



## Failures of Power-Balancing: The Ottomans and British in Iraq and Kuwait

Amna Abudyak  
*American University of Sharjah*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/bjur>

---

### Recommended Citation

Abudyak, Amna (2021) "Failures of Power-Balancing: The Ottomans and British in Iraq and Kuwait," *Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 7 , Article 13.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/bjur/vol7/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

## **FAILURES OF POWER-BALANCING: THE OTTOMANS AND BRITISH IN IRAQ AND KUWAIT**

AMNA ABUDYAK, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF SHARJAH  
MENTOR: ISA BLUMI

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to present Ottoman, Arab, and British dynamics in the Arabian Peninsula. The paper highlights British exploitation of political circumstances to gain presence in Iraq and the Gulf (more particularly Kuwait) throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As pan-Arab movements began to gain traction within Arab territories during the final years of the Ottoman Empire, Gulf tribes sought to move away from Ottoman influence and to establish greater sovereignty, control, and border integrity. This desire for Arab tribes to form independent polities was utilized by the British to competitively gain strategic presence against France, the Dutch, and Russia in the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East on a wider scale for various reasons.

This paper first covers internal conditions within the Ottoman Empire, as well as Ottoman-Arab relations. Second, utilizing historical texts, the paper specifies the nature of British–Arab relations to lay the historical contextual framework for shifting sentiments in the Gulf as the Ottoman Empire weakened. The paper then moves on to explicate geopolitical factors for continuous border disputes between Kuwait and its northern neighbor, Iraq, which eventually culminated in the 1990 Iraqi invasion. Secondary sources are consulted to present the consequences of British involvement in heightening tensions in Iraq and, vicariously, Kuwait due to the catalyst effect of their diplomatic missions and establishment of protectorates parallel to growing pan-Arab sentiment. Finally, the events discussed are reviewed through power-balancing theory to assess the effects of political decisions on both Iraq and Kuwait.

**Keywords:** Pan-Arabism, tribal relations, British diplomacy, Ottoman Empire, power balancing, Arabian Gulf

In the political climate of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Ottoman Empire found itself a waning empire surrounded by European powers who intended to

increase their influence in a highly competitive environment fueled by imperial expansion. In a more magnified version of urban sprawl, the Ottomans struggled to secure the integrity and unity of their more distant provinces into the Ottoman Empire politically and nationally.

By the 19th century and after tumultuous periods of reform, the Ottoman Empire's frontier extended to North Africa, Mesopotamia, the Balkans, and parts of the Arabian Peninsula. With European powers such as France, Russia, and England encroaching on the Ottoman Empire, Abdulhamid II was faced with the need to be careful with his alliances. Sultan Abdulhamid II's willingness to cooperate with the British soon fueled the disgruntled to speak out with anti-British sentiment (Tallon, 2019). Eventually, the Young Turks (primarily the Committee of Union and Progress) deposed Sultan Abdulhamid II in 1908 (Al-Hamdi, 2015). This deposition left the Young Turks with the burden of further securing Ottoman borders through various agreements and increased military presence around some borders (Tallon, 2019). Not long after, however, an Ottoman–Balkan war throughout 1912 and 1913 stripped the Ottoman Empire of its last remaining territories in Europe (Tallon, 2019). Along with all of this tension, throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Ottoman Arab provinces, particularly aggressively in the “fertile crescent,” an opposition movement—Pan-Arabism—had been brewing (Dawn, 1988).

The growing pan-Arab movement proved to be a tool for opposing imperial powers to exploit, especially the British. With a second government stationed in India, the British were highly involved in attempting to shift the balance of power in the Arabian Peninsula to further secure their position in India and to deter other European powers from establishing spheres of influence with the Arab peoples. This led the British to utilize tactics with tribal leaders of both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait that they had previously used in India, as well as to interfere with Baghdad's and Basra's finely tuned political structure, leading to various consequences. Although British intervention in supporting Arab movements during the 1880s and throughout World War I assisted in achieving autonomy from the Ottomans, it fueled bilateral and internal conflicts in the post-WWI period, eventually setting the foundation for the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

The Ottomans under Sultan Abdulhamid II and after the Young Turk Revolution, however, were privy to the European interest in the more distant provinces such as those in present-day Iraq and the Gulf. Furthermore, the Ottoman administration recognized vulnerability to European powers (Çetinsaya, 2003). For instance, various governors, ambassadors, and viziers reported a British threat in

Iraq and in the Gulf, with particular regard to Kuwait. The emboldened efforts of the British to approach ambitious Arab leaders were attributed to a lack of a “forward policy” and to local Ottoman officials being “neutral bystanders” to Britain’s actions in the region throughout the 1880s (Çetinsaya, 2003, p. 199).

