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State formation as an Outcome of the Imperial Encounter: the case of Iraq

Abstract: This article employs a postcolonial historical sociological approach to studying state formation in Iraq between 1914-1924. In doing so, it synthesises insights from the ‘historical’ and ‘imperial’ turns in International Relations (IR), to understand the state as a processual and relational entity shaped by the imperial relations through which it emerged. Drawing on the case of Iraq, this article demonstrates how British imperial relations (‘international’) interlaced with anti-colonial struggles (‘domestic’) to foster a historically-specific pattern of Iraqi state formation. In making these claims, this article contributes to bridging IR’s analytical divide between ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ spaces, whilst undermining IR’s universalist assumptions about the ‘spread’ of the state from Europe to the Arab world. Rather, this paper demonstrates that the imperial encounter was constitutive of the type of state that emerged, thereby highlighting the agency of anti-colonial struggles in producing historically specific patterns of state domination.

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In the summer of 1920, eighteen months after the end of the First World War (WWI), the British Empire came face to face with the strongest armed uprising it would encounter throughout the twentieth century.1 The uprising unfolded in the formerly Ottoman territory of Iraq, which the British had occupied during the war. Demanding “complete independence” (al-ʾistiqlal al-tam), more than 130,000 Iraqis fought against the British Army over six months.2 That the Iraqi uprising posed a serious threat to British control was evident from the high human toll of suppressing it, which according to conservative British estimates, amounted to 8,200 Iraqi and 2,269 British casualties.3 The military cost was no less severe, requiring the deployment of 101,000 British troops and heavy bombing

by the Royal Air Force (RAF).\textsuperscript{4} In total, the British Treasury spent £40 million to quell the uprising – twice its annual budget for Iraq.\textsuperscript{5}

In the midst of the uprising in late October, the British established a provisional government, culminating in a constitutional monarchy in August 1921.\textsuperscript{6} The legal basis for Britain’s state-building project stemmed from a League of Nations Mandate, granted at the San Remo Conference on 28 April 1920. The mandate conferred on Britain supervisory functions to oversee “the progressive development of Mesopotamia as an independent State.”\textsuperscript{7} The establishment of the Iraqi state therefore unfolded against the backdrop of one of the biggest anti-colonial uprisings in modern Iraqi history, widely known within Iraqi historiography as the 1920 Revolution.\textsuperscript{8}

This article maintains that the historical concurrence of these two developments – state formation and anti-colonial struggle – was not coincidental, but was formative of the Iraqi state’s patterns of domination, that is, how it sought to govern Iraqi society.\textsuperscript{9} In analytically linking these developments, this paper contends that early state formation in Iraq should be conceptualised as the outcome of the colonial encounter – of the struggle between colonial power and local movements. It is here, in the dynamic between anti-colonial struggles and colonial power’s repressive response, that we can trace the transformative impact of the colonial encounter for state-society relations.

In the case of Iraq, this impact can be traced to how Britain’s response to the Iraqi uprising shaped the way the Iraqi state mediated its relations with society. Specifically, this article argues that the uprising represented the site upon which Britain and the Iraqi

\textsuperscript{4} ‘Note on Use of Air Force in Mesopotamia’, 26 February 1921, AIR 5/223, TNA.
\textsuperscript{6} High Commissioner to India Office, Telegram 12987, 26 October 1920, FO 371/5231/13471, TNA.
\textsuperscript{9} ‘Domination’ is understood as the ability to gain obedience through the power of command, see Joel Migdal, ‘The state in society: an approach to struggles for domination’, in Joel Migdal, Atul Kohli, Vivienne Shue (eds), *State Power and Social Forces* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 8-9, fn 2.
independence movement fought to implement their conflicting visions of Iraqi statehood. Through its violent suppression of the uprising, the British quashed the independence movement’s bottom-up state-building project and gained the upper hand in implementing its imperial project. Yet, how the British authorities dealt with the independence movement directly shaped the incipient state’s coercive and political parameters. Britain’s reliance on the RAF to quell the uprising paved the way for the institutionalisation of air power as the state’s primary mediator in state-society contestation, whilst Britain’s quest to fragment the independence movement gave rise to a narrow framework for political participation. This outcome, it will be argued, placed constraints on the scope of Britain’s control in Iraq whilst impeding the Iraqi state’s ability to establish its power inclusively throughout society.

In making these claims, this article underscores the imperial dimensions of state formation in Iraq, by studying state formation, the international, and political movements within a single analytical framework. It does this by employing a postcolonial historical sociological approach, which synthesises insights from the ‘historical’ and ‘imperial’ turns in International Relation (IR). The historical turn – or “re(turn)” – emerged in the early 1980s, as scholars began gravitating towards historical sociology to address the lack of temporality within mainstream – neorealist – approaches. Whilst history has long been present within IR scholarship, it has tended to function as “scripture”, as empirical data for verifying theoretical claims, lacking an explanatory value. Against this, historical sociology espouses a historicist perspective, defined here as an understanding of the contingent and constitutive impact of historical events and processes. As such, historical

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sociology offers a solid platform to examine the processes and relations through which seemingly ahistorical social objects, like the modern state, are formed.\textsuperscript{14}

Through its relational approach, historical sociology, particularly its latest ‘global’ variant, underscores the ‘thick’ domestic, transnational and global relations through which states emerge.\textsuperscript{15} This opens the door to a ‘thick’ conception of the state, as an emergent and relational entity, lying at the nexus between ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ relations. The first contribution of this article lies in providing a detailed empirical illustration of how the state is constituted through its intertwined domestic and international relations. Drawing on the case of Iraq, I demonstrate how British imperial relations (‘international’) interlaced with local anti-colonial struggles (‘domestic’) to foster a specific pattern of Iraqi state formation.

The second contribution of this article is to the ‘imperial turn’ in IR, which emerged in the last two decades as part of the discipline’s “self-reflexive turn”.\textsuperscript{16} At the core of this approach is a commitment to studying the intertwined and mutually constitutive relations between Western and non-Western societies.\textsuperscript{17} Through its relational ontology, this literature compliments global historical sociology (GHS), while offering a vital corrective to IR’s Eurocentrism.

Notwithstanding the valuable contributions of the ‘imperial turn’, this article maintains that it suffers from epistemological and historiographical shortcomings that overlook the role of non-Western agency in shaping the political outcomes of the imperial encounter.\textsuperscript{18} Firstly, the majority of studies within the ‘imperial turn’ focus on how the

\textsuperscript{17} Barkawi, ‘Empire’.
conduct of empire in colonised spaces shaped Western or imperial developments, with no corresponding emphasis on how the actions of the colonised themselves actually changed the imperial trajectory within these colonised spaces.\textsuperscript{19} Secondly, this literature privileges the cultural, legal and discursive dimensions of imperialism and thereby overlooks on-the-ground anti-colonial movements.\textsuperscript{20} These are two major oversights, especially since anti-colonial movements had a transformative impact on political outcomes, and thereby offer a pathway for incorporating non-European agency into our analysis.\textsuperscript{21}

This article addresses these understudied dimensions in the ‘imperial turn’ through a “re(turn)” to the key tenets of a postcolonial approach. This entails an engagement with the histories of imperialism from the perspectives of the colonised and a more rigorous historical practice that takes seriously the agency of anti-colonial movements in shaping the imperial trajectory.\textsuperscript{22} I demonstrate the fruitfulness of this approach by engaging with Iraqi historiography through Arabic memoirs – alongside the British archives – to examine how the imperial conflict between the Iraqi independence movement and the British authorities was formative of the type of state that emerged in Iraq.

