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British Attitude Towards Southern Kurdistan between 1917 and 1919

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Abstract

To undertake a historical study on the political, military, economic and diplomatic positions of the British representatives in Iraq and the region in general during the transformation from Ottoman rule to a new, independence-seeking political unit of Iraq, after the First World War, it is important to examine the perspectives of the British civil and military authorities and their plan toward the Kurdish districts of the Mosul vilayet, especially southern Kurdistan and protecting the northern frontier of Iraq.

Although detailed studies of British post-war strategy towards Iraq have already been undertaken by Western and Eastern historians, much of the historical work that has been done on the British view and their attitude towards southern Kurdistan in general and the local government in Sulaymaniyah in particular, tends more to use imperfect narrations writing from the standpoint of ideological, ethic and political interests. Therefore, through an exhaustive use of British official archives, and analysing original British unpublished documents from various departments of government, this study attempts to objective understanding of the attitude of British officials in London, India and Iraq, toward the future of southern Kurdistan.

This study consists of two main sections, the first section examines the situation of southern Kurdistan in the course of World War I. The second one investigates the beginning of the emergence of the Anglo - Kurdish political relations, as well as an analysis of the official position of British representatives toward the local government in Sulaymaniyah.

This study rests upon official British and unpublished documents found in the British National Archives, British Library and Parliamentary Archives in London and the Middle East Centre at Oxford University and others were relied upon.

Introduction

From the early sixteenth century until the First World War, the land that had been known Kurdistan was under the Safavid (Persian) and Ottoman (Turkish) empires. Kurdistan had been home to the Kurds and various minorities, such as Arabs, Turkmens, Persian and Christian groups such as Assyrians and Armenians. The Kurds were part of the Indo-European speaking groups, whom moved towards western Iran and the mountain system of Zagros, probably between 4000 and 2000 B.C. The Kurds then claimed their origin to the Medes, who ruled the Median Empire from 678 to 549 B.C. A geographical border of greater Kurdistan demarcated to the north beyond the Araxes River; to the west as far as Sivan, Erzurum, Marash, the Mesopotamian plain around Kirkuk, and the mountains of Jebel Hamrin, and to the east to Tabriz and Hamadan.¹ As a result of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the redrawn political map of the Middle East, the Kurds were now split over four countries, namely Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, whilst a large number also remained in Armenia and Azerbaijan, in the Soviet Union. This work aims to assess the position of southern Kurdistan in British policy. According to a British document, the frontiers of southern Kurdistan consisted of the Greater Zab in the north, the hill range of Hamrin in the south, the Turco-Iranian boundary in the east, and the line from the Great Zab to Diyala in the west.²

Due to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, a turning point in the modern history of the Kurds was begun, as they found a historic opportunity to assert their political rights and claim self-determination. Like other such groups within the Ottoman Empire, Kurds were inspired by President Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points, especially point 12 which stated that the nations in the Ottoman Empire should be assured of having a free right to determine their own political destiny and autonomous development.³

Southern Kurdistan During the First World War

In the early part of the war, in order to fight against Britain, the Ottoman Empire tried to mobilize its nationalities by means of pan-Islamic propaganda (Jihad). The character of the Holy War was promoted both Shia and Sunni