Further, ambassadors noticed the “neglect” of residents in Arab provinces in what is now Iraq, as Ottoman officials considered those residents to be “ignorant and uncivilized” (Çetinsaya, 2003, p. 201). Because of this “incivility,” Ottoman administrators feared a conquest of Basra beginning with British control and use of Kuwait’s harbors (Çetinsaya, 2003). Because of this and other factors such as instability in the vilayets of Basra, Mosul, and Baghdad, in the years after the 1878 Berlin Treaty, the Ottomans sought ways to pull in the periphery more aggressively, by planning for the Berlin–Baghdad railway, increasing naval presence, and implementing policies on the ground in a rather unwelcomed process of “Turkification”<sup>1</sup> in an attempt to re-regularize administration empire-wide (Simon, 2004, p. 40).

### The Arab Political Climate

Overtures by the British in Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, and Bahrain were not isolated events. As British authorities (more specifically, the government of India) recognized a potential to exploit tensions in the region throughout the 19th century and the interwar years, a “scramble for Arabia” was instigated (Tallon, 2019, p. 98). With the Ottoman Empire turning its attention to more direct rule in Mesopotamia after the pacification of Mohamad Ali in 1841, discontent in local communities began to brew (Blumi, 2012). As Arabs began to desire more autonomy, the pan-Arab movement mobilized. Additionally, the increasingly

---

<sup>1</sup> “Turkification” refers to the systematic process of limiting expression of variance in ethnicity, language, and religion within Ottoman territories in order to enforce Ottoman uniformity. The unionist ideology of the Young Turks paid little attention to diversity, as Ottomanism was largely synonymous with being a Muslim Ottoman Turk. This ideology led to underrepresentation of Arabs and other ethnic groups in the Ottoman Parliament. Because Arab identity was based predominantly on religion and language, Arabs felt increasingly alienated by the Young Turk administration imposing Turkish language policy, for instance. Further, Muslim Arabs associated Turkification with the phasing out of Islam from society, particularly because of the irreligious character of non-Arabic-speaking Ottoman government officials assigned to administrate their areas. The disruption of traditional social and political norms in Arab territories eventually encouraged Muslim Arabs to form literary organizations (e.g. al-Muntada al-Adabi) rejecting Turkification, in an attempt to reinforce their version of group identity. Consequently, as Arabs found their cultural, political, and social rights continually suppressed, an Arab Revolt ensued (Kayali, 1997).

aggressive racial Turkification policies of the Young Turks further urged and fueled separationist, nationalist ideas in provinces such as Basra, eventually culminating in the 1914 Great Arab Revolt (Simon, 2004). Pan-Arab sentiments occurred most prominently in tangible form within Iraq and Syria (Dawn, 1988), where publications of pan-Arab and nationalist thinkers were used in schools and were circulated heavily. In comparison, the more tribal dynamics of the Arabian Peninsula manifested these sentiments in expansionist strategies by various tribes, such as Al Saud.

Writers such as al-Shurayqi, al-Khatib, and Miqdadi explored common themes of the Arab nation being a “living body” (Dawn, 1988, p. 69) and of Arabs as being the last of a series of Semitic migrations (i.e., Semitic wave theory), making them “heirs of the Semites” (Dawn, 1988, p. 70).

With regard to external powers, pan-Arab/nationalist texts often contrasted the “noble” Arabs to the exploitative, economically driven, “hateful” Persians and “innately mean” Europeans (Dawn, 1988, p. 76). The texts also regarded the trade routes going through Arab territories to India as a way for external powers to weaken Arabs in the face of the Ottomans (Wagner, 2015). Despite this idea—which later set the groundwork for the Ba’athist and Nasserist regimes—there was an ideological dissonance with pan-Arabism, as Arabs were still willing to deal with external powers to consolidate autonomy and greater agency from the Ottomans (Dawn, 1988).

Furthermore, Arab movements also had a religious dimension represented in Pan-Islamism: ideas of an Arab caliphate that would preserve Arab society from the “second Jahiliyya” of Sufism (Dawn, 1988, p. 74), a religious sect highly associated with Ottoman tradition. This was showcased with the increasing control of Al Saud over Mecca and Medina through their use of the Wahhabis and Ikhwan to consolidate influence in frontiers surrounding them, which threatened Ottoman religious legitimacy and hajj revenues (Tallon, 2019). This later led to skirmishes between Al Saud and the Ottoman-backed Ibn Rashid. Other figures began to harness the Ottomans’ crumbling religious legitimacy as well, including Husayn ibn Ali (sharif of Mecca), who called for a separate Arab Muslim state for himself (Yaphe, 2004).