This article’s third contribution lies in applying a postcolonial historical sociological framework to IR approaches to Arab state formation. Although historicist insights are not lacking in these approaches, they tend to be dominated by universalist assumptions about the ‘spread’ of Westphalian norms from Europe to the Arab world.\textsuperscript{23} These assumptions, it will be argued, overlook how the state was remade through imperial


\textsuperscript{22} I am grateful to an anonymous peer reviewer for help in wording this sentence.

relations, giving rise to a historically specific pattern of state domination across the Arab world. It is the specificity of colonial state formation that reveals the historically contingent meaning of the category of the state, and thereby encourages a more reflexive attitude to IR’s analytical categories. Accordingly this article contributes to a shift away from studying the state as an analytical category of comparison, towards an understanding of the state as an empirical and processual category of practice.

Towards a Postcolonial Historical Sociology

All social theories can be understood as lenses through which to observe a single reality, each using a particular wavelength to filter which aspects of this reality become clearer, and which are obscured. In this sense, GHS elucidates the historical processes and relations through which social objects, like the modern state, are formed. This differs from a neorealist prism, which views states as the analogous sovereign units of the international system, operating according to the timeless principle of anarchy. The problem with this image, from a historicist perspective, is not that it lacks a correspondence with social reality but rather that it is based on an ahistorical snapshot of the international order, naturalised and reified to the level of theory.

What is obscured through a neorealist prism are the myriad domestic, global, and transnational relations which historically produced, and continue to produce, the ostensibly distinct units – states – in the first place. By emphasising these ‘thick’ constitutive relations, historicisation opens the door to a rethinking of IR’s deeply-rooted assumptions about the structure of world politics, particularly its analytical bifurcation of social relations into ‘international’ (‘external’) and ‘domestic’ (‘internal’) spheres. Rather than

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studying the state as a social unit lying within either sphere, GHS encourages us to study states through their constitutive relations that cut across ‘internal’ and ‘external’ spaces.\footnote{George Lawson, ‘A Global Historical Sociology of Revolution’, in Go and Lawson (eds), \textit{Global Historical Sociology}, p. 88.} The ontology of relationalism recognises such social forms as real only inasmuch as they are produced through historical processes.\footnote{Go and Lawson, ‘Introduction’, p. 24.}

From this perspective, states should be studied as emergent phenomena – “entities in motion” – rather than pre-social essentialist categories.\footnote{Ibid., p. 3; Bayly, ‘The ‘re-turn’ to empire’, p. 463.} This paves the way to a ‘thick’ conception of the state, as embedded within both rich ‘international’ relations and the broad networks of social power within its ‘domestic’ setting.\footnote{John Hobson, ‘The Two Waves of Weberian Historical Sociology in IR’, in Hobden and Hobson (eds), \textit{Historical Sociology}, pp. 74-6.} This conceptualisation allows us to consider the role of non-state forces in shaping the state’s patterns of domination. It also leads us away from a focus on the state as a by-product of its autonomous will, toward an understanding of state formation as highly contingent on the outcomes of its interactions with local and external social forces.\footnote{Migdal, ‘state in society’, pp. 9-10, 23, 26.} This approach therefore reveals the recursive and mutually constitutive relationship between state, society and the international.

Whilst historical sociology elucidates the processual and relational dimensions of the state, historical tools of analysis cannot alone address IR’s “unreflective assumption of the centrality of Europe and latterly the West in human affairs.”\footnote{Barkawi, ‘Empire’.} Herein lies the contribution of the ‘imperial turn’, which centres imperial histories through an examination of the mutually constitutive relations between Western and non-Western societies.\footnote{Go, ‘Postcolonial Sociology’, p. 25; Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, ‘The postcolonial moment in security studies’, \textit{Review of International Studies}, 32:2 (2006), p. 346; Go and Lawson, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.} As such, the ‘imperial turn’ offers a corrective to IR’s amnesia on empire, which tends to be subsumed within the discipline’s Eurocentric “origin and spread”
narrative. At the centre of this narrative is the “Westphalian common sense” assumption that the sovereign state originated from the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), then spread across the world via colonialism. Europe is thus positioned as the sole originator and agent of global history, whilst non-European states feature as the “intruder element” that, following independence, entered into “basically a European system of states”.

A rich wave of literature has emerged within the ‘imperial turn’ to challenge the Eurocentrism of this “origin and spread” narrative. Jordan Branch traces the genealogy of the principle of territoriality to European competition over the Americas during the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Meanwhile Antony Anghie shows how the European conquest of Africa was instrumental in the emergence of the idea of territorial sovereignty in nineteenth century European international law. The legal notion of sovereignty is further re-examined in Edward Keene’s rereading of Grotius’s work, where he shows how the concept of “divided sovereignty” was tailored to justify Europe’s imperial pursuits. By placing Europe and its colonies within the same analytical framework, this literature demonstrates that colonialism was not simply a mechanism for the “spread” of the European sovereign state, but was in fact constitutive of its “origins”.

Whilst these studies highlight the parochialism of IR’s Eurocentric historiography, a parallel literature within the ‘imperial turn’ examines how the colonial encounter itself generated new meanings that shaped imperial relations. Martin Bayly draws on the nineteenth century colonial conquest of Afghanistan to argue that the amorphous meaning

43 Keene, Grotius, pp. 76, 95.
that Afghanistan held for the British was culturally co-constituted through the colonial encounter. In doing so, Bayly restores some agency to the “Afghanistan context” by shifting the explanatory focus away from Anglo-Russian geopolitical rivalry. Also focusing on discursive representations, Roxanne Doty offers a critical genealogy of North-South relations by analysing how structures of meaning – particularly the self/other dichotomy – are constructed by dominant powers during violent imperial encounters.

The ‘imperial turn’ offers a vital corrective to IR’s Eurocentrism and ahistoricity. Yet, throughout this otherwise critical literature, non-European actors feature primarily as the objects, not the subjects, of imperial outcomes. The analysis of non-Western agency is limited to demonstrating non-European contributions to Europe’s legal, political, or discursive formation. The research questions guiding these studies are all similarly centred upon Europe, whether it is the meaning non-Westerners held in Western representations or the role of non-Westerns in shaping European conceptions of state sovereignty. Notwithstanding the importance of these studies, the literature is lacking comparable contributions about how the imperial encounter shaped political outcomes from the non-Western – and hence “weaker” – side of the encounter. We are left without a real sense of how the actions of the colonised actually changed the historical trajectory of imperialism. In other words, the existing literature does not go far enough in studying “the weak and the strong together, as jointly responsible for making history.”

To be clear, the claim here is not that IR’s ‘imperial turn’ is Eurocentric. The literature’s focus on how non-European agency shaped European developments is certainly a vital step towards producing a global history of the international order. Rather the crux of the problem lies in the imbalance in historiographical and epistemological

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46 Doty, *Imperial Encounters*, p. 171.
choices throughout these studies. In particular, the prevalence of historiographical questions about Western – political/legal/discursive – formations, which inevitably results in research with a Western focal point. The dominance of Western/English historical sources within the ‘imperial turn’ also partly explains the focus on Europe.\footnote{Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Why is there no non-Western international relations theory? An introduction’, in Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (eds), Non-Western International Relations Theory (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), p. 1.} Inscribed within all sources are the power dynamics and ontological frameworks present at the moment of their production.\footnote{Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), pp. 49, 73-4.} Studying imperial relations by drawing primarily on sources that share the ontological parameters of the dominant – Western – power will, by necessity, silence alternative – non-Western – interpretations of the past.