elements in Mesopotamia to fight against Britain. In this regard, the report of the Civil Administration of the occupied territories of Iraq indicated that 'both at Qurna and Shu 'aiba the enemy was supported by large bodies of Arab Mujahidin drawn from every tribe and every class in the Iraq'.⁴ While the pan-Islamism, nationalist and pan-Turkish propaganda led the Arabs and Turks to become hostile to Britain, the Turks also tended to mobilize the Kurds in southern Kurdistan against Britain, using the religious propaganda. The Kurds joined the Ottoman forces under the leadership of Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji, who was from the important Qadiriyyah Sufi family of the Barzanji Clan. His grandfather, Sheikh Ahmmad, was one of the significant notables in the Ottoman Empire in general, and the most significant religious leaders in Sulaimaniyah. After the death of his father by the Turkish authorities in Mosul on 5 January 1909, and due to his present in the political situations during the First World War, Mahmud's influence had dramatically evolved. He led his followers to fight the British in Shu 'aiba village to the north-west of Basra (known as the Battle of Shu 'aiba) on 12 April 1915. Due to the existence of different opinions amongst scholars about the number of Kurdish participants in the battle, it is not clear yet how many they were. Rafiq Hilmi, one of Mahmud's close friends, counted the number as 1000 men, who came from the most prominent of the Kurdish tribes, but an assessment by the War Office estimated the number to be 3000 men.⁵ However, the Ottoman forces were defeated, and as a result, the Kurds sacrificed a large number of fighters.

The participation of Kurdish fighters from different tribal elements with their own weapons, showed their unanimous view of the British forces as invaders rather than liberators, especially as some of these tribes had not previously recognised the leadership of Mahmud, but they subordinated to him in order to fight the British. However, whatever the result of the war, it provided a chance for Mahmud to extend his spiritual influence further than ever before.

There are no record of any formal relations between the Kurds and British political officers until the occupation of Baghdad, apart from

Sharif Pasha's attempt to contact British government in connection with Kurdish affairs. Sir Percy Cox (the Civil Commissioner in Mesopotamia, 1916-1918 and the High Commissioner in Baghdad, 1920-1923) reported his hour talk with Sharif at Marseilles on 3 June 1918, during which Sharif asked about the future of southern Kurdistan and demanded guarantees for Kurdish autonomy under British protection. Cox also noted that Sharif wished to propose the suggestion which he made in a letter addressed to British government for independence of Kurds of 23 November 1914, which he had made at several times since then.⁶ After taken Baghdad by British forces in March 1917, there was a satisfaction believe by local populations that Britain should assume to take responsibility to hold frontiers further north. The Kurdish tribes in the region had consider taking a benefit from emerged opportunity and they contacted the British political officers, in the hope that Britain would allow them to conduct their own affairs, under the terms of the British Baghdad proclamation to the Arabs.⁷ Khanikin was marked as the first Kurdish city where British officers were appointed, after the autumn campaign of 1917. Although British officers had expected to take Khanikin earlier and despite the request made by Mustafa Pasha Bajlan, the most important political figure in the city, for British protection, British troops were unable to enter the city, as it was already occupied by the Russian troops. The reasons for taking the city by Britain before the other Kurdish distracts were explained by Cox as the political aim of controlling Khanikin in order to secure British interests and control over the Kurdish tribes who already cooperated with British officers.⁸

British economic interests may have been the major factor in taking the city. To support this, it should be noted that Khanikin was considered to be a significant point on the trade route from Mesopotamia to Tehran, due to the Khanikin station line, seven miles from Khanikin to Quraitu on the Persian border. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company had also considered the development of the oil field in Naft Khanah, near Khanikin, before the First World War.⁹ Although the military situation and British responsibilities for their zone of influence

elsewhere were considered as reasons for preventing the British attack on the city. They were also fighting with Ottoman forces in their advance to the north. The Russian treatment of the inhabitants of the districts was unpopular and led them to keep asking for the appointment of British officers in the area. After the Russian retreat to Persia at the end of June 1917 due to their aware of the revolution at home, Khanikin was reoccupied by the Turks, until it was finally taken again by British forces in December 1917. As everything was taken by the Russian and Turkish armies during their occupation of Khanikin, only one-third of the inhabitants had remained in the city and they suffered from food shortages.¹⁰