Later in the post-WWI period, however, the once-quelled conflicts among movements in Arab territories gained even more traction; the pan-Islamists and nationalists were in almost constant conflict. The British were quick to attempt to take advantage of the tumult without properly understanding the complexities of

the interconnections of these movements, leading to major instability in areas they have occupied in what later became Iraq.

### **British Policy and the Arabs**

Although the British did not fully comprehend political and social intricacies in regions such as the vilayets of what later became Iraq, early endeavors to explore the Gulf and surrounding areas navally in the 1700s and 1800s, mail links, and the presence of political residents allowed for the British administration to recognize the potential for a minimally challenged strategic encroachment into the area (Simon, 2004). Serious consideration for mobilizing more direct control in the Gulf by the British region began in 1913, however, when Ottoman neglect of the area allowed piracy, arms sales, slavery, and German presence to go unchecked, according to the British, threatening future British hegemony in the Gulf (Simon, 2004). Additionally, this was an opportune time to increase presence in Ottoman territories in the Gulf, as the war-ravaged Ottoman Empire was focused elsewhere after the yearlong Balkan conflict mentioned previously.

As World War I wore on, Britain surveyed the general situation of the region and consequently also surveyed societal divisions that it might utilize accordingly. According to a 1913 British governmental document, British policy was multidimensional and included with regard to “Arabia” establishment of protectorates in Southern Syria and Mesopotamia, a protectorate in Kuwait, recognition of the Hijaz as independent, encouragement of an Arab caliphate led by the sharif in Hijaz, and a coordinated military effort with other allied European powers to quell unrest. Furthermore, the press would be used to politicize Sunni Islam further throughout other areas in “Arabia” and even India. These plans would also serve to put pressure against the unstable Young Turk administration from within (Hurewtiz, 1914; Wagner, 2015). These policies aimed to achieve a concrete severance of aspiring Arab leaders from the Ottoman sphere of influence while also further divorcing religious credibility heralded by the Ottoman sultan as protector of Mecca and Medina.

Furthermore, the British realized that to garner Arab support, their propositions would have to be framed to appeal to existing movements (primarily Pan-Islamism and Arab nationalism/Pan-Arabism, as previously mentioned). In a 1914 British governmental proclamation to “the natives of Arabia and the Arab provinces,” Britain denied a desire to conquer, possess, occupy, or protect any Arab territories (Burdett, 1998, p. 99). Further, the text heavily references God and refers to the Ottomans as “Turks” who have “laid upon” the Arabs a “heavy burden” that

the English would “cast” with “God’s help” (Burdett, 1998, p. 100). In another proclamation a year later, the British maintained the same rhetoric, insisting on complete independence and that “please God, [the lands of Arabia] return along the paths of freedom to their ancient prosperity” (Burdett, 1998, p. 101), echoing the sentiments of Pan-Arabists and Pan-Islamists as they appealed to them.

The British consequently increased their presence “on the ground” in the Arabian Peninsula and in vilayets that later made up Iraq, attempting more “hands-on” policies. Britain took on an active role in resolving both tribal and political conflict in the case of Kuwait, for instance. Additionally, the extravagance of the buildings that housed British representatives became more prominent throughout the 20th century, symbolizing the growing British influence in the area and the local acceptance of their authority (Muir, 2008).

Real alarm in the Ottoman Empire was heightened, however, after what was termed the British–Ottoman confrontation over Kuwait, spanning from 1896, with Muhammad Al-Sabah’s assassination, to 1904. The Ottomans considered British policy with the Arab provinces and areas such as Kuwait as another English “civilizing” mission like that with Egypt in the past (Çetinsaya, 2003). Eventually, the warnings and intuitions of the various Ottoman officials concerning the Arab provinces and the Gulf were realized, as Kuwait began to pull away from the Ottoman sphere of influence more definitively and ultimately succeeded in doing so—meaning that Ottoman policies to control dissent were not enough.