These shortcomings in the ‘imperial turn’ can be addressed through an engagement with the histories of imperialism from the perspectives of the colonised, alongside a more expansive definition of agency that allows us to examine how the actions of the colonised shaped imperial outcomes. Both these requisites require a “re(turn)” to the key tenets of a postcolonial approach. Epistemologically, a postcolonial perspective entails a commitment to a situated perspective on international politics, that emphasises how our view of politics is transformed when envisioned from within colonial histories.\footnote{Charlotte Epstein, ‘The Postcolonial Perspective: an Introduction’, International Theory, 6:2 (2014), pp. 295, 298, 300} Meanwhile, through its core idea that imperial relations are mutually constitutive, a postcolonial perspective does not limit agency to powerful states, but rather sees non-state actors, including “the weak”, as integral to shaping political processes.\footnote{Barkawi, ‘Empire’.} Inherent in this approach is a recursive understanding of agency, not limited to moments of triumph – which, for “the weak”, are rare – but integral to how both the powerful and weak shape political processes through their interactive encounter.\footnote{Hobson, ‘Orientalism’, p. 136.}

In addition to these historiographical and epistemological shortcomings, the majority of writings in the ‘imperial turn’ are dominated by ideational themes and

\begin{itemize}
\item\footnote{Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Why is there no non-Western international relations theory? An introduction’, in Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (eds), Non-Western International Relations Theory (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), p. 1.}
\item\footnote{Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), pp. 49, 73-4.}
\item\footnote{Barkawi, ‘Empire’.}
\item\footnote{Hobson, ‘Orientalism’, p. 136.}
\end{itemize}
constructivist approaches that focus on the discursive, cultural and legal dimensions of imperialism. By focusing on the meanings produced through the imperial encounter, this approach is “historicist without being historical” – that is, it addresses only one aspect of historicity, the production of narratives, whilst overlooking history as a social process.

Missing from this literature are the political and military dimensions of imperialism, as relayed through the lived experiences of people on-the-ground, who became enmeshed in “the tensions produced by efforts of empires to install real administrations over real people”.

By privileging discursive representations over politics on-the-ground, this literature tells us little about the history of the actual political movements and violent struggles which were at the heart of the imperial encounter. These anti-colonial struggles represent micro sites upon which the imperial encounter was mediated and refashioned, and as such they offer diagnostic sites for detecting historical changes in configurations of power. Anti-colonial struggles and attempts by colonial elites to suppress them elucidate the core tension in the imperial encounter: the battle to define the emerging political order, particularly the boundaries of legitimate political practice. The outcomes of these struggles were therefore intimately connected to the patterns of domination that were embedded in the colonial state. Accordingly, the ‘imperial turn’ requires a more rigorous historical practice that takes seriously the social history of anti-colonial movements, in order to reveal their impact on imperial trajectories.

As outlined thus far, postcolonial historical sociology offers a strong platform to study colonial state formation. Through its relational and processual ontology, historical sociology encourages us to study the state as an emergent phenomenon, shaped by the imperial relations through which it was established. This compliments a postcolonial perspective, which highlights the historical agency of non-European and non-state actors.

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61 Doty, *Imperial Encounters*, p. 76.
in shaping the imperial trajectory. A postcolonial historical sociology allows us to take seriously historical specificities, as a ground for engaging epistemologically, whilst the focus on the relational and joint nature of historical processes prevents this from descending into a narrow empiricism.

**IR approaches to Arab state formation**

IR scholars have long adopted historicist approaches to studying Arab states. Yet these approaches tend to be anchored in the universalist assumptions of IR’s Eurocentric “origin and spread” narrative. The majority of literature on Arab state formation is premised on the assumption that the European state system “expanded” to the region through European imperialism, creating polities in its “own image”. As Bahgat Korany puts it, the Arab territorial state is “a phenomenon made in Europe”. Similarly Fred Halliday notes that “Western values, and concerns…have indeed ‘spread’ to the Middle East”. The European state was, according to Roger Owen, the only viable model available to state leaders upon independence.

This assumed ‘spread’ of Western norms across the region renders Arab states subject to analytical universality. Halliday takes this universalist commitment furthest, arguing that the universal expansion of capitalism means the region underwent the same historical transformations as other non-European countries. The spread of European norms and institutions has been so extensive, according to Halliday, that the intellectual content of all political movements in the region – the critical, rebellious, and revolutionary

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– now derive from European sources. This analytical move is considered crucial for avoiding “regional narcissism” in our approach.

Whilst it is difficult to disagree with Halliday’s caution against a narrow focus on particularisms – “regional narcissism”, – it is not clear why this methodological stipulation necessitates a commitment to its polar opposite: an analytical universalism that reduces the region’s intellectual currents to Western derivatives. In doing so, this mode of analysis presupposes a normative hierarchy in which Europe is treated as the source of universal political values. Such an approach leaves us in a “Eurocentric cul-de-sac”, where Europeans remain the real subjects of history, whilst non-European agency is confined to choosing between pre-existing Western sources. If political actors in the Arab world are trapped in a maze of Western-derived values, what do they have left, in their intellectual repertoire, to imagine alternative possibilities? Lost in this universalist framework is historical sociology’s emancipatory commitment – which Halliday himself advocates – of opening a space for the possibility of change.

Equally problematic, the assumed universal ‘spread’ of European norms paves the way for the reification of the European sovereign state into an analytical category of analysis. The study of Arab state formation thus becomes a process of translating historical specificities through universal analytical categories. In theory, this translation renders Arab states empirically distinct, yet normatively similar, to Western states. Yet, given this translation is done via an analytical category – the sovereign state – whose strongest approximation are Western states, the result is not so much comparable equivalents that mediate between differences, but rather the production of difference, cast as inadequate

71 Halliday, Middle East, p. 49.
75 Fred Halliday, ‘For an International Sociology’, in Hobden and Hobson (eds), Historical Sociology, p. 247.
vis-à-vis the Western benchmark. In effect, we are left with a mode of analysis that conceptualises Arab states in terms of what they lack – in historical experience or attributes – compared to a “Western state format”.

The analytical limitations of such an approach are evident throughout IR approaches to Arab state formation, which is implicitly conceptualised as an earlier stage in Europe’s history, resulting in a “history-by-analogy”, rather than a history-as-process. Thus Raymond Hinnebusch maintains that the Westphalian state system was prematurely imposed onto an Arab region “similar to medieval Europe”, resulting in centralised modern bureaucracies with “neo-medieval” patrimonial leadership. Similarly, Ian Lustick argues that the “absence” of great powers among Middle Eastern states stems from their “latecomer status”, which hindered them from embarking on the kind of state-building wars that facilitated the rise of European great powers during the nineteenth century.

The focus on historical timing also informs Adham Saouli’s historical-structuralist approach, where he points to the immediate pressures of democratisation faced by new Arab states to explain their “incomplete” status, in contrast to their European predecessors who consolidated state power before the pressures of democratisation emerged. The different histories of state formation in Europe and the Arab world are also central to Gökhan Bacik’s claim that the region’s “hybrid sovereignty” arose as a by-product of the region’s “artificial” modernisation. Indeed a strong modernist current runs throughout this literature, exemplified by Michael Hudson’s contention that the “legitimacy problem”

78 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, pp. 17, 32.
83 Saouli, Arab State, pp. 12, 15, 33, 52.
84 Bacik, Hybrid Sovereignty, pp. 38-9.
among Arab states arose from the rapid process of modernisation, which rendered Arab societies “no longer traditional” but “far from being fully modern” and thereby struggling to develop rational-legal legitimacy.85

Underpinning these approaches is a transition paradigm, premised on the notion that the region is belatedly undergoing a transition into modern statehood, akin to what occurred in nineteenth century Europe.86 By ascribing Arab states with a pre-destiny trail blazed by Europe, this literature relies on ontological assumptions about history as a singular, linear and European-driven process.87 Rather than treating Arab states and European states as inhabiting the same temporal horizon, historical time becomes an explanation for the institutional differences between the two.88 As such, a reified image of Europe becomes the theoretical subject of all history, whilst the Arab world becomes merely one variation on this master narrative.