After this, the British forces headed on 24 April 1918 north towards Kurdistan and resulted in the occupation of Kifri, Duz-Khirmatu, Alton-Keupri and Ain Farsis in early May. It resulted in Turkish losses of about 10,000 men, amongst whom 7,500 were taken prisoner, with capturing 30 guns and some more materials. The Kurdish tribes helped Britain by not offering supplies to the Turkish forces. A telegram from the political office on Baghdad described the tribes in the east of the River Zab as becoming very hostile to the Turks, and that those who still doubted would show their loyalty to Britain, after the city of Kirkuk had been retaken.¹¹ It could be argued that without Kurdish help, the British troops would not be able to advance to the north so easily. The Kurdish support helped Townshend to capture Kirkuk without Turkish resistance on 7 May 1918. The inhabitants in the city welcomed the British troops, especially the famous tribe of Hamawand.¹² Although the Hamawand tribe with other tribes and nationalist groups had fought against Britain in Shu 'aiba, they were now to welcome the British forces. This was an indication of the alteration of Kurdish political opinion about the British forces when compared to the early part of the First World War. The change might be a consequence of the previous contacts between the tribal representatives in southern Kurdistan and the British political officers after March 1917. The capture of Kirkuk caused the Turkish evacuation of Sulaimaniyah, and the inhabitants there joined in the welcome to British forces. The oppressive policy exercised by the Turks

and the general conditions of the war had brought famine and disease, and the spread of the plague caused many deaths. As a result of this, the population of Sulaimaniyah declined from 40,000 before the war to 9,000, and 'dead bodies were collected in the bazaar every morning, and in some cases people were eating their dead babies'.¹³ Hilmi indicated that every day at least ten people died in Sulaimaniyah. He believed that the Turkish officers had caused this situation, as they had taken everything, including food, clothes and more taxes, under the justification of the pledge of allegiance.¹⁴ To support Hilmi's opinion in describing this terrible situation, for which the Turkish regime was mainly responsible, Major Edward Noel, the British intelligence Officer in Baghdad, confirmed the high level of poverty created by the Turks, as he stated that '80% of population has disappeared and most of town is in ruins'.¹⁵

The Beginning of the Anglo-Kurdish political relationship and the British formal stance on local government in Sulaimaniyah

Although initially some loyal friendships were made between British officers and Kurdish notables in 1917, Anglo-Kurdish relations did not take formal shape formally until the Sulaimaniyah government was established in December 1918. Although the early British Military operation to take Kirkuk was successful, the decision not to hold Kirkuk was not reached for some days. Therefore, the first troops of British force starting back from Kirkuk on 11 May and by the end of May 1918 the final withdrawal from there had been carried out. This withdrawal left the local inhabitants of the region to face the return of the Turks, and this halted more British contact with the Kurds, but the retaking of these areas by British forces a few days before the Mudros armistice of 25 October 1918¹⁶ opened the way for British officers to contact the local authorities in southern Kurdistan. In fact, local stability in southern Kurdistan was thought necessary to pacify Mesopotamia, and thus to secure British interests in the country. Therefore, the political and economic interests of the British government led the Officials at Baghdad to contact the emerging Kurdish nationalists and the notables who hoped for independence and a

state of their own, based on the principle of self-determination. To some degree, the confirmation of Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points by the Anglo-French declaration on 8 November 1918 motivated this desire of the Kurdish nationalists.¹⁷

The Kurdish willingness to accept British help and sponsorship motivated the British officials in Baghdad to deal with the Kurdish question as part of the British agenda. A telegram by Office of the Civil Commissioner at Baghdad on 1 November 1918 stated that Political Officer, Kifri, reported the arrival of Mahmud's two delegates, who brought a letter from him strongly demanding that the British government: Not to exclude Kurdistan from list of liberated people, as but for delay caused by his imprisonment by the Turks, he would have everything ready before now for Kurdistan to free itself. He asks for instructions, especially regarding movement against Turks.¹⁸

