹ "Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 14 June 1920."

²¹⁰ In February of 1919 she wrote *Self-Determination in Mesopotamia*, where she advocated for long term British rule in Iraq. Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 27.

growing nationalist sentiment without jeopardizing the future administration.²¹¹ When the Middle Euphrates erupted in revolt, Bell, unlike most of her peers, placed part of the blame on the approach of the administration, saying that, “In light of the events of the past two months there’s no getting out of the conclusion that we have made an immense failure here. The system must have been far more at fault than anything that I or anyone else suspected.”²¹² While other administrators were busy defending the savior narrative against mounting criticism, Bell was seeking to develop an alternative vision that maintained Great Britain’s role as savior but also saw certain Iraqis as more active participants in a joint mission to bring modernity to Iraq. Although outnumbered, she was not alone in her stance. Edgar Bonham-Carter, a veteran of the Sudan and the head of the civil administration’s judicial department, wrote *The Place of the Arab in the Administration* in February of 1919, advocating for a system of indirect British administration that was similar to the protectorate over Egypt.²¹³ In a letter shortly after Cox’s arrival, Bell spoke highly of a small cadre of like-minded officials who agreed on the need for an Iraqi government and were quick to work with Cox to set up a native administration.²¹⁴

Almost immediately upon Cox’s arrival in October of 1920, the civil administration’s narratives were altered to look favorably on the early establishment of an indigenous government. Cox initiated bimonthly intelligence reports that would give an overview of developments in the provisional government and in public opinion to officials in London and across the Middle East. The first Intelligence Report stated that, “in Baghdad and Mosul there was a strong desire for the immediate establishment of national institutions,” a definite shift from

²¹¹ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 14 June 1920.”

²¹² “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 23 August 1920.”

²¹³ Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 27.

²¹⁴ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 17 October 1920,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

the narrative under A. T. Wilson, when officials went out of their way to offer alternative explanations that cast most Iraqis as supportive of the administration and relegated nationalist sentiment to the irrational and the greedy.²¹⁵ The first report to the League of Nations clearly articulated the new narrative of the civil administration. Speaking about the underlying goals of the civil administration, the report stated that they were based on the “benevolent intentions” of forming an “Arab National Government.”²¹⁶ After describing the transition to a nominally independent constitutional monarchy headed by Faisal, the report emphasized that, “Yet though the change in the political landscape has been rapid it has been effected by orderly development.”²¹⁷ This statement was a far cry from the vision that officials like Wilson painted when they talked about the possibility of an indigenous government.

One could perhaps question the authenticity of these statements, since both the Intelligence Reports and the report to the League of Nations were written specifically for metropolitan audiences that would look favorably on the development of an Arab government. However, there is ample evidence that Percy Cox genuinely believed in the potential of the indigenous government. He actually fought with his superiors (by now the newly formed Middle East department within the Colonial Office) in favor of Faisal’s demands that the new King be given wider latitude in forming the organic law of Iraq.²¹⁸ This turn of events is evident of the tremendous change that had come to the civil administration of Iraq.

²¹⁵ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 1.

²¹⁶ High Commissioner of Iraq, *Iraq: Report on 'Iraq Administration. October 1920- March 1922* (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1922), 4.

²¹⁷ High Commissioner of Iraq, 1.

²¹⁸ High Commissioner of Iraq to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 17 August 1921, “New Policy in Mesopotamia,” August 31, 1921, FO371/6352/9854, United Kingdom National Archives.

The new narrative of the British presence in Iraq was centered around the vision of urban Sunnis as partners in a joint civilizing mission. The 30 November 1920 Intelligence Report noted that the High Commissioner was “warmly advocating” for the return of Sunni Iraqis who had been serving in the independent Syrian administration and might play a role in an indigenous government.²¹⁹ In his first report to the League of Nations Cox specifically praised the Sunni Iraqis returning from Syria and elsewhere, referring to them as “Men of experience and education,” and saying that their return was, “of advantage to the state.”²²⁰ The Sunni Naqib of Baghdad was also singled out for praise. The 15 November 1920 Intelligence Report referred to him as a man of “high social and religious standing” as well as “universal respect.”²²¹ The provisional government formed by Percy Cox in November 1920 was headed by the Naqib and almost all of its members with portfolio were Sunni.²²² In the first League of Nations Report Percy Cox spoke highly of this provisional government, saying that, “it performed important and instructive work, and during the whole period of its existence I relied on its loyal cooperation in seeking a solution for the problems that confronted us.”²²³ The high praise of the Sunni officials who made up most of the new indigenous government was a far cry from statements about Iraqis’ inability to play an active role in their own government, but this new narrative did not extend to all Iraqis.

British officials continued to view the Shi‘i ulama as a threat to the modernizing project. Intelligence reports frequently discussed the activities of the Shi‘i ulama and assessed their potential threats. A report from 31 January 1921 discussed the rising influence of Saiyid ‘Ali ibn

²¹⁹ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 3.

²²⁰ High Commissioner of Iraq, *Iraq: Report on Iraq Administration. October 1920- March 1922*, 5–6.

²²¹ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 2.

²²² “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 2–3.

²²³ High Commissioner of Iraq, *Iraq: Report on Iraq Administration. October 1920- March 1922*, 6.

Saiyid Muhammad Kadhim al Yazdi, voicing concern that he was “gradually disaffecting the tribes and Najafis against an Arab government.”²²⁴ Officials discussed potential Shi‘i threats in greater detail during periods of special religious significance such as Ramadan or the Muslim lunar month of Muharram, when Shi‘is mourned the martyrdom of Hussein. The 15 September 1921 Intelligence Report noted that, “The first ten days of the Muharram, when pious Shi‘ahs gather together in the holy towns give opportunity for much talk in the houses of the ‘Ulama.”²²⁵ Later on, the report would become more specific, mentioning a gathering of ulama where everyone spoke negatively of Faisal, the newly crowned King of Iraq, because of his willingness to cooperate with the British.²²⁶ Officials would also continue to express their concerns about the ulama in personal correspondence. As British officials prepared for a referendum to select Faisal as King of Iraq, Gertrude Bell expressed doubts about whether Faisal could gain the support of the Shi‘i ulama and prevent them from trying to interfere in the government. She told her father that, “I’ve still in the back of my mind got a doubt about the Shi‘ah ‘alims and mujtahids, confound them. We can do very little with them. Faisal thinks he has got them and I hope he is right. . . . That however, is on the knees of the gods – or the devils.”²²⁷ Bell expressed an enduring weariness about the Shi‘i religious leadership, suggesting that she would continue to see them as a threat to secular government.

In fact, British officials would continue to see the Shi‘i ulama as a threat to their modernizing mission and would take active steps to prevent them from playing a major role in Iraq’s civic discourse. As we have seen, British officials also supported the rise of a new Iraqi

²²⁴ “Intelligence Report No. 6,” 13.