The crux of the problem with this literature stems from its universalist assumptions about the global ‘spread’ of Western norms and institutions. To speak of the universal diffusion of social objects, namely the modern state, from Europe to the Arab world, presupposes that these objects are fixed entities with stable attributes, that remained essentially unchanged as they moved through time and space.89 Of course, ideas and institutions did move – both ways – during the colonial encounter, but the very imperial process through which this movement occurred refashioned and reconstructed these objects along the way.90

The literature thus overlooks the constitutive role of imperial relations in producing historically-specific patterns of colonial state formation in the Arab world. This specificity arose from how the institutions of the sovereign state, as a universal principle

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86 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, pp. 7-9, 17.
88 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, p. 27.
premised on the equivalence of national-state units, were established throughout the Arab world through hierarchical and asymmetrical imperial relations. In other words, Arab state formation unfolded as an “inequality structured through the form of equivalence”. These imperial tensions were inscribed in the state-building project even when it took place through a League of Nations Mandate, itself firmly entrenched within the imperial framework of its day. This overlapping nature of imperial and domestic rule produced patterns of state domination characterised by a simultaneous co-existence with, and denial of, indigenous sovereignty.

By analytically linking state formation with imperialism, my argument differs from Fred Lawson’s contention that “the end of empire…and the emergence of sovereign states represent separate trends that must be kept analytically distinct.” Rather, this article contends that state sovereignty and imperialism represent analytically intertwined trends that shaped early patterns of Arab state domination. This, in turn, reveals the historically contingent meaning of IR’s analytical category of the state, and the limitations of its claims to universality.

Accordingly, the national-state in the Arab world emerged as a by-product of imperial relations, rather than from the ‘spread’ of European norms and institutions. Seen in this light, the methodological choice is not between a commitment to local particularities that leads to “regional narcissism” or an analytical universality that overlooks the historically contingent nature of its categories. Rather, the choice is between studying Arab state formation through modes of analysis that encourage comparison to a European normative benchmark, or studying the region through a relational approach where Europe’s relevance shifts from its reified position as the perennial source of

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93 James McDougall, ‘The British and French Empires in the Arab World: Some problems of Colonial State-formation and its Legacy,’ in Cummings and Hinnebusch (eds), Sovereignty After Empire, p. 56.
95 Barkawi, ‘Empire’.
political norms, to that of an important actor in the imperial process. In adopting the latter approach, this article contributes to a shift away from conceptualising the state as an analytical category of comparison towards understanding it as an empirical and processual category of practice.  

Such a processual and relational approach to the state requires a detailed engagement with imperial histories of the region. And yet, as Nazih Ayubi lamented over two decades ago, “although it is sorely needed, no imperial history of the Arab World is yet available”. Of course, references to imperial legacies are widespread in IR literature on the region, often characterised as the world’s “most penetrated international relations sub-system.” Yet, lacking are studies of the micro-imperial dynamics that drove political processes like state formation. The dearth of such studies on the Arab world is at odds with historical scholarship on Africa and India, which boasts a well-established critical literature on colonial states and anti-colonial movements, with Indian historiography inspiring its own school of thought, Subaltern Studies.

The absence of a comparable imperial historiography on the Arab world stems partly from the relatively short duration of formal colonial rule in much of the region – 18 years in Iraq – and its frequent exercise through indirect methods, namely mandates, treaties and protectorates. More importantly, the dominant “theoretical metonym” through which imperialism is conceptualised in IR centres upon its macro-structural legacy, namely the colonial imposition of “artificial” borders that left behind a “misfit” between territory and identity. Thus Hinnebusch refers to the “break up of bilad ash-

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98 Ayubi, Arab State, p. 108.
100 Exceptions to this trend include Daniel Neep, Occupying Syria under the French Mandate (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 2.
101 McDoughall, ‘Empires in the Arab World’, p. 49.
102 Ibid., p. 44.
“Sham” as the “original sin” of European colonialism, resulting in “borders cutting across pre-existing sub- and supra-state identities, fragmenting the potential ‘Arab nation’.”

This emphasis on the tensions between territorial borders and pre-existing – and somewhat static – cultural identities is pervasive throughout the literature. Among English School scholars, the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire “by the pencil and ruler of a Colonial Official” is attributed with creating “unnatural states” mapping poorly onto local identities. In his constructivist approach, Michael Barnett links the emergence of a regional order to the increasing compatibility between Arab nationalism and Westphalian state sovereignty. Even in avowedly materialist accounts, the imperial legacy of “arbitrary” country formation offers the underlying premise for understanding Arab state formation.

This scholarly focus on European border-making is a welcome reminder that Arab state formation occurred as part of an external intervention into a foreign territory, and that European imperialists and Arab societies occupied asymmetrical positions in determining this process. However by attributing too much historical agency to top-down imperial legacies, these studies leave us without a detailed understanding of how macro colonial policies interacted with local dynamics to drive the process of state formation. In other words, they do not go far enough in analysing the constitutive relations between ‘external’ colonial influence and ‘internal’ political dynamics.

The study of the interaction between anti-colonial movements and imperial state-building projects offers a strong platform for exploring how external influences interacted

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106 Buzan and Gonzalez-Pelaez, ‘Conclusions’, p. 238; Simon Murden, ‘The Secondary Institutions of the Middle Eastern Regional Interstate Society’, in Buzan and Gonzalez-Pelaez (eds), *International Society*, p. 120.
110 McDoughall, ‘Empires in the Arab World’, p. 46.
with local politics to shape state formation. These imperial encounters lay at the
intersection between local political demands and exogenous colonial interests, and thereby
help elucidate the porousness of IR’s analytical distinction between ‘international’ and
‘domestic’ spaces. Within IR, the pertinence of political movements for understanding
Arab state formation has long been recognised, but rarely followed through with detailed
studies. Accordingly in what follows I provide a detailed empirical study of how British
colonial power interacted with the Iraqi independence movement to shape the process of
state formation.

The Iraqi independence movement: the rise and violent collapse of alternative
possibilities

Britain’s wartime invasion of Iraq in November 1914 paved the way for the collapse of
four centuries of Ottoman power in 1918, leaving behind a political vacuum that brought
to the fore the question of how to form a new political order. The imperial encounter
between the independence movement and the British administration became the site upon
which two conflicting visions of Iraq’s political future were fought, reaching its peak
during the Iraqi uprising in 1920 and culminating in the British establishment of the Iraqi
state in 1920-1924.

Although the imperial encounter in Iraq was primarily a conflict with a particular
polity (Britain) over the future of a particular state (Iraq), it was embedded in a wider
transnational field of anti-imperial struggle that characterised the post-war moment.
Indeed, the year before the Iraqi uprising was among the most threatening the British

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111 Frederick Cooper, ‘The Dialectics of Decolonization: Nationalism and Labor Movements in Post-War
112 Doty, Imperial Encounters, pp. 85-6.
114 Julian Go, ‘Relational Sociology and Postcolonial Theory: Sketches of a “Postcolonial Relationalism”’, in
368; Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, ‘The Great War as a Global War: Imperial Conflict and the
p. 76.
Empire had hitherto faced, both at home and abroad. In the spring of 1919 Britain confronted major resistance to its rule by the Wafd movement in Egypt, while it deployed extreme violence to quell protests in the Punjabi city of Amritsar, followed by its entanglement in the Third Anglo-Afghan War. Soon after, Britain faced the Iranian denouncement of its Anglo-Persian Agreement. Meanwhile closer to home, British forces were embroiled in a guerrilla war with the Irish Republican Army. Whilst each anti-imperial struggle emerged out of a different political conjuncture, they were connected through an isomorphic and transnational language, centred upon the right to self-determination.