Although Mahmud was not happy with the Turkish presence and their behaviours in Sulaimaniyah, he had not been able to remove them. Thus, Mahmud hoped for British help, and his letter was a clear indication that unlike the Turks, the Kurds would welcome British officers to Sulaimaniyah. Mahmud's invitation letter reassured the British officers, who had previously doubted entering Sulaimaniyah, due to their commitment to the armistice agreement and the presence of the Turks in city. Britain had realised that Mahmud was the most important figure in the region to be contacted as a leader of Kurdish ambitions for self-determination. A former telegram by the political officer from Kifri described him as one of the influential sheikhs who had been appointed as a Qaim-maqam of Sulaimaniyah by the Turks. Moreover it stated that 'He carries great weight, and may be considered the most representative of tribal leaders in southern Kurdistan'.¹⁹ In addition to this, Office of the Civil Commissioner at Baghdad reported that during his visit to Khanikin and Kifri on 16 November 1918, the Kurdish notables from Baghdad and outside it were visiting him and they showed their loyalty to Britain, whilst they asked for the Kurdish confederation under British Protection.²⁰ Therefore, Major Edward Noel, the British Intelligence Officer in Baghdad, was sent to

Sulaimaniyah and appointed as the Political Officer there. It has to be mentioned that his experience of Kurdistan and knowledge of the Kurdish cultural background was a factor in choosing him. John Evelyn Shuckburgh, the Under Secretary of State for India, stated that 'The Kurds, more than anybody else that I know, are moved by persons rather than by policies. Noel can do as he likes with them ...'.²¹ Noel was authorised by the High Commissioner in Baghdad as follows:

It should be your object to arrange with local chiefs for the restoration and maintenance of order in areas outside the limits of our military occupation, for the exclusion and surrender of enemy agents and for the supply of commodities needed by our troops ... You are authorized to appoint [Sheikh] Mahmud as our representative in [Sulaimaniyah], should you consider this expedient, and to make other appointments of this nature at Chamchamal, Halebjja, &c., at your discretion. ... Tribal leaders will be encouraged to form a confederation for the settlement of their public affairs under the guidance of the British political officers.²²

On 16 November 1918, Noel arrived at Sulaimaniyah and, as instructed by Wilson, on 1 December he proclaimed a temporary system for the settlement of the Kurdish affairs, headed by Mahmud, who was recognised as the representative of the British government. British political officers had been appointed for Kirkuk, Kifri, Arbil, Altun-Keupri and other districts, under the control of the British High Commissioner in Baghdad, and Kurdish officers were named, to each sub-districts, under the direction of British officers.²³ This government was envisaged as being the Kurdish confederation system to rule southern Kurdistan, but it would not be free of all interference from the Baghdad administration. It would be the instrument of rebuilding the country that had been destroyed by the autocratic regime of the Turks, who could still pose a danger to the British zone of influence in southern Kurdistan. Noel's previous experience in Kurdistan had made him aware of the Kurdish political situation and to support the Kurds. A telegram from the Civil Commissioner in Baghdad to the Secretary of State for India reported the running of an active campaign by Noel to establish a

Kurdish state, as Noel stated that the 'national movement is so virile that I do not foresee much difficulty in creating Kurdish state under our protection'.²⁴ Noel recognised the fact that the Kurds would never accept Arab rulers, and any effort to do so would create instability in Iraq and thus cause risks to British interests. In his memo circulated to the Assistant Political Officers at Kirkuk, Kifri and Altun-Keupri on 8 December 1918, Noel stated that British policy in Kurdistan should be framed in accordance with the existing development of Kurdish movements and national aspirations. He argued that the Turkish and Arab officers should be replaced by Kurdish ones, and that the official language should be the Kurdish tongue. Moreover, the inhabitants would have their own regional budget, and the laws would be altered so that the local revenue, custom and taxes would be used by the local administration for the benefit of the people, whilst the government would be influenced by Baghdad in other sectors, such as agriculture, education, communication and work.²⁵ Although Wilson's instructions had apparently indicated that British intentions were to establish no more than a tribal confederation system under British direct rule, it was a historic opportunity for the Kurds to develop their own administration under the British auspices. However, Mahmud's ambition was to establish an independent Kurdish emirate without Iraqi intervention.