²²⁵ “Intelligence Report No. 21, 15 September 1921,” 496.

²²⁶ “Intelligence Report No. 21, 15 September 1921,” 497.

²²⁷ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 10 July 1921.”

state that was dominated by the minority Sunni community. The next chapter will explore how the British discourse on Shi'i Iraqis played a role in forming these policies.

Chapter 3: Discourse and Policy

This chapter will explore how the British discourse on Shi‘i Iraqis impacted the policy decisions of British officials in Iraq during a period from October 1920 to early 1923. This short time frame represents a crucial period in the history of Iraq. It saw British officials in Iraq work with locals to create indigenous state institutions and establish precedents that would last throughout the mandate period and beyond. In October of 1920, High Commissioner Percy Cox established a provisional council that would govern Iraq and work to develop an electoral law for an Iraqi legislature. In August of 1921, after a brief tour and a quick referendum, Faisal was enthroned as King of Iraq. By late 1922 the provisional Iraqi government and Faisal had completed the electoral law, drafted a treaty to govern the relationship between Great Britain and Iraq and began the long process of electing the Iraqi legislature. These were all crucial moments. Since the British had officially declared their intentions of creating an independent indigenous government, British officials would be limited in their ability to remove the indigenous government’s officials or countermand their proposals without drawing the criticism that the mandate was a sham designed to hide the reality of British imperial control. This early period represented a key moment for British officials, since they would have to continue to work with the people they empowered and the precedents they established.

A variety of complex factors were involved in the decisions made by British officials during this period. They had to balance Great Britain’s strategic interests in Iraq with their perceptions of the best interests of Iraqis. Officials also had to consider various logistical limitations, as well as the actions of numerous groups of Iraqi actors, each with their own agendas. While bearing these complexities in mind, this chapter will argue that the discourse on Shi‘i Iraqis had a significant impact on British policy. The idea that the political activity of the

Shi'i ulama represented a significant threat to the future of a modern Iraq led British officials to make a concerted effort to challenge and eliminate Shi'i religious leaders' efforts to play a role in the political discourse of Iraq. Meanwhile, the idea that the Shi'i umma was more backwards than the Sunni umma also led British officials to support the chronic underrepresentation of Shi'is at all levels of the indigenous government. However, it is important to note that British officials also expressed a desire to protect Shi'is from Sunni domination and described themselves as a check that would prevent the Sunni dominated government from enacting policies that were detrimental to Shi'is.

This chapter will enhance our understanding of the influences on British policy in Iraq. In *Contriving King and Country*, Peter Sluglett argues that British policy in Iraq was driven primarily by strategic concerns about Britain's influence in the region.²²⁸ Sluglett acknowledges the underrepresentation of Shi'is and efforts to combat the political activity of the ulama, but he tends to explain these decisions in terms of strategic and logistical concerns. Toby Dodge challenged elements of Sluglett's take in *Inventing Iraq*, where Dodge argued that British officials genuinely sought to create a successful state in Iraq but failed due to cultural assumptions that clouded their understanding of Iraqi society.²²⁹ Dodge focused primarily on British perceptions of urban and rural difference, arguing that British officials' anxieties about modernity in Great Britain led them to empower rural tribal leaders. This chapter will complement Dodge's argument by demonstrating that policy decisions were also influenced by British officials' cultural assumptions about Sunni and Shi'i Islam.

²²⁸ Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 218.

²²⁹ Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, xi–xii, 1.

Policy Towards the Shi'i Ulama

Before and after the establishment of the provisional government, civil administrators consistently emphasized the need to limit the political involvement of the Shi'i ulama. In her *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, Gertrude Bell stated forthrightly that, “the great mujtahids, absorbed in matters of religion, should not take any part in temporal affairs.”²³⁰ This attitude remained consistent after the establishment of the provisional government and the coronation of Faisal as King of Iraq. The Intelligence Report of 1 February 1922 stated that, “The King is fully alive to difficulties which confronted the Ottoman Government and the Government of Occupation no less than his own and is specially anxious to weaken the influence of the Persian divines who occupy the highest place in the Shi'ah Vatican but have no interest in, or loyalty to, the ‘Iraq State.”²³¹ British officials took an active role in encouraging the indigenous government to take a hard line with the Shi'i ulama. In a December 1922 letter Gertrude Bell commented on a conversation with the King about the ulama, saying that, “I've been encouraging him to stand up to them boldly.”²³² Why were British officials anxious to exclude the Shi'i ulama from the political process?

One answer is that the Shi'i religious leadership represented a threat to Great Britain's position in Iraq. Shi'i religious leaders were often involved in acts of resistance against British authority and opposition to European colonization was an important facet of Shi'i political theory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²³³ The potential for resistance did

²³⁰ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 28.

²³¹ “Intelligence Reports No. 2 and No. 3, 15 January and 1 February 1922,” in *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq Volume 2 1922-1923*, vol. 2, Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq (London: Archive Editions Limited, 1998), 8–9.

²³² “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 16 December 1922,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

²³³ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 55.

feature prominently in British reports on the Shi‘i ulama. For example, the 31 December 1920 Intelligence Report made note of the death of the “Shari‘at al Ispahani,” an important Shi‘i religious leader, and went on to list several potential successors, discussing each individual’s stance towards the British and any role they played in the 1920 revolt.

Resistance was an important part of Shi‘i-British relations, but scholars should not assume that this conflict was inevitable. Many Shi‘i religious leaders proved willing to work with the British. There was already a preexisting relationship between British officials in India and Shi‘i religious leaders in Najaf from the administration of the Oudh Bequest, a religious endowment from a province in British-controlled India that British officials sought to use to gain influence in the shrine cities even before the invasion of Iraq.²³⁴ In fact, British officials were often careful to differentiate between Shi‘i religious leaders that resisted British authorities and those that were allies or neutral, often suggesting that only a small minority of the ulama were involved in anti-British activity. For example, A. T. Wilson stated that, “The leading mujtahids of Najaf, headed by the venerable Saiyid Muhammad Kadhim Yazdi, retained a terrified silence” during the 1920 revolt even though he criticized other Shi‘i religious leaders for their involvement.²³⁵ Even anti-British leaders sometimes proved willing to cooperate. Intelligence Reports indicate that after the 1920 revolt turned in the favor of the British, some of the Shi‘i ulama who were involved in the revolt offered to serve as intermediaries in negotiations for peace.²³⁶

British officials were not above cooperating with potential enemies and including them in indigenous institutions. During a period of rising tensions just before the outbreak of the 1920

²³⁴ Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj, 1856-1956*, 50.

²³⁵ Wilson, *Mesopotamia 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties; a Personal and Historical Record*, 297.