The roots of this anti-colonial storm lay in wartime developments that had undermined the legitimacy of a Eurocentric imperial order and ushered in a critical historical juncture with spaces for local movements to realise alternative possibilities. This trend was crystallised by the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, and Russia’s consequent imperial retreat and exposure of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. The legitimacy of European colonialism was further challenged by the Ottoman Empire’s pan-Islamic discourse and its wartime declaration of jihad against imperial powers. Indeed, in Iraq, the Ottoman declaration was supported by a major armed mobilisation against invading British forces in 1914-1915. The dwindling credibility of European empire-building was dealt another blow by the rise of American liberalism, epitomised by President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Point speech in January 1918. The speech outlined Wilson’s support for the “autonomous development” of ex-Ottoman nationalities,

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signaling the advent of the self-determining state as the ordering principle of international relations.\textsuperscript{121}

The transformative impact of the war on anti-colonial struggle was mirrored by its impact on imperial practice.\textsuperscript{122} With the wartime erosion of imperial legitimacy, colonial powers could no longer justify imperial expansion through the Eurocentric conception of the ‘standard of civilisation’.\textsuperscript{123} Across the former Ottoman provinces, imperial powers adapted by claiming their rule would further national demands. Within Iraq, this new modus operandi was reflected through a British Proclamation promising not to impose “alien institutions”, following the occupation of Baghdad in March 1917.\textsuperscript{124} More pertinently, the Anglo-French Declaration, issued in November 1918, unequivocally supported “the establishment of governments…deriving their authority from…the free choice of the native populations.”\textsuperscript{125}

These ideological changes culminated in the charter of the League of Nations in April 1919, paving the way for the mandate system. Heralded by its supporters as an “improvement on colonialism”, in reality the mandate system institutionalised colonial hierarchies in a supervisory framework in which “advanced nations” helped non-Europeans “move forward” in line with an ostensibly universal, but in reality European, ‘standard of civilisation’.\textsuperscript{126} Nevertheless, the idea that the mandate state would eventually “stand alone” marked the emergence of “covert empire” across the region.\textsuperscript{127} In Iraq specifically, this less visible form of empire had emerged in relation to Britain’s changing cultural conceptions of the region along with heightened anti-imperialist sentiment, both at


\textsuperscript{123} Aydin, \textit{Politics of Anti-Westernism}, pp. 96, 110-11, 127.


\textsuperscript{127} Satia, \textit{Spies in Arabia}, p. 7; Sluglett, ‘An Improvement on Colonialism’?, p. 419.
home and abroad. This offers an important reminder that imperialism, far from being a
transhistorical force, was constantly metamorphosing according to its spatial and temporal
context.

Expanding our spatial and temporal horizon in this way reveals the ‘thick’ global
and transnational connections within which both the Iraqi independence movement and
British imperial practices were enmeshed. These transnational relations unfolded between
and across social sites that have been analytically separated in IR, namely internal/external
and domestic/international, thereby highlighting the empirical and analytical porousness of
these distinctions. Moreover, the way these ‘thick’ connections transformed both anti-
colonial struggle and imperial practice generated a fluid post-war historical juncture within
which the imperial encounter in Iraq unfolded.

It was precisely the fluidity of this historical juncture that meant the outcome of
the imperial encounter in Iraq was far from inevitable. As such, the specific details of the
conflict between the British authorities and the independence movement are not merely
interesting descriptive afterthoughts, but were constitutive of the post-war political order in
Iraq. A country-wide understanding of the constitutive impact of the imperial encounter
necessitates a study of all the major political movements in post-war Iraq, including the
Kurdish movement. Since each movement warrants its own in-depth treatment, what is
presented here is an analysis of the independence movement that emerged among Iraq’s
Arab inhabitants, primarily in Baghdad and the area surrounding the river south and
southwest of Baghdad down to Samawah, known as the mid-Euphrates area.

The Iraqi independence movement brought together three distinct yet connected
social forces: the Shi’a ulema, the mid-Euphrates tribal leaders and urban nationalists
centred in Baghdad. The Shi’a ulema, who resided in the mid-Euphrates shrine cities of
Najaf and Karbala, played a leading role in undermining the authority of the British
occupation. Most notably, in the summer of 1920, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-

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130 The discussion of the Iraqi independence movement in this section draws on Aula Hariri, ‘The Iraqi
Independence Movement: A Case of Transgressive Contention (1918–1920)’, in Fawaz A. Gerges (ed.),
Shirazi issued a fatwa on the permissibility of using defensive force against British forces.\(^\text{131}\) This fatwa was particularly influential among the tribes of the pre-dominantly Shi’a mid-Euphrates region, who formed the fighting force during the 1920 uprising, capturing most towns in this area.\(^\text{132}\) In contrast, town populations did not participate in armed combat, yet nationalists in the leading political party, Haras al-Istiqlal (Guardians of Independence), contributed to the independence movement through their political activism.

At the heart of the imperial encounter were two conflicting visions of Iraqi statehood.\(^\text{133}\) Britain sought to produce a political order that normalised its authority in Iraq, through a top-down British-guided state-building project. This vision was rooted in ontological assumptions about history as a European-driven linear process, consigning Iraqis to history’s imaginary ‘waiting room’, having not yet reached full maturity for self-government.\(^\text{134}\) These colonial assumptions were personified by the Acting Civil Commissioner Arnold Wilson, who established councils aimed at “training” Iraqis for self-government.\(^\text{135}\)

In direct repudiation of Britain’s imperial vision, the Iraqi independence movement envisaged state-building as a local and immediate project centred upon complete independence within the framework of a constitutional monarchy. This political vision was the outcome of a process of local discussion spearheaded by the British ‘plebiscite’ of 1918-1919. Select notables were consulted about the geographical boundaries of Iraq and their choice of leader, resulting in almost identical petitions in Baghdad, Kadhimiya, Najaf, and Karbala, defining Iraq as spanning from Mosul to Basra and demanding a constitutional monarchy, bound by a national legislative assembly and headed by a son of Sharif Hussain al-Hashimi of the Hejaz.\(^\text{136}\) The inclusion of Mosul in


\(^{132}\) Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, pp. 6, 79.

\(^{133}\) Doty, *Imperial Encounters*, pp. 76-7.

\(^{134}\) Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, pp. 7-9, 23.


Iraq suggests this territorial sense of statehood was well established among Iraq’s Arab inhabitants. The demands of the independence movement also indicate that the idea of a centralised Iraqi state was neither foreign nor broadly opposed in Iraqi society, leading us to question scholarly accounts that fixate on Iraq’s ‘artificiality’. Those participating in the Iraqi independence movement were protesting the British occupation, not Iraq’s ‘artificial’ borders. Indeed, a sense of local Iraqi identity had long predated the British invasion, yet it was the demise of centuries-old Ottoman rule that encouraged its politicisation as a basis for political community and collective action. In fact, the notion of Iraq’s ‘artificiality’ was then primarily a colonial narrative, deployed by British officials to discredit local demands for self-government. As Wilson put it, “Iraq as an independent nation had scarcely taken shape, for the country lacked homogeneity.”

At first, the independence movement sought to fulfill its demands by capitalising on the international tide against empire-building. Accordingly, leading up to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, letters from the mid-Euphrates were sent to Sharif Hussain, in the hope his representatives at the conference could influence its outcome. This international route was however swiftly abandoned after the League of Nations granted Britain a Mandate over Iraq in April 1920. As news of the mandate trickled into Iraq, anti-British street demonstrations erupted, particularly in Baghdad where the Haras took the lead. Gatherings in mosques, attended by the thousands and punctuated with audience cries of


141 al-Beesir, Tarikh al-Qadiyya, p. 51.
“down with the imperialists”, formed a focal point of anti-British mobilisation. As described in British intelligence reports, these gatherings advocated “for a real union between Shia and Sunni”, fostered through the convening of joint rituals. Fearing the political repercussions of these gatherings, the British administration banned them in August 1920, followed by the imprisonment and hanging of Baghdadis accused of ‘seditious’ activities.

The inclusive framing of the independence movement went beyond Sunni-Shi’a unity to include Iraq’s Jewish and Christian communities. The importance of respecting the rights of these minorities was stressed in a letter penned by Ayatollah al-Shirazi to nationalists in Baghdad. Efforts to engage these communities appeared through notices distributed in coffee shops addressed to “our brothers the Christian and Jewish fellow citizens,” inviting them “in the name of the Fatherland” to unite for the cause of independence. Through its engagement with religious minorities, coupled with its focus on Sunni-Shi’a unity, the activities of the independence movement served as constitutive sites for the formation of inclusive conceptions of Iraqi political community.