In his visit to Sulaimaniyah on 1 December 1918, Wilson received a delegation of the principal notables of southern Kurdistan, and from other side of Turco - Persian frontiers, during which the Kurdish representatives hoped to obtain British support for establishing a united Kurdistan including all of its parts, instead of just the southern one.²⁶ Wilson pointed out that: 'some chiefs were in favour of, others against, an effective British administration in Kurdistan; some insisted that Kurdistan must be under London, not Baghdad'.²⁷ The meeting resulted in a document that was signed by Mahmud and the notables, in the following terms:

His Majesty's Government having announced that their intention in this war is the liberation of Eastern peoples from Turkish oppression, and to grant assistance to them to establish their

independence, we, the representatives of the people of Kurdistan, ask His Britannic Majesty's Government to accept us also under British protection, and to attach us to Iraq, so that we may not be deprived of benefits of that association; and we hereby request the Civil Commissioner in Mesopotamia to send us a representative with necessary assistants to enable Kurdistan people [sic] under British auspices to progress peacefully on civilized lines.²⁸

At this stage British policy was not entirely clear and it seemed to be tactical and provisional. For his part, Wilson then signed a draft document that the Kurdish tribes in the British zone of influence, 'from the greater Zab to Diala', who desired to recognise the leadership of Mahmud, would be allowed to do so, and Britain would undertake its responsibility to support him as ruler in those areas on behalf of the British government. However, Wilson also noted the dislike of the inhabitants of Kifri and Kirkuk for the leadership of Mahmud, and that 'a few [Notables] told me in secret that they would never accept [Sheikh] Mahmud as leader, but they could suggest no alternative'.²⁹

Hilmi has noted that Mahmud appointed his brother, cousin and other relatives to the important positions in his government.³⁰ This may have been partially the cause of some of the notable dislike of Mahmud's leadership. The concern of Wilson about Mahmud's attempt to be an independent ruler led him to use those notables to prevent Mahmud from expanding his influence over all of the Kurdish areas in the British zone of control. Wilson accused Mahmud personally of usurping British authority, however Wilson understood that Kurdish nationalist were encouraging this.³¹ In this regard, Noel pointed out that the self-centred group around Mahmud, which consisted of chieftains and educated notables, including ex-officers and civil servants of the former Ottoman Empire, journalists and teachers, made him feel as if he was the ruler of all Kurdistan and led to a heavy expenditure.³² Wilson supported the idea of sending strong British forces to Kurdistan, in order to maintain law and order, whilst Noel disagreed and argued that due to Mahmud's full co-operation with British authority and his powerful character, the peace

should be kept in the area without bringing in British troops. He understood that removing Mahmud would cause a problem, as influential tribes in southern Kurdistan and notables even from the Persian border had recognised his appointment in Sulaimaniyah. Therefore, Noel believed that a growth of Mahmud's power and expansion of his authority would be in the interests of both Britain and the Kurds in the area.³³

There was a major conflict between the British officials in Baghdad and the Sulaimaniyah government respecting the question whether the Kurds in Iraq should be ruled by an Arab or not. Stephen Longrigg, the Assistant Political Officer at Kirkuk, agreed with Noel's position, as he believed that the dream of forming an independent Kurdish state, under the protection of the British government, would soon become a reality. He also thought that Mahmud would be the best person to rule this state.³⁴ This question was discussed in the telegrams between the Secretary of State for India and Wilson. Unlike the former position, Wilson argued that the desire of the Kurdish people for the inclusion of the Mosul vilayet in Iraq could be 'tactically assumed', and their relations with the Arab ruler and their exact grade of autonomy under the safeguard of the British High Commissioner should be settled later.³⁵ I would argued that although Wilson knew that Mahmoud would not accept the Arab rule, his intention was to impose his opinion for the inclusion of Kurdistan into Iraq, whilst there was a strong voice for separate Kurdistan from Iraq, amongst the British officials. Wilson did not deny that as he stated that while the Kurdish inhabitants desired to be protected and administrated by the British authorities at Baghdad, 'Kurds in this region are bigoted Sunnis, but as far as I can see they will not assent to be under a titular Arab head thought this might conceivably come later'.³⁶ Wilson excluded the districts of Altun-Keupri, Arbil, Kifri and Kirkuk, Akra, Dohuk and Zakho from southern Kurdistan, and included them within Mesopotamia as integral part of the Mosul vilayet. He has later inclined to demarcate further areas of northern Kurdistan within southern Kurdistan.³⁷ It is worth noting that Wilson's demarcation line between Mesopotamia and southern Kurdistan was based