²³⁶ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 4–5.

revolt, the Inter-Departmental Conference on Middle Eastern Affairs asked Percy Cox “to consult every shade of Mesopotamian opinion, including, if necessary, such Mesopotamians, not at present in the country, as were responsible for the existing unrest on the frontier.”²³⁷ This was a reference to Sunni Iraqis that were serving in Faisal’s Syrian administration and had been accused by acting Civil Commissioner A. T. Wilson of encouraging Iraqis to revolt. Some officials within the Civil Administration were also eager to dispel tensions by including nationalists in the political process. Gertrude Bell frequently met with urban Iraqi nationalists who were involved in organizing protests against the British, even during the 1920 revolt. In August of that year she told her father that, “I met on the most friendly terms everyone who had been doing his damndest against us and we all shook hands in the greatest amity.”²³⁸ She was also in favor of dealing lightly with the tribes who were involved in the revolt, saying that, “Reprisals on our part seem to me to be pointless.”²³⁹ Percy Cox put these policies into action when he assumed the role of High Commissioner, quickly creating an indigenous government and including Iraqi officers who had served in the government of Syria and were accused of playing a role in the 1920 revolt. Cox also made overtures to rebelling tribes, giving a public declaration stating Great Britain’s intention to set up an indigenous government and essentially telling the rebels that they should come back into the fold since Great Britain was willing to give them what they wanted.²⁴⁰

²³⁷ Cox was preparing to journey through Baghdad in route to London after serving as acting Minister in Tehran, but it was widely expected that he would assume the role of High Commissioner for Iraq after his visit to London. “Unrest on the frontier” was a reference to ongoing conflicts along the Syrian border that officials in Iraq blamed on Iraqis who were serving in the Arab government in Syria and wanted to initiate an anti-British revolt in Iraq. “Minutes of Inter-Departmental Conference on Middle Eastern Affairs,” 7.

²³⁸ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 23 August 1920.”

²³⁹ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 12 September 1920,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

²⁴⁰ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 2.

It seems that the Shi‘i ulama was the one group that British officials refused to include in the political process. British officials were quick to rebuff requests from Shi‘i religious leaders and Shi‘i tribal leaders to include Shi‘i religious leaders in negotiations to end the revolt. The 15 November 1920 Intelligence Report noted such a request, but it went on to say that, “The pretensions of the clergy have been politely but firmly disregarded and the Shi‘ah Vatican has been given no opportunity of exercising the powers of an Imperium in Imperio to which it lays claim.”²⁴¹ British officials thus clearly tied the decision to exclude the Shi‘i ulama from negotiations to a desire to prevent the ulama from forming a ‘state within a state.’ The next report would also mention the negotiations; this time the report directly suggested that the request to include the ulama was with, “the intention of forcing Government to accept the theocratic authority of Najaf. . .”²⁴² A. H. Ditchburn, the Political Officer for the Muntafiq division, described the refusal to negotiate with religious leaders as a selfless act intended to improve the future of Iraq rather than protect British interests. He mentioned petitions calling for, “the institution of a theocratic Government built up on one of the fundamental principles of the Shi‘ah doctrine,” and went on to say that, “No doubt by accepting the principle enunciated, the rebellion could have been settled in the early days on the Middle Euphrates, when the chief Mujtahid offered to bring peace in return for the release of deportees, but later generations of ‘Iraq politicians may appreciate the gratitude they owe the British for saving them from Najaf when perhaps the rebellion could have been controlled by negotiating with the ‘Ulama.”²⁴³ For Ditchburn and other officials, the refusal to cooperate with religious leaders was more about principles of proper governance rather than threats to British interests.

²⁴¹ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 4–5.

²⁴² “Intelligence Report No. 2,” November 30, 1920, 6, FO 371/6349/2172, United Kingdom National Archives.

²⁴³ Ditchburn, “A History of the Muntafiq during the Mesopotamian Disturbances of 1920,” 19.

This steadfast refusal to include the Shi‘i ulama in the political process is not surprising in light of the British discourse on Shi‘i Iraqis and the civic-religious values that influenced this discourse. British Protestants saw the separation of temporal and spiritual authority and religious tolerance as keys to Great Britain’s unique success. Including the Shi‘i ulama in the political process, either as state actors or influential voices in the political discourse, was inconsistent with British ideas about how to form Iraq into a successful, modern state. This general aversion to religious leaders taking an active role in politics was reflected in the information that was included in Intelligence Reports. The 1 March 1922 report went into great detail describing Shaikh Mahdi al Khalisi’s fatwa against the *Lisan al Arab*, an Iraqi newspaper, because of positive comments about the Bahai sect.²⁴⁴ The 1 April 1922 report would continue to discuss the fatwa, lamenting that, “The Lisan al Arab has not survived the attack delivered by Shaikh Mahdi al Khalisi,”²⁴⁵ This report went on to discuss another fatwa issued by a Sunni, ending on a more positive note by saying that, “His views command no sympathy among the younger generation or among men who have lived in Constantinople or traveled in Europe. . . . the feeling against fatwabs, whether Shi‘ah or Sunni, shows a healthy tendency to increase.”²⁴⁶ These reports about fatwas are particularly interesting because the fatwas in question were not related to the British presence in Iraq. The fact that British officials felt these fatwas were worth mentioning (and condemning) suggests that officials were interested in the power of the Shi‘i ulama in general, rather than only being focused on the ability of the Shi‘i ulama to resist British authority.

²⁴⁴ Khalisi was a religious leader of the Shi‘i shrine city of Kadhimain and regular critic of the British and the Iraqi government. The Bahai were an Islamic sect in Iraq and Iran that was vigorously persecuted by the Shi‘i Ulama in the nineteenth century. “Intelligence Report No. 5, 1 March 1922,” 4.

²⁴⁵ “Intelligence Report No. 7, 1 April 1922,” 4.

²⁴⁶ “Intelligence Report No. 7, 1 April 1922,” 4.

The presence of Shi‘i religious leaders who were willing to work with British officials and the willingness of British officials to negotiate with other Iraqi actors who were involved in resistance to British rule both suggest that the British decision to exclude the ulama from the political process was not a response to potential resistance. Some Shi‘i religious leaders would continue to challenge Great Britain’s position in Iraq, and British officials continued to take specific actions to deal with these challenges, but resistance alone does not explain the decision to exclude the ulama from the political process and to seek to limit the ulama’s political influence among the Shi‘i umma. It is possible that more Shi‘i religious leaders may have embraced the British presence if they had a greater stake in the indigenous institutions that the British were establishing, but we can only speculate about paths not taken. Ultimately, British policy was informed by British ideas about the proper relationship between temporal and spiritual authority and by British evaluations about the ‘intolerant’ and ‘theocratic’ nature of Shi‘i Islam.