The ideas and strategies of the independence movement were also informed by its connections to anti-colonial struggles beyond Iraq’s borders. Al-Furat newspaper, published in Najaf during the uprising, referred to connections between Iraq’s revolution and “its sisters, the Irish and Egyptian revolutions”. The post-war global wave of anti-colonial movements had precipitated a sense of belonging to a supranational anti-colonial community. This was anecdotally relayed during the uprising through battlefield stories of Iraqi fighters creeping into British trenches at night, calling on Indian troops to switch sides. The Egyptian Revolution particularly resonated in Iraq, with praises of Sa’ad

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142 Abstract of Intelligence (AOI), No.21, 22 May 1920, FO 371/5076/8448, TNA; AOI, No.23, 5 June 1920, FO 371/5076/8846, TNA.
143 Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates*, p. 326; Wilson to SSI, 12 August 1920, FO 371/5229/10274, TNA.
145 AOI, No.22, 29 May 1920, FO 371/5076/8611, TNA.
147 Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, p. 50.
Zaghlul heard regularly in political gatherings, whilst the impact of the Egyptian Wafd experience was mirrored by the formation of an Iraqi equivalent in May 1920.\textsuperscript{150} Recognising the wider politico-ideological field within which the 1920 uprising was embedded renders the imperial encounter intrinsically internal and external – grounded in the local colonial situation whilst connected to anti-colonial movements beyond Iraq.\textsuperscript{151} Against this global tide of anti-colonial activism, the independence movement believed it was well-positioned to realise its vision of Iraqi statehood. It came closest following the outbreak of the uprising in the summer of 1920, when a temporary government was established in the territories liberated from the British, headed by the Shamiyah tribal leader, Muhsin Abu Tabikh.\textsuperscript{152} That this government was intended to be national, rather than local, is suggested by the raising of the Iraqi flag at its inauguration celebrations in October, drawing in 20,000 people.\textsuperscript{153} The establishment of this government represented a direct repudiation of the developmentalist ontology at the heart of British power, as encapsulated by a leading Haras member: “it is our duty to [ensure the success of this administration]…so that…the occupying British…realise that we are a people capable of managing the affairs of our own homeland and not, as they believe us to be, that we have not matured yet.”\textsuperscript{154} Indeed, the establishment of a temporary government reveals the extent to which the uprising heightened the possibility of an alternative political order, beyond British control. Recognising this alternative possibility is vital for avoiding a backward-gazing approach to history, in which all historical outcomes appear inevitable.\textsuperscript{155}

Whilst the Iraqi independence movement was realising its state-building project, the British administration took parallel steps to establish a provisional Iraqi government.\textsuperscript{156} That the independence movement and the British authorities were simultaneously engaged

\textsuperscript{150} al-Bazirgan, \textit{Al-Waqai'}, p.125; Kadhim, \textit{Reclaiming Iraq}, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{152} Abu Tabikh, \textit{Mudhakkirat}, p. 174.
\textsuperscript{153} al-Bazirgan, \textit{Al-Waqai'}, pp. 196-7.
\textsuperscript{154} Chakrabarty, \textit{Provincializing Europe}, pp. 8-9; Trouillot, \textit{Silencing the Past}, p. 82; Quoted in Kadhim, \textit{Reclaiming Iraq}, p. 92
\textsuperscript{155} Frederick Cooper, \textit{Colonialism in Question} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 18.
\textsuperscript{156} Telegram 12987, High Commissioner to India Office, 26 October 1920, FO 371/5231/13471, TNA.
in state-building was telling of the fluid yet critical nature of this historical juncture. For the British, engaging meaningfully with the independence movement was an inconceivable outcome, since it would invalidate the very basis of Britain’s presence in Iraq. The continuity of imperial power hinged on the suppression, rather than integration, of the movement. This was achieved, by February 1921, through Britain’s deployment of ground troops in tandem with the RAF, which dropped over 97 tons of bombs over Iraq. The immense violence the British deployed to quell the uprising is vividly conveyed in RAF log books, as noted by one flight lieutenant who undertook a town’s “bombing while [the 53rd Brigade] sacked the town and set it on fire”.

It is here, in the dynamic between anti-colonial struggle and colonial power’s repressive response, that we can trace the transformative impact of the colonial encounter for Iraqi state-society relations. Britain’s ruthless suppression of the uprising dealt a fatal blow to the Iraqi independence movement’s capacity to realise its state-building project, thereby diminishing the alternative possibilities unleashed by WWI. Britain’s rationale behind the deployment of vast coercive force was summarised by a British official in 1920:

until we show the tribes that are against us that they are pitting their puny strength against a powerful nation… [they will not be] content with anything short of turning us ignominiously out of the country…the only arbitration possible now is the arbitration of the sword…after we teach our enemies to respect us…maybe we can come to some sort of peaceful agreement with the people.

The violence – “arbitration of the sword” – Britain deployed to suppress the uprising provided the necessary precursor for its establishment of a Hashemite monarchy – “some sort of peaceful agreement with the people” – in August 1921. Accordingly Sharif Hussain’s son, Faisal, who the French had recently deposed in Syria, was enthroned in a ceremony overseen by Wilson’s replacement, Sir Percy Cox. Britain’s establishment of the monarchy against the backdrop of its violent suppression of the Iraqi uprising offers a

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158 Pilot Flying Log Book 425, 1920-1925, AC 72/19/1/4, RAFM.
159 Copy of Memo No.3524, Hillah, 27 July 1920, AIR 20/749, TNA. Emphases added.
cogent reminder of the primacy of coercion in colonial patterns of domination, and suggests that British control in Iraq, despite its legal basis in a mandate, was, like elsewhere in the Empire, the object of a violent political struggle.\textsuperscript{160}

\textbf{State formation as an outcome of the imperial encounter}

Britain’s defeat of the 1920 uprising dealt a major blow to the Iraqi independence movement, yet this did not pave the way for Britain’s unilateral exercise of power in Iraq. The imperial encounter may have been far from equal, yet imperial power was neither monolithic nor atemporal.\textsuperscript{161} Britain’s experience with the independence movement exerted a decisive influence over how the Iraqi state set its coercive and political parameters of control, by heralding the rise of an air control regime and a narrow framework for political participation. This pattern of domination ensured Britain survived as the dominant foreign power throughout the monarchic period, even after Iraq’s nominal independence in 1932. In the long term, it simultaneously limited both Britain’s imperial control and the Iraqi state’s capacity to establish its power inclusively throughout society, contributing to the collapse of the British-backed monarchy in 1958.

The most immediate manifestation of how the imperial encounter shaped Iraqi state formation relates to the rise of air control as the state’s main coercive tool for maintaining “order” in Iraq.\textsuperscript{162} The RAF’s decisive role in suppressing the 1920 uprising paved the way for the transfer of defence responsibilities to the RAF in October 1922, thereby institutionalising air power as the state’s mechanism for policing the boundaries of permissible behaviour.\textsuperscript{163} The RAF deployed its first large-scale bombing campaign in November 1923, against tribes along the Euphrates who refused to surrender weapons or pay taxes.\textsuperscript{164} Air power offered the British a means of stifling unrest through “a swift and unexpected blow”, and yet its inability to negotiate and remedy grievances hindered, from


\textsuperscript{161} Cooper, \textit{Colonialism in Question}, p. 25.


\textsuperscript{163} Dodge, \textit{Iraq}, pp. 149, 150-57; David E. Omissi, \textit{Air Power and Colonial Control} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 31; Telegram No.2946, 4 March 1920, AIR 5/223, TNA.