on strategic considerations, as he included the important lands south and west of the Mosul vilayet with Iraq and he assumed that the Turkish frontier would be pushed further back to the north of the vilayet.

Wilson thought that to stop Mahmud's growing ambitions to govern all of southern Kurdistan, further political and military steps needed to be taken, as he realized that indirect rule had not been successful in establishing British influence. In order to do so, after separating the districts of Kirkuk and Kifri from Sulaimaniyah division, in February 1919, Wilson demanded the influential tribe of Jaf to reject Mahmud's confederacy.³⁸ Moreover, the British authorities in Baghdad decided to replace the political assistance of Mahmud in Sulaimaniyah. Wilson stated that there was a unanimous view in Baghdad to change the policy of administration in southern Kurdistan by making it similar to the other districts in Iraq. In this regard, Wilson stated that after considerable discussion about the position amongst the political officers in Baghdad, 'it was decided, with Noel's full concurrence, that his place at [Sulaimaniyah] should be taken by Soane, who had hitherto had no personal relations with [Sheikh] Mahmud, but had exceptional qualifications and intimate knowledge of the whole area'.³⁹ Noel was thought to be a strong supporter of obtaining Kurdish independence under British protection, and this could be seen as the main reason for replacing him. Although Wilson's telegram to Arthur Hirtzel, the Assistant Under-Secretary of State for India, on 24 November 1919 complained about Noel's inexperience of Kurdistan, in the same telegram he contradicted this assessment of Noel's Kurdish expertise and indicated that the main reason for his removal from Sulaimaniyah was:

Major Noel have [sic] never served in Mesopotamia and his experience of southern Kurdistan is limited to about 4 months in the Sulaimaniyah-Rawanduz region where his pro Kurdish enthusiasms involved this administration in such heavy expenses and in such undesirable political commitments vis a vis [Sheikh Mahmud that I had to remove him to a sphere where his energies could be used with greater advantage ... His remarkable personality and his knowledge of Kurdish language and

customs enable him to exercise great personal influence for the Kurds, but this influence is transient and cannot in my judgment be used as a basis on which to found our general policy.⁴⁰

Major Ely Soane, an expert in the Kurdish and Persian languages, was viewed by Wilson as a reliable and skilful man who could implement a difficult task. Unlike Noel, Soane supported the inclusion of southern Kurdistan into the Mosul vilayet itself, under Iraqi authority. The adoption of a new policy of direct control over the Sulaimniyah government by Soane was cause of the negative situation.⁴¹ This caused great annoyance amongst the Kurds, and it gave Mahmud and the nationalist class no option except the reaction that led to the first revolt on 22 May 1919, which brought instability to the political sphere in Kurdistan.

The British authorities at Baghdad reported the outbreak of 1919 as a serious event that threatened all of Kurdistan. Mahmud took control of the government, the treasury was seized, the local gendarmes were defeated, and the British officers, staff and troops were captured. Mahmud then declared himself the ruler of Kurdistan, and he raised the Kurdish flag and appointed his agents for the districts, and declared his own stamp. The reports by the officials showed that the outbreak was completely unexpected by the British officers, as they thought that Mahmud had lost ground. I think this shows that they misread the political and military ability of Mahmud. It was also noted that this movement resulted from Mahmud's activity for independence and was strongly supported by Persian Kurdistan, which supplied about 1500 men.⁴² However, the number of Kurdish Persian supporters involved may be exaggerated. Hilmi indicated that 300 men from the famous tribe of Dzli in the Persian borders, headed by their Chief, Mahmud Khan, controlled Sulaimaniyah at first.⁴³ It was also considered that if the revolt was not suppressed immediately, similar unrest would occur in northern Kurdistan and north-east Persia and would seriously affect the military position in the Mosul and Baghdad vilayets. Thus, in order to pacify the situation, the High Commissioner and the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief considered the possibility of occupying Sulaimaniyah as the source of the unrest.⁴⁴ On