Strategies of Exclusion

British officials employed several tactics in their bid to limit the political influence of the Shi‘i religious leadership. One of their most important strategies was to simply ignore the ulama. Percy Cox employed this strategy in the waning days of the revolt, refusing to negotiate with Shi‘i religious leaders and instead requesting that tribal leaders meet with him directly to make peace.²⁴⁷ British advisors actively encouraged the newly formed indigenous government to take the same approach. Shortly after Feisal’s coronation as King, Gertrude Bell would tell

²⁴⁷ High Commissioner of Iraq, *Iraq: Report on Iraq Administration. October 1920- March 1922*, 4.

her father that, “The Turks in the old days found [the Shi‘i ulama’s] shouting to be mere sound and fury, and I think myself if the Arab Govt stands up to them it will find they have no more significance than before.”²⁴⁸ Most Iraqi officials generally followed British advice. When several Shi‘i religious leaders issued fatwas against participating in elections for the Iraqi legislature in late 1922, Prime Minister Muhsin Beg al Sa’dun “refused to go and see the ‘ulama himself, lest they should think themselves of primary importance.”²⁴⁹

When Shi‘i religious leaders attempted to rally their followers to take action against the new indigenous government or against British interests, a more confrontational approach was sometimes necessary. British officials were careful in how they responded to potential resistance, choosing to employ subtle threats rather than direct confrontation and also working through their capacity as advisors to the indigenous Iraqi government rather than through direct action. The Karbala conference of April 1922 is a good example of these strategies in action. During the Spring of 1922, Iraq was experiencing increasing tension over negotiations on the Anglo-Iraq treaty that would define the relationship between Great Britain and Iraq, as well as growing concern about the government’s ability to protect its citizens along its western border from raids by Ibn Saud.²⁵⁰ On 1 April, Shaikh Mahdi al Khalisi, a well-renowned Shi‘i religious leader of the shrine city of Kadhimain, issued a summons to tribal leaders and other important figures to gather at Karbala for a conference to discuss defense against the raids of Ibn Saud.²⁵¹ This proposed meeting was similar to other gatherings that had been called by religious leaders

²⁴⁸ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 17 September 1921,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

²⁴⁹ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 4 December 1922,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

²⁵⁰ High Commissioner of Iraq, *Iraq: Report on ‘Iraq Administration. April 1922 - March 1923* (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1924), 4.

²⁵¹ “Intelligence Report No. 8, 15 April 1922,” in *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq Volume 2 1922-1923*, vol. 2, *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq* (London: Archive Editions Limited, 1998), 2.

in Najaf, but Khalisi had a reputation for being anti-British and officials quickly became concerned that the true purpose of the meeting was to lead a call for rejecting the mandate and perhaps even coordinating violent action against the British.²⁵² King Feisal, with the advice and approval of High Commissioner Percy Cox, intercepted telegrams calling tribal leaders to the conference, but otherwise no serious effort was made to stop the conference.²⁵³ Instead, officials focused on minimizing the potential for anti-mandate petitions arising from the gathering. The minister of the interior was sent to attend the meeting in an effort to ensure that discussions were limited to Iraqi defense.²⁵⁴ British officials also flew 16 airplanes to the Middle Euphrates to present swords of honor to loyal tribal leaders; this mission involved flying the aircraft over Karbala and Najaf, demonstrating a show of air power to remind potential resisters about the power of the British military.²⁵⁵ British efforts to control the tone and outcome of the meeting were apparently successful. The 1 May 1922 Intelligence Report noted that in spite of efforts to draft an anti-British petition, the conference only officially addressed the issue of self-defense against Ibn Saud.²⁵⁶

British officials sometimes took more direct action, especially when actors in the Iraqi state proved unreliable in containing Shi‘i resistance. Although the April Karbala conference failed to produce an anti-mandate petition, some Shi‘i religious leaders continued to rally against the Anglo-Iraq treaty and Britain’s role in Iraq. Tensions continued to rise over the summer, resulting in frequent demonstrations.²⁵⁷ The conflict came to a head on 23 August 1922, when

²⁵² “Intelligence Report No. 8, 15 April 1922,” 3.

²⁵³ “Intelligence Report No. 8, 15 April 1922,” 4.

²⁵⁴ “Intelligence Report No. 8, 15 April 1922,” 4.

²⁵⁵ “Intelligence Report No. 8, 15 April 1922,” 5.

²⁵⁶ “Intelligence Report No. 9, 1 May 1922,” in *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq Volume 2 1922-1923*, vol. 2, *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq* (London: Archive Editions Limited, 1998), 4.

²⁵⁷ “Intelligence Report No. 17, 1 September 1922,” in *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq Volume 2 1922-1923*, vol. 2, *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq* (London: Archive Editions Limited, 1998), 4.

Percy Cox traveled to the royal palace to congratulate Faisal on the anniversary of his coronation. When Cox arrived, he found a massive anti-mandate demonstration outside of the palace and received insults from the crowd as he made his way to greet the King.²⁵⁸ The next day, Cox advised Faisal to take strong repressive measures to prevent further unrest, but Faisal refused.²⁵⁹ In fact, British officials were concerned that Faisal was working with Muhammad al Sadr, a low ranking Shi'i religious leader with a long history of protesting the British presence in Iraq.²⁶⁰ Ultimately, fate intervened when Faisal suffered from an appendicitis and required emergency surgery. On 26 August, Percy Cox assumed direct control of the Iraqi government and ordered the closure of anti-British newspapers and the arrest of some anti-British activists.²⁶¹ Cox also took action against some anti-British Shi'i religious leaders. Muhammad al Sadr and Shaikh Muhammad al Khalisi "were strongly advised to proceed at once to Persia. . . failing which His Excellency [High Commissioner Percy Cox] would be forced regretfully to take measures which out of respect for the 'Ulama he would prefer to avoid. . .'"²⁶² Interestingly, in spite of rising tensions Cox chose to encourage Sadr and Khalisi to leave voluntary (with a threat that they would be arrested if they failed to leave on their own) rather than arrest them with the other agitators.

Tribal leaders also played an important role in British policy towards the Shi'i ulama. They played a crucial role in deflating anti-British sentiment at the Karbala conference of April 1922. Gertrude Bell noted that several sheikhs visited High Commissioner Percy Cox "to ask his

²⁵⁸ "Intelligence Report No. 17, 1 September 1922," 6.

²⁵⁹ "Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 27 August 1922," Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

²⁶⁰ "Intelligence Report No. 17, 1 September 1922," 5.

²⁶¹ "Intelligence Report No. 17, 1 September 1922," 8.