\textsuperscript{164} Dodge, \textit{Iraq}, pp. 152-3.
the outset, the development of the state’s infrastructural channels.\textsuperscript{165} The state’s dependence upon air power therefore meant it “not only became detached from society but also hung two hundred feet above it.”\textsuperscript{166}

With its coercive boundaries established, the Iraqi state set about defining the parameters for legitimate political participation. The state, having partly come to life to placate the Iraqi independence movement, was immediately faced with the task of defining its relations with the social forces that comprised it, namely the Shi’a ulema, the Baghdadi nationalists, and the mid-Euphrates tribal leaders. It was precisely because Britain’s state-building project unfolded within the historical context of the independence movement, that its response to the movement would have long-term repercussions for Iraqi state-society relations. This was because the independence movement harboured an inclusive notion of political community \textit{and} possessed a huge capacity to mobilise support for its demands. As such, the societal legitimacy and reach of any future Iraqi state partly hinged on its ability to satisfy the demands of the independence movement, and to incorporate its social forces into its own apparatus, thereby subsuming the movement’s mobilisational capacity as its own.

Rather than engage meaningfully with the Iraqi independence movement, the monarchy sought to undermine its political power by fragmenting its mobilisational capacity. This reflected the colonial logic of state formation, driven by Britain’s overriding concern to guarantee its influence within the new state. The fragmentation of the independence movement was achieved through the politics of selective inclusion and exclusion, carried out \textit{through} the vehicle of the new Iraqi state. Britain’s encounter with the independence movement was a determining factor in which social forces it sought to include or exclude from political participation. Through economic incentives, the British, in conjunction with the new state elite, sought to neutralise those social forces whose interests could be satisfied through incorporation into the state, namely the mid-Euphrates tribes, whilst marginalising or excluding those whose political demands lay beyond public

\textsuperscript{165} Air Staff, ‘On the Power of the Air Force and the Application of this Power to Hold and Police Mesopotamia’, March 1920, encl. in FO 371/5076/8136, TNA; Dodge, \textit{Iraq}, p. 156.

\textsuperscript{166} Dodge, \textit{Iraq}, p. 134.
office, namely the Baghdadi nationalists and the Shi’a ulama. Britain’s state-building project and the demobilisation of the independence movement were therefore inextricably linked, and as such, state formation functioned as a mechanism for demobilisation in its formative years.

One of the first steps the British took to fragment the independence movement involved weakening the Baghdadi nationalists’ hold on urban politics. This occurred after a short-lived rapprochement between Faisal and the independence movement, owing to the king’s anti-mandate stance and his unwillingness to endorse the Anglo-Iraqi treaty, which accorded Britain vast legal powers over Iraq’s institutions. This situation proved untenable to the High Commissioner, driving him, in August 1922, to ban anti-British newspapers and opposition parties, including the Haras, and to deport its leading members. This potent reminder of Britain’s supreme power compelled Faisal to publicly endorse Cox’s actions, accept the treaty, and announce elections for a Constituent Assembly to ratify the treaty.

Having suppressed the Baghdadi nationalists, the British authorities set about fostering the rise of a British-backed state elite. The British turned to ex-Ottoman Iraqi officers in Syria who had, until the French takeover in July 1920, occupied prominent positions in Faisal’s government. The majority of these officers, along with Faisal, had wound up in Syria after fighting as part of the wartime British-sponsored ‘Arab Revolt’ (1916-1918). Upon their return to Iraq in 1921, they quickly occupied key administrative positions. Having recently lost their livelihoods and status in Syria, these officers offered the British a dependent political force to channel British interests. However, the fact that these officers were distinguished by their Ottoman backgrounds and were mainly drawn from one social group – Sunni Arabs from Baghdad and northern Iraq,

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169 Intelligence Report (IR), No.17, 1 September 1922, FO 371/7772/E10859, TNA.
– narrowed their social appeal. Moreover, their absence from the 1920 uprising was widely resented, as captured by an Iraqi poet: “What a revolution of the unrewarded / We planted the crops and others harvested.” Accordingly the ascent of the ex-Ottoman officers marked the emergence of a state-society disjuncture, whilst marginalising the far more popular Baghdadi nationalists.

Cox’s suppression of the Baghdadi nationalists, coupled with the dramatic shift in Faisal’s position, cast the king as a “servant of the English” whilst making a mockery of the fairness of the electoral process. These developments evoked the animosity of the two remaining active elements of the independence movement, the mid-Euphrates tribal leaders and the Shi’a ulema, culminating in the first major challenge to the Iraqi state’s authority. Ayatollah Mahdi al-Khalisi, who was now the leading political voice among the Shi’a ulema, repealed his support for the king and issued a fatwa prohibiting participation in the upcoming elections. The fatwa precipitated a widespread boycott campaign, effectively bringing the elections to a halt.

The boycott campaign offered a powerful reminder of the ulema’s mobilisational capacity, reviving British calls for their political exclusion. In an attempt to deprive the ulema of their support base, Faisal set about courting prominent mid-Euphrates tribal leaders through economic concessions, eventually succeeding in persuading enough of them to abandon their support for the election boycott. This opened the door for the state’s removal of the ulema from the political scene. To this end, a new immigration law was passed, permitting the deportation of foreign citizens engaged in anti-government activity, with the aim of extending this to the ulema that held Persian nationality. On this pretext, and despite his known Arab lineage, Ayatollah al-Khalisi was deported to Iran in

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172 Davis, Memories of State, p. 49.
176 al-Khalisi, Batal al-Islam, p. 216; IR, No.22.
June 1923, followed by the voluntary exile of a group of *ulema* in protest. With the exception of Ayatollah al-Khalisi, Faisal succeeded in negotiating the return of the exiled *ulema*, on the condition they would not “interfere in political affairs”.

The Iraqi state had thus been deployed as an institutional mechanism to exclude the Shi’a *ulema* from meaningful political participation, marking the decline of their political role under the monarchy. This was seen by the British as a major triumph for the authority of the incipient state. Yet given the *ulema* had been integral to the politicisation and unification of the mid-Euphrates tribes, – within the framework of an Iraqi state, – their political exclusion cut off an important channel for rural political engagement. Moreover, the way the *ulema* had been excluded marked the introduction of sectarian tensions into Iraqi politics. By deporting Ayatollah al-Khalisi on the wrongful pretext that he was Persian, the monarchy sought to cast the politically engaged Shi’a *ulema* as outsiders promoting “the pro-Persian idea”. Matters were made worse by the government’s unwillingness to show impartiality by deporting some Sunnis engaged in pro-Turkish propaganda. In this way, the state’s political exclusion of the *ulema* served to undermine the Sunni-Shi’a unity fostered by the independence movement whilst introducing new obstacles to broadening its support base.

In place of the inclusive patriotism advocated by the independence movement, the monarchy advocated its own brand of pan-Arabism. Baghdad’s newspaper described the deportation of Ayatollah al-Khalisi as “evidence of the victory of the Arabian ideal over its rivals”. That pan-Arabism was central to the state’s self-image was unsurprising. The new occupants of state power had earned their positions under the pan-Arab banner of the Arab Revolt, and had no historic relation to the inclusive patriotism that underpinned

184 Article extract from No.197 Al-Asimah newspaper, 2 July 1923, CO 730/40, TNA; al-Wardi, *Lamahat* p. 223.
185 Baghdad Secret Despatch, 22 November 1923, FO 371/9012, TNA.
187 Al-Asimah newspaper (1923).
the 1920 uprising. The rise of pan-Arabism to state prominence in Iraq was thus inextricably linked to Britain’s suppression of the Iraqi independence movement, rather than an inevitable outcome of the colonial – ‘artificial’ – break-up of the Ottoman Empire.