17 May 1919, General Fraser advanced toward Darbandi-Baziyan, 12 miles east of Chemchemal, where Mahmud held the main pass. Fraser's troops comprised the 53rd and 55th infantry battalions from the 18th Division, with four squadrons of Indian horsemen and three artillery batteries. Eventually, after an unbalanced battle in numbers and firepower, Mahmud was wounded and captured on 18 May. 42 of his fighters were killed and 100 men were captured, including his brother. Mahmud was sent to Baghdad, his supporting chiefs were punished and the Civil Administration restored over the next six weeks.⁴⁵ Mahmud was then exiled to India, but the unrest and the Kurdish desire for self-rule were not ended as Wilson intended, and the anti-British movement continued in the most of the mountain areas.

The British agents in Iraq accused Mahmud and his supporters of being influenced by Islamic propaganda spread by the Turks. Wilson indicated that Kurdistan was divided into a pro-British party and a pro-Turkish group who were recognised as enthusiastically anti-foreign and anti-Christian.⁴⁶ Wilson used the term of pro-Turkish group for the pan-Islamism group. Instead of this, Noel mentioned the Pan-Islamic and Nationalist directions amongst the Kurds in northern Kurdistan; the first of whom was encouraged by the Turks, whilst the development of the latter would be in favour of the British interests.⁴⁷ Whilst, MacDowell noted the existence of a third group of political opinion amongst them who supported complete independence.⁴⁸ Although the Kurds were divided in their views between anti-British and pro-British supporters, they were mostly against direct British rule over Kurdistan. It should be noted that although the pro-British supporters trusted Britain to support their demand for independence, British policy-making on the ground was a major factor in the creation of an anti-British attitude. In particular, the policy of direct rule by Soane, under the instructions of

Wilson in Baghdad, caused the subsequent deterioration in Anglo-Kurdish relation.

Conclusion

The strategic and geographical situation of Kurdistan forced the Kurds to accept political outcomes that resulted from the conflicts of foreign powers in the Kurdistan region, and these consequences shaped the fate of Kurdistan in ways that the Kurds did not desire. It is worth noting that due the lack of previous contact between the Kurds and British officers, some Kurds had been impressed by the religious fanaticism of the Ottoman regime to see the British forces as their enemy in the early part of the First World War. However, the Kurds later came to understand that their real enemy was the Turkish regime, and so they took the opportunity to obtain help by contacting the British officers to liberate them from the Turkish authorities.

In order to stabilise Mesopotamia, imperial and strategic interests prompted the British government to establish a Kurdish local administration in southern Kurdistan, but the policy of the British authorities at Baghdad was assumed to be tactical as regards the Sulaimaniyah government. Although the British political officers in Kurdistan thought that it would benefit both Kurdistan on one side and Britain and Iraq on the other side if the Kurds should have a government of their own under indirect British rule, the attempt to impose direct rule over Kurdistan by the British High Commissioner at Baghdad made the situation worse. This caused the pro-British supporters who had trusted Britain to support their desire for independence to lead the first revolt on 22 May 1919. At the same time, the Islamic propaganda of the Turks had some impact in increasing anti-British sentiments. It was obvious that the British policy towards the Kurdish situation in general and Southern Kurdistan in particular was not yet clear, as British policy was influenced by the personal views of British officials rather than the settled decisions of the government.

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