²⁶² Muhammad al Khalisi was the son of Mahdi al Khalisi, and was also involved in promoting anti-mandate sentiment. "Intelligence Report No. 17, 1 September 1922," 9.

advice as to their conduct and to express themselves willing to protest if anything anti-British occurs at the meeting.”²⁶³ The tribal leaders proved to be loyal, as the 1 May 1922 Intelligence Report noted that their protests were an import reason for Khalisi’s failure to draft an anti-mandate petition.²⁶⁴ Tribal leaders continued to work against Khalisi after the conference; a group of them journeyed to Baghdad to meet with King Faisal and delivered a petition against the Shi‘i ulama being involved in politics.²⁶⁵ The exact nature of the relationship between the tribes and British officials during this episode is not entirely clear. An Intelligence Report noted that Percy Cox was supportive of the tribal leaders who protested the Karbala meeting and the interference of the Shi‘i ulama, but the report also stated that he was careful to avoid the appearance that he was responsible for their protest.²⁶⁶ Gertrude Bell’s description in her letter mentioned above gives Cox even less credit, implying that the tribal leaders came to Cox already willing to stand up for British interests at the meeting. These documents suggest that Cox did not instigate the pro-British, anti-ulama actions of the tribal leadership, but it is also possible that Cox was more proactive in rallying the tribal leaders’ support. Bell and others may have sought to paint a more positive picture of the tribes’ loyalty. Or perhaps British reports about the loyalty of tribal leaders were accurate. While the exact nature of the relationship between British officials and Shi‘i tribal leaders is often unclear, there is no doubt that Shi‘i tribal leaders often disagreed with the political involvement of the Shi‘i religious leaders and increasingly refused to take part in the ulama’s efforts to disrupt the mandate.

²⁶³ “Gertrude Bell to Dame Florence Bell, 12 April 1922,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

²⁶⁴ “Intelligence Report No. 9, 1 May 1922,” 6.

²⁶⁵ “Intelligence Report No. 9, 1 May 1922,” 6.

²⁶⁶ “Intelligence Report No. 9, 1 May 1922,” 6.

Tribal leaders certainly had good reasons to support the British presence in Iraq. The power of tribal leaders was in decline during the late Ottoman period, as reforming officials sought to redefine land ownership to create a Western-style agrarian economy, but British officials reversed this trend, returning control of land to tribal leaders and also empowering them as political authorities who were responsible for enforcing taxation and the rule of law amongst their followers.²⁶⁷ Civil administrators described the tribal policy as a solution for ruling a vast territory using scant resources.²⁶⁸ In *Inventing Iraq*, Toby Dodge argues that British officials empowered tribal leaders because of their romantic imaginings of traditional tribal society and in order to create a counterweight against the urban Iraqi dominated central government that British officials saw as inefficient, corrupt and despotic.²⁶⁹ Perhaps the tribal policy was also intended to counter the influence of the Shi‘i ulama. In *The Shi‘is of Iraq*, Yitzak Nakash argues that the indigenous Iraqi government and its British advisors crafted tribal policy to create a division between the Shi‘i tribal leaders and the mujtahids, effectively preventing the two groups from uniting.²⁷⁰ In the sources employed in this study, there is no mention of the policy of vesting tribal leaders with political authority as an explicit strategy to combat the Shi‘i ulama, but a careful analysis of a wider source base may still yield evidence that the tribal policy was motivated, at least in part, by a desire to reduce the influence of the Shi‘i religious leadership.

Representation in the Provisional Government

²⁶⁷ Nakash, *The Shi‘is of Iraq*, 88.

²⁶⁸ Pulley, “1919 Hillah Report,” 2.

²⁶⁹ Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 61.

²⁷⁰ Nakash, *The Shi‘is of Iraq*, 93.

British policy towards Shi‘is went beyond the role of the Shi‘i ulama in the new Iraqi state and civil society. British officials also had to consider whether and how to include Shi‘i actors in the new government. As with policy towards the ulama, these decisions were impacted by a number of factors, one of which was the British discourse on Shi‘i Iraqis. Shi‘is were consistently underrepresented, relative to their proportion of the overall population of Iraq, in appointments to national and local government posts during the early years of the mandate. Shortly after assuming the post of High Commissioner, Percy Cox began forming a provisional council to serve as the temporary executive authority over the new indigenous government and to draft the electoral law which would govern elections for a constituent assembly. Cox selected the Naqib of Baghdad, a Sunni who was known for his “high social and religious position” and his political neutrality, to serve as the President of the council.²⁷¹ This council consisted of the President and a cabinet of eight ministers with portfolios representing various government departments; it also included thirteen members without portfolio. In the first council suggested by the Naqib, seven of the ministers were Sunni Muslims and one was a Jew; the council also included four Shi‘i members without portfolio.²⁷² In a country where a majority of the inhabitants were Shi‘i, only four out of the twenty two members of the council would be Shi‘i. Shi‘is were quick to complain about the relative lack of representation and the Intelligence Report that announced the initial appointments for the provisional council noted that British officials and the Naqib were already searching for a Shi‘i to take over one of the portfolios.²⁷³

²⁷¹ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 2.

²⁷² “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 3.

²⁷³ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 4.

After a prolonged search, a Shi'i from Karbala was ultimately appointed as Minister of Education in January of 1921.²⁷⁴

Over the next three years, the cabinet experienced regular turnover as various controversies led to resignations of both individual ministers and entire cabinets. Throughout this period, Shi'is were represented by no more than two ministers with portfolio.²⁷⁵ Lists of cabinet members in British reports would always specifically point out the Shi'i member(s), as well as any members who were Jews, Christians, or Kurds, but these lists never referred to a Minister as a Sunni. The first report to the League of Nations listed the names of each Minister in the cabinet and also gave a very brief biographical account focusing on what qualified them for office. Sayyad Talib Pasha, holding the important position of Minister of the Interior, was noted for his participation in the Ottoman legislature and his efforts to assist British officials in developing an electoral law and was referred to as, "a man of prominence" who "possessed of a remarkable force of character."²⁷⁶ Sasun Effendi Haskail, Minister of Finance, was referred to as, "a leading representative of the Jewish Community of Baghdad, [who] commands universal respect and confidence."²⁷⁷ Saiyid Muhammad Mahdi Tabatai, the Minister of Health and Education, was referred to simply as "a Shi'iah of Karbala."²⁷⁸ These descriptions suggest that British officials saw Sunni ministers as the norm and Shi'i ministers as token appointments to ensure some representation for their group. Shi'is were also underrepresented in appointments to local offices. The 31 January 1921 Intelligence Report noted that Shi'is were appointed as Qaimmaqams (essentially district administrators) over Karbala and Najaf in the newly created

²⁷⁴ Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 223.

²⁷⁵ High Commissioner of Iraq, *'Iraq: Report on 'Iraq Administration. October 1920- March 1922*, 5; High Commissioner of Iraq, *'Iraq: Report on 'Iraq Administration. April 1922 - March 1923*, 7.

²⁷⁶ High Commissioner of Iraq, *'Iraq: Report on 'Iraq Administration. October 1920- March 1922*, 5.

²⁷⁷ High Commissioner of Iraq, 5.