With the Shi’a ulama removed from the political scene, the British had finally succeeded in demobilising the Iraqi independence movement. Through the imperial politics of selective inclusion and exclusion, the Iraqi state had excluded the ulama from the body politic, co-opted the mid-Euphrates tribes, and marginalised the urban nationalists. The state’s unwillingness to meaningfully incorporate these social forces into its apparatus, and thereby subsume their collective mobilisational capacity as its own, served to narrow its channels into Iraqi society. Such a narrow framework for political participation hindered the state’s capacity to achieve ‘integrated domination’, that is, to centrally establish its power inclusively throughout society.188 The Iraqi state therefore began life with a weak foothold in society, unable to effectively represent or mobilise its citizens. Ultimately, this rendered the notion of domestic sovereignty – as ownership of the state by its people – a deferred aspiration and a hallow concept voided by the colonial logic of state formation.189

With the independence movement completely fragmented, elections for the Constituent Assembly resumed and, only after direct British meddling, a favourable Assembly was elected that ratified the treaty on 11 June 1924.190 Thereafter the Iraqi constitution was ratified, establishing Iraq as a parliamentary monarchy, whilst guaranteeing the king – surrounded by British ‘advisors’ – sufficient executive powers to control parliament. With the constitutional framework established, the final step in the formation of the Iraqi state came in July 1924, with the decision of the League of Nations to incorporate Mosul into Iraq.

For the British, the outcome of the imperial encounter meant its influence was built into the structural set-up of the monarchy, and yet this was far from a guarantee of

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188 Migdal, ‘state in society’, pp. 9, 27.
189 McDoughall, ‘Empires in the Arab World’, p. 56.
unhampered imperial domination. Rather, the legacy of the imperial encounter, namely Britain’s reliance on air power and an ex-Ottoman elite, limited the scope of its control.\textsuperscript{191} The unpopularity of the ex-Ottoman officers meant British interests could not be channelled through Iraq’s parliamentary mechanisms. Rather, British officers, in conjunction with ex-Ottoman officers, operated in the shadowy networks of the state, manipulating its formal institutions – most notably through election rigging – whenever matters “of vital importance to British interests” were concerned.\textsuperscript{192} In other words, British imperial power could only operate by subverting the state institutions it had created.

This epitomised the new imperial strategy of “covert empire” in Iraq, buttressed by the far more visible and “despotic” power of Britain’s air control regime.\textsuperscript{193} Thus, when tribal uprisings erupted in the mid-Euphrates region in 1935-1936, the state responded via 1,200 bombs dropped by the RAF.\textsuperscript{194} Although air power allowed the British to brutally quash any challenges to the state, each deployment of the RAF proved a major blow to the credibility of the British-backed monarchy. A major turning point in this regard was Britain’s re-invasion of Iraq during the Second World War, to topple a pan-Arab government that was unwilling to accede to its wartime military demands.\textsuperscript{195} Britain’s reliance on air power to fend off challenges to its control suggests that, despite its defeat of the 1920 uprising, the battle to define the political order in Iraq continued under the monarchy.\textsuperscript{196}

\textsuperscript{191} I am grateful to an anonymous peer reviewer for highlighting the importance of this point for clinching the paper’s argument.
\textsuperscript{192} Mohammad Mehdi Kubbah, \textit{Mudhakkirat fi Samim al-Ahdath 1918-1958} (Beirut: Dar al-Tali‘ah, 1965); pp. 336-7; Paraphrase Telegram No.445 from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Acting High Commissioner for Iraq, 3 November 1926, signed Amery, FO 371/11467, TNA; Satia, \textit{Spies in Arabia}, p. 264; Tripp, \textit{History of Iraq}, p. 259
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., p. 451; Cooper, \textit{Colonialism in Question}, p. 157.
Britain’s attempts to bomb Iraqi society into submission, alongside its covert operations in the state’s shadowy networks, served to undermine the legitimacy of the monarchy. Imperial and domestic rule became inextricably linked in the Iraqi state, whose distinguishing feature became its simultaneous affirmation, and denial of, indigenous sovereignty. The Iraqi state’s alienation from society thus occurred not only at the moment of its exogenous inception, but also through its imperial patterns of domination, which increased its detachment from wider society and served as a reminder of its colonial origins. The Iraqi state was thus “doubly alienated - in becoming as well as in being.”

None of this was, in itself, a problem for Britain, for colonial domination was not concerned with ruling through popular consent. However, the cumulative effect of Britain’s air policing alongside its role in electoral corruption, was to undermine the state’s parliamentary and legal channels for change. This inadvertently contributed to the rise of the army as a viable route for change, heralding a cycle of coup d’états (1936-1941) which testified to the limitations of Britain’s imperial control. In the long term, the bitter experiences of political groups striving for legal change within the monarchic system, eventually propelled them to work for the overhaul of the monarchy’s entire structural set-up. As the British Ambassador aptly remarked following the extensive rigging of elections in 1948, “the hopes entertained by the parties…of introducing some reality into the fictitious democratic structure of the Iraqi State had been extinguished. They began to realise that they must…work largely in opposition to the ruling class as a whole.” This realisation sowed the seeds for the 14 July Revolution in 1958, which overthrew the monarchy in a coup d’état that spelt the end of British dominance in Iraq. In this way, the Iraqi state’s patterns of domination, that were borne out of the imperial encounter, had inadvertently contributed to its demise.

197 McDoughall, ‘Empires in the Arab World’, p. 56.
198 Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony*, p. 64.
200 Baghdad despatch No.347, Mack to Bevil, 17 December 1948, FO 371/75128/1016/E74, TNA.
Conclusion

This paper has elucidated the ‘thick’ domestic, international and transnational relations through which historically-specific patterns of imperial state formation emerge. As an outcome of the struggle between ‘internal’ anti-colonial movements and ‘external’ imperial powers, the state is constituted through relations between and across ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ spaces. In the case of Iraq, the state emerged as a by-product of the violent encounter between British imperial practice (‘international’) and the Iraqi independence movement (‘domestic’). This encounter unfolded as part of a critical historical juncture opened up by the momentous transnational and global changes unleashed by WWI. By underscoring the constitutive role of imperial relations for understanding state formation, this paper adds to GHS’s growing body of scholarship that seeks to bridge IR’s analytical bifurcation between ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ spaces.

Adopting historicist tools of analysis, synthesised with a postcolonial perspective, this paper has demonstrated that imperial relations were productive of historically contingent patterns of state formation. This approach sets itself apart from existing IR approaches to studying Arab states that attribute explanatory priority to the historical timing or macro-structural legacies of the universal ‘spread’ of the Westphalian state. These approaches, it has been argued, rely on ontological assumptions about history as a linear and European-driven process, overlooking the constitutive role of imperial relations in producing historically-specific patterns of colonial state formation. In the case of Iraq, Britain’s repressive response to the Iraqi independence movement produced patterns of domination centred upon air power and a narrow framework for political participation. By offering a detailed empirical illustration of how historically specific patterns of state domination emerged in Iraq, this paper undermines the universalist assumptions of IR’s category of the state, encouraging a shift towards a historically contingent and processual understanding of state formation.

Finally, this paper has sought to widen the epistemological and historiographical focus of the ‘imperial turn’ in IR, by engaging with imperial histories through non-Western sources. Applied to the case of Iraq, this approach has demonstrated that the imperial encounter had a transformative impact on both the Iraqi independence movement and British colonial domination. Britain’s suppression of the 1920 uprising paved the way
for a more covert exercise of imperial power through the shadowy networks of the Iraqi state, buttressed by the coercive power of the RAF. This was not, of course, the outcome that the Iraqi independence movement had envisaged amidst its heroic moments of triumph during the 1920 uprising. Yet neither did this outcome offer Britain the broad covert control it sought under the monarchy. In other words, whilst anti-colonial struggles did not produce the intended political triumphs on the ground, neither did colonial power’s repressive response pave the way for its unimpeded dominance. Recognising that anti-colonial struggles impinged on colonial domination, despite not achieving their desired outcome, opens the way for a more expansive understanding of non-Western agency that recognises the vast power asymmetries entailed in the imperial encounter without minimising the transformative impact of anti-colonial struggles.  

This conceptualisation of anti-colonial agency offers the ‘imperial turn’ an effective way of navigating between the vicissitudes of Western imperial domination and non-Western agency.

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201 Cooper, Colonialism in Question, p. 18.