### Kuwait

Geographically, Kuwait (“Grane,” as termed by the British) was situated south of the Ottoman province of Basra, strategically bordering Shatt al-Arab, which made it a valuable land- and sea trade route for the Ottoman Empire and a significant port between Basra and Bahrain, where Indian ships came to stop (Muir, 2008). Relatedly, Kuwait was a municipality in the Ottoman Basra province. Kuwait’s location eventually made it a point of contention as imperial powers competed to absorb it into their spheres of influence. Kuwait exploited its location to create a commercial-friendly environment, even taking a toll on caravans that passed through it to transport supplies and weaponry to the Ottoman provinces of Damascus and Aleppo, eventually even rivaling Basra as a “trans-desert route” (Muir, 2008, p. 171). The flow of weapons from and to the area was especially problematic for the Ottomans and, later on, the British, as it gave rebel forces means of battle and altered the status quo (Blumi, 2012). This exploitation of movement was further optimized with Mubarak Al-Sabah’s increasingly strong ties with Al

Saud and rivalry with Ibn Rashid (Blumi, 2012). Additionally, new trade routes were established in the mid-1800s, excluding major merchants in the area and British correspondents in nearby Bushire, giving Kuwait further leverage as a trading post (Blumi, 2012).

The importance of Kuwait's location of course did not go unnoticed by larger powers. As the Ottoman Empire sought to invigorate its suffering economy and link its provinces to the Anatolian metropole, Kuwait became the proposed end of the planned Berlin–Baghdad railway (Blumi, 2012). The proposed railway would dually attract European powers to its locality by the late 1800s in an attempt to secure a foothold and more favorable economic shares, as well as cause Kuwait to seek integrity even more aggressively (Rush, 1991a).

### **Beginnings of Kuwaiti–British Relations**

Before the factors and events that led to Kuwait distancing itself from Ottoman control are presented, context regarding this Ottoman–Kuwaiti relationship must be detailed. As mentioned above, Kuwait's geographic location provided a political environment that would later allow Kuwait to propel itself further from sole Ottoman influence through strategic balancing of major powers and local alliances. Historically, however, Kuwait had always enjoyed a degree of autonomy compared to areas in Ottoman Mesopotamia. In an administrative report by the local British agency in Kuwait, contextual political and historical information were provided to the British metropole. The document detailed that the sheikh was regarded a *de facto* ruler, but it documented a *de jure* governor by the Porte in the region (Archive Editions, 2020). This distinction would later allow the British to surpass higher powers in the Ottoman “chain of command” to deal with the Kuwaiti sheikh directly in order to manipulate this Ottoman “communications problem” when the right time came to sway Kuwait into their sphere of influence (Kumar, 1962, p. 71).

Although the Kuwaiti sheikh Muhammad Al-Sabah embraced Ottoman relations, he was eventually assassinated by his ambitious half-brother, Mubarak Al-Sabah, in 1896. With Mubarak in power, realizations of Kuwait pulling away from Ottoman influence began. During his reign, Mubarak ran various military campaigns to extend his tribal reach further into the Arabian Peninsula (Archive Editions, 2020). This is also because his coup did not go completely unchallenged, as the late Muhammad Al-Sabah's allies, such as Yousef Al-Ibrahim, attempted to counter Mubarak's expansion militarily for more than two decades (Blumi, 2012)

As Mubarak sought to fortify himself with regard to tribal alliances and the seeking of British help, Ottoman officials aimed to prevent the British from creating a toehold in Kuwait and saw the necessity of Mubarak's "ejection" (Çetinsaya, 2003, p. 201). Realizing that Kuwait was too autonomous for the Ottoman Empire's integrity, officials planned to incorporate Kuwait in a "reconstitution" of Basra into a single *kaza* more effectively (Çetinsaya, 2003, p. 201). By 1899, Kuwait had secretly struck a deal with the British to guarantee its protection from Ottoman forces, effectively severing it from Basra (Rush, 1991a). Despite previous attempts by Mubarak to secure an agreement with the British, the British finally considered dealing with Kuwait as they realized the Russian and German interests in the land.

Furthermore, once Curzon had assumed position as viceroy of India in 1898, he had insisted that Kuwait was instrumentally important to British interests with regard to India, trade routes, and ports in the Gulf (Muir, 2008; Pillai & Kumar, 1962). This British interest in Kuwait is undoubtedly also linked to the fact that Kuwait was to be the endpoint of the Berlin–Baghdad railway, which pushed Britain to interfere with construction indirectly to increase its bargaining power against Germany. In this way, the British would ensure greater trade benefits once the Berlin–Baghdad railway was completed, especially that the tracks would lie precariously close to English–Iranian oil fields (Kumar, 1962).

In 1903, with Curzon's visit there, Kuwait became a *de facto* British protectorate, especially as Curzon recognized the threat of Kuwait falling back into Ottoman influence if Al Saud would be on the losing side of tribal spats with the Ottoman-backed Ibn Rashid (Al-Hamdi, 2015). By 1904, the British government tasked political resident Knox to monitor the Khor Abdallah as well as relations between Al Saud and other tribes in