²⁷⁸ High Commissioner of Iraq, 5.

Karbala division, but all of the officials appointed for the adjacent Hillah division were Sunnis, even though most of the division was Shi'i.²⁷⁹ In a letter around this same time, Gertrude Bell told her father that the same pattern was present all across the predominantly Shi'i Euphrates divisions.²⁸⁰

British officials were quick to blame the underrepresentation on a lack of qualified Shi'i candidates. After commenting on the desire to appoint a Shi'i minister to assuage Shi'i protests, the 15 November 1920 Intelligence Report noted that, "it is hoped that it will be possible to arrange this, though competent Shi'is are hard to find."²⁸¹ The 30 November 1920 report made note of protests from Kut about the lack of Shi'is in the cabinet, but also pointed out that, "no suitable Shi'ah candidates are mentioned."²⁸² Gertrude Bell explained the reason for the dilemma in a letter to her father, saying that, "[Shi'is] never under the Turks took part in administration; consequently there are no men among them who have the shadowyest acquaintance with public affairs."²⁸³ A. T. Wilson also stressed the lack of Shi'i government experience in his memoirs, complaining that the decision to quickly establish an indigenous government effectively disenfranchised Shi'is since, unlike their Sunni counterparts, they were not allowed to hold government offices or attended Western-style government-run schools under the Turks.²⁸⁴

²⁷⁹ "Intelligence Report No. 6," 1.

²⁸⁰ "Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 13 February 1921," Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

²⁸¹ "Intelligence Report No. 1," 4.

²⁸² "Intelligence Report No. 2," 3.

²⁸³ "Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 7 November 1920," Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

²⁸⁴ Wilson, *Mesopotamia 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties; a Personal and Historical Record*, 314.

The British excuse of a lack of qualified Shi‘i candidates was not entirely baseless, but it also fails to account for other factors that influenced British decision-making. Shi‘i Iraqis were excluded from government office under the Ottomans and they rarely attended Ottoman-run schools since these schools taught Sunni Islam as part of their curriculum.²⁸⁵ However, some Sunni appointees did not have previous government experience or a Western-style education. Most of the Sunnis who were appointed to serve as Ministers with portfolio did have prior government experience, but some came from backgrounds as lawyers or merchants.²⁸⁶ The Naqib effectively served as the chief executive of the Iraqi state for almost a year prior to the coronation of Faisal as King and then served as Prime Minister, but before assuming office he was a religious scholar who “consistently refused to take part in public affairs,” before “emerging from the seclusion of a Darwish,” to take office.²⁸⁷ British officials did not express concern about the Naqib’s lack of experience, perhaps because the Naqib had consistently shown goodwill to the British, was generally willing to do what they asked and believed in the need to separate political and religious affairs.²⁸⁸ Comments about the Shi‘i Minister of Education, Saiyid Hibat al Din al Shahrastani may spread more light on the attributes that were the true focus of British officials. Shahrastani lacked previous government experience, but the Intelligence Report announcing his appointment referred to him as, “the author of learned works” and went on to praise him because, “He holds very liberal views and at one time incurred the censure of the Shi‘ah community for articles in the ‘Ilm which condemned the practices of

²⁸⁵ Sluglett, *Britain In Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 220.

²⁸⁶ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 3.

²⁸⁷ “Intelligence Report No. 1,” 2.

²⁸⁸ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 32.

transferring corpses to Karbala and Najaf for burial.”²⁸⁹ It is interesting that this report choose to focus on Shahrستاني’s ‘liberal views’ and critiques of Shi‘i practice as qualifications for office. This suggests that British officials were probably as concerned with the civic and religious values of Shi‘i candidates as actual experience, a focus that makes since in light of British officials’ concerns about the supposedly theocratic tendencies of Shi‘i Islam in Iraq.

Comments about Shi‘i candidates for office often corresponded to negative impressions in the British discourse on Shi‘i Islam. Shi‘i Iraqis were consistently described as more ‘backwards’ and ‘fanatical’ than Sunnis. After the creation of the indigenous government, this pattern extended to potential candidates for public office and even to those who were accepted to serve. Shi‘i ministers were often described as less capable than Sunni Ministers. Speaking on the Shi‘i Minister of Education, Gertrude Bell told her father that, “I don’t think there’s much to choose between him and his predecessor but capable Shi‘ahs grow on very few bushes.”²⁹⁰ Her tone was even more negative a few months later when she complained, “what are you to do with a Minister of Education who when a Shiah student fails to pass an examination writes to the examiner and directs him to provide him with a diploma! I suppose he holds that there’s neither ignorance nor wisdom but thinking makes it so.”²⁹¹ Bell was not alone in her criticisms.

Intelligence Reports used more restrained language, but they frequently made negative comments about Shi‘i ministers. A report from 15 September 1921 said that, “The ministry of education, being ear-marked for a Shi‘ah, will rarely be filled satisfactorily.”²⁹² Several months

²⁸⁹ The ‘Ilm was a Shi‘i Iraqi journal. “Intelligence Report No. 22, 1 October 1921,” in *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq Volume 1 1920-1921*, vol. 1, Political Diaries of the Arab World: Iraq (London: Archive Editions Limited, 1998), 4.

²⁹⁰ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 11 September 1921,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

²⁹¹ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 6 December 1921,” Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

²⁹² “Intelligence Report No. 21, 15 September 1921,” 13.

later, another report noted that, “The Minister of Education, who is the Shi‘ah member of the cabinet, is admittedly incompetent and there is a general desire, shared by the King, for his removal. The King is anxious to get rid at the same time of the Ministers of Interior and Public works.”²⁹³ It is interesting that this report referred to the “incompetent” Minister of Education as a Shi‘i, but made no mention of the religious identities of the other ministers that were mentioned. Complaints about Shi‘i ministers were generally tied into their identity as Shi‘is, while negative comments about Sunnis described them in terms of their individual actions and character rather than traits that were alleged to be shared by a wider group. For example, when Percy Cox discussed his decision to exile Minister of the Interior Sayyad Talib for spreading rumors designed to provoke anti-British sentiment, Cox made no mention of Talib’s Sunni affiliation, instead describing Talib’s decisions in terms of his personal desire for political power.²⁹⁴

Lack of experience was not the only factor that British officials blamed for the underrepresentation of Shi‘is. The lack of willing candidates was also frequently mentioned, often along with the fact that many prominent Iraqi Shi‘is were of Persian origins and would have to adopt Iraqi nationality to be eligible for office. As we saw in chapter 2, when discussing the possibility of including Shi‘i leaders from the shrine cities in the provisional government, Gertrude Bell explained that, “One of the difficulties is that all or nearly all the leading men of the Shi‘ah towns are Persian subjects and must be made to adopt Mesopotamian nationality before they had take official positions in the Mesopotamian state,” although she also said that, “I hope a section will become definitely Arab and take a hand in the State.”²⁹⁵ Intelligence Reports

²⁹³ “Intelligence Reports No. 2 and No. 3, 15 January and 1 February 1922,” 6.

²⁹⁴ High Commissioner of Iraq, *Iraq: Report on 'Iraq Administration. October 1920- March 1922*, 11.

²⁹⁵ “Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 1 November 1920.”

suggest that British officials often had a difficult time finding Shi‘is who were willing to take office. The 15 September 1921 Report spoke positively about Shaikh ‘Abdul Karim Jazairi, a Shi‘i candidate for Minister of Education, but went on to say that, “being one of the lesser Mujtahids he may possibly refuse office. His nationality may also prove an obstacle.”²⁹⁶ Shi‘is were sometimes willing to officially embrace Iraqi citizenship in order to accept public office. Saiyid Hibat al Din al Shahrastani accepted the position of Minister of Education, “after formally testifying his intention to become a subject of ‘Iraq as soon as the change could be officially regulated.”²⁹⁷ Unfortunately, without access to Shi‘i Iraqi sources, it is difficult to speculate about how many Shi‘is actually turned down the opportunity to serve in the government or to speculate about why they choose not to serve. Since Shi‘is were only given token levels of representation in the cabinet, potential Shi‘i candidates may have felt that the government was not legitimate and may have been concerned that fellow Shi‘is would see them as collaborators if they choose to work with a predominantly Sunni government. Since British officials never seem to have seriously considered the possibility of proportional representation, it is difficult to speculate about whether more Shi‘is would have been willing to participate under this scenario.

Caveats and Inconsistencies

British officials actively countered the Shi‘i ulama’s efforts to play an active role in the political discourse and created an indigenous state where Shi‘is were grossly underrepresented, but they also continued to express a desire to protect Shi‘is from Sunni dominance. In January of 1921 Gertrude Bell complained to her father that, “The present government, which is

²⁹⁶ “Intelligence Report No. 21, 15 September 1921,” 13.

²⁹⁷ “Intelligence Report No. 22, 1 October 1921,” 4.

predominantly Sunni, isn't doing anything to conciliate the Shi'ahs. They are now considering a number of administrative appointments for the provinces; almost all the names they put up are Sunnis, even for the wholly Shi'ah provinces on the Euphrates. . ."²⁹⁸ She put the blame squarely on Sunni Iraqis, stating that, "The Naqib is the worst of the lot in this particular. He hates the Shi'ahs and any Shi'ah whom Talib (as minister of the Interior) proposes he turns down. . . They must make up their minds that they can't have it both ways. If they want popular native institutions the Shi'ahs, who are in a large majority, must take their share."²⁹⁹ Bell saw British intervention as the solution, saying that, "Sir Percy will have to intervene when the names come up to him for sanction for if anything is certain it is that the Euphrates won't put up with Sunni officials."³⁰⁰ A month later she implied that the Naqib only approved a Shi'i as Minister of Education as a result of strong British pressure.³⁰¹ Other British officials also expressed concern that Sunni Iraqis were seeking to ensure that Sunni control was reestablished under the indigenous government. A January 1921 Intelligence Report suggested that Sunni nationalists were likely to suggest a son of the former Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid, "because the choice of a representative of the former Hanafi rulers would, they hope, provide them with a guarantee against Shi'ah predominance."³⁰²

Why were British officials willing to support a Sunni-majority cabinet but also concerned about Sunnis exploiting Shi'is? It is helpful to remember that British policy decisions and the British discourse on Shi'i Iraqis were both tied into British officials' visions of themselves as saviors bringing Iraq into the modern world. While British officials spoke negatively about the

²⁹⁸ "Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 22 January 1921," Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letters.php>.

²⁹⁹ "Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 22 January 1921."

³⁰⁰ "Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 22 January 1921."

³⁰¹ "Gertrude Bell to Sir Hugh Bell, 13 February 1921."

³⁰² "Intelligence Report No. 6," 2.

Shi'i ulama and the Shi'i umma, they also expressed hope that Shi'i Iraqis would eventually develop a more modern outlook once they saw the benefits of the modern reforms that the British were seeking to instill.³⁰³ Within this paternalistic vision, the idea that a subset of the Iraqi population was deserving of British protection and ultimately political inclusion, but incapable of participating in self-government in the near future, was not out of place. British officials seem to have reconciled their desire to protect Shi'is and their conviction that Shi'is were incapable of self-government by focusing on their own role as advisors to the indigenous Iraqi state, seeing themselves as a check on the baser instincts of their Sunni allies.

British officials' paternalistic narrative about their mission in Iraq and the discourse on Shi'i Iraqis both had a significant impact on British policy towards Shi'is. British ideas about the need to separate temporal and spiritual authority led British officials to see the politically active Shi'i ulama as a threat to their modernizing mission. This perceived threat in turn led British officials to initiate several strategies to exclude the Shi'i ulama from the political process. The British discourse on Shi'i Iraqis and the cultural assumptions that underlay this discourse also led British officials to see Shi'i Iraqis as more 'backwards' and 'fanatical' than their Sunni brethren. Once again, these perceptions influenced policy decisions, as British officials created and supported a Sunni-majority government to rule Shi'i-majority Iraq. British officials did express a hope that Shi'is would one day become more progressive and they also expressed a desire to use their position as advisors to protect Shi'is from Sunni exploitation, but ultimately the British created a system of unequal representation that would endure for the next eighty years.

³⁰³ Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, 40.

Conclusion

British officials consistently described the Shi'i religious leadership as a threat to their efforts to create a stable, modern, secular government in Iraq and described Shi'i Iraqis as more 'fanatical,' and more 'backwards,' than their Sunni counterparts. British officials were consistently negative in their portrayals of Shi'i Iraqis, although they also expressed a hopefulness that Shi'is might become more progressive with British aid and a paternalistic desire to protect Shi'is from exploitation by Turkish or Arab Sunnis. This discourse was part of a broader narrative, wherein British officials in Iraq saw themselves as saviors, coming to rescue Iraqis from the backwards, despotic rule of the Ottoman Turks and to help Iraqis develop a modern state and society. Interestingly, British descriptions of Shi'is remained remarkably consistent in spite of dramatic changes to the overall goals of British policy in Iraq and to the civilizing mission narrative that helped to explain them. In spite of initial reservations, British officials in Iraq ultimately created a nominally independent indigenous state and accepted urban Sunnis as partners in the civilizing mission, but they continued to portray most Shi'is as unfit for self-government.

The British discourse on Shi'i Iraqis was not entirely detached from reality, but it also seriously mischaracterized the motivations and context of Shi'i actions. Throughout the British occupation various Shi'i religious leaders sought to subvert British authority and to assert a role for themselves in the political discourse of Iraq. Furthermore, at several crucial points, large swaths of the Shi'i population participated in acts of passive or active resistance to British influence in Iraq. British officials were responding to these realities, but they also fundamentally misunderstood the motivations and context of Shi'i actions. British officials saw Shi'i religious leaders' attempts to intervene in politics and resist British authority as symptoms of a religious

system that was inherently predisposed to theocracy and religious intolerance. In reality, Shi‘i religious leaders were responding to changing global dynamics and interacting with a string of modernist Islamic thought focused on incorporating European ideas into a new vision of Islamic society. This inaccurate interpretation of Shi‘i motivations, theology and practice makes more sense when we begin to consider the influences that contributed to the British discourse.

British officials interpreted Shi‘i resistance and the differences between the Sunni and Shi‘i religious communities through a lens that was colored by British officials’ experiences with Christianity in Europe. They applied their personal ideas about the proper relationship between religion, civil society and the state to the Iraqi context and they also used symbols and ideas from metropolitan discourses on religion and society to explain the situation in Iraq. Hugh McLeod demonstrates that in nineteenth and early twentieth century Great Britain, the protestant faith of the British nation was seen as an integral part of the unique civic virtues that set Great Britain apart from its rivals and led to Great Britain’s economic success and imperial expansion.³⁰⁴ Catholic societies were thought to be plagued by the negative effects of their faith, including an overly influential and abusive priesthood, a focus on rituals of piety at the expense of good character, and an intolerant attitude towards religious pluralism and new ideas.³⁰⁵ In comparison, British Protestants saw themselves as benefiting from the good moral character, religious freedom and intellectual open-mindedness of British Protestantism. When British officials looked at the situation in Iraq, they identified the negative traits associated with Catholicism in Shi‘i actions and Shi‘i theology. British officials criticized the influence of the Shi‘i ulama and their efforts to intervene in the political discourse, seeing this behavior as

³⁰⁴ McLeod, “Protestantism and British National Identity,” 49.

³⁰⁵ McLeod, 47–48.

incompatible with a modern, successful state and society. They also looked down Shi'i rituals and saw Shi'i resistance against British authority as a byproduct of religious intolerance and a refusal to accept change. British officials also found similarities between British Protestantism and Arab Sunnis.

This study has ramifications for how we understand British imperial officials' perceptions of Islam across the empire. If British officials in Iraq used their own ideas about and experiences with Christianity in the metropole in order to differentiate between Sunni and Shi'i Islam in Iraq, then it is likely that British officials in other imperial contexts also used their metropolitan experiences with religion to differentiate between different iterations of Islam. Historians could benefit from exploring this possibility by looking at how the religious and civic values of officials in other imperial contexts influenced the way that they differentiated between different iterations of Islam (or other religions). These studies could focus on evaluations of Sunni and Shi'i Islam in other parts of the empire, or they could analyze how British officials differentiated between Sufi orders, different schools of Islamic jurisprudence, or even regional or class-based variations in Islamic practice.

This study also provides important insights in the historiography of British policy in mandate Iraq. British policy decisions were shaped by a confluence of factors, but the discourse on Shi'i Iraqis did play an important role in this process. British officials consistently emphasized the need to exclude the Shi'i ulama from the political discourse of Iraq and they actively worked to achieve this goal by refusing to include the Shi'i ulama in political discussions, by employing threats and ultimately deporting activist Shi'i religious leaders, and by working in cooperation with both Sunni and Shi'i Iraqis to counter the Shi'i ulama's influence. This policy was not just a response to anti-British activism on the part of some Shi'i religious

leaders; instead, it was a systematic decision to limit the political influence a group that British officials saw as incompatible with their vision for the future of Iraq. British officials also supported the chronic underrepresentation of Shi'is at both the national and local levels, blaming this underrepresentation on a lack of qualified and willing candidates for office. The assumption that fewer Shi'is were qualified was based partially on the reality that Shi'is were not allowed to participate in the government under the Ottomans, but this assumption was also based on a British discourse that emphasized the backwardness of Shi'i Islam and most of its followers.

This study deepens our understanding of British perceptions of and policy towards Shi'i Iraqis. It offers a clear, but nuanced explanation of why British officials in Iraq tended to view Sunnis more favorably than Shi'is: British officials evaluated Sunni and Shi'i Islam through a prism of metropolitan values and ideas about the proper relationship between religion, society and the state, a prism that led British officials to see Sunni Islam as more compatible with modernity. It also suggests that British policy towards Shi'i Iraqis was influenced by evaluations of Sunni and Shi'i Islam. British decisions to resist the political activism of Shi'i religious leaders and condone the underrepresentation of Shi'is in government institutions were based not only on calculations of British strategic interests, but also on misguided British assumptions about what was ultimately in the best interests of Iraq. This argument in turn suggests that, at least for the first few years of the mandate project, British officials in Iraq were not simply seeking to promote the global strategic interests of Great Britain and were instead involved in a genuine, but fundamentally misguided attempt to create a successful modern state and society in Iraq.

Epilogue

The trends seen in the first two years of the indigenous Iraqi state would continue for the rest of the mandate period. 1923 would see the most serious period of conflict between the Shi'i ulama, the British authorities and the Iraqi state. Late in 1922, a few prominent Shi'i mujtahids, including Shaikh Mahdi al Khalisi, issued fatwas against participation in the elections for the Constituent Assembly; this action resulted in deadlock as election commissions resigned and many Shi'is refused to be registered for the election.³⁰⁶ On 25 June, Henry Dobbs (Percy Cox's replacement as High Commissioner), in conjunction with Faisal, ordered the arrest and deportation of Khalisi; subsequently several other influential Shi'i religious leaders went into voluntary exile in Iran in a show of sympathy.³⁰⁷ Yitzhak Nakash argues that these moves had a tremendous impact on the future of the Shi'i religious leadership in Iraq, leading to conflicts both between and amongst the Shi'i religious leaders who were exiled and the Shi'i religious leaders who remained in Iraq, as well as a prolonged split between the Arab and Persian Shi'i ulama of Iraq, preempting the ulama from presenting a united front against the British and the indigenous government.³⁰⁸ The exile of these religious leaders also furthered the split between the Shi'i ulama and secular Shi'i leaders, as the Shi'i umma was largely indifferent to the exile of the Shi'i religious leaders and many secular Shi'i leaders pledged their support to the government.³⁰⁹ Nakash also emphasizes the role of tribal policy, arguing that British and indigenous Iraqi policies elevated the status of tribal leaders, giving them a reason to support the status quo and the indigenous government in Iraq.³¹⁰ The end result of these various policies was that the Shi'i

³⁰⁶ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 80.

³⁰⁷ Nakash, 82.

³⁰⁸ Nakash, 84.

³⁰⁹ Nakash, 85.

³¹⁰ Nakash, 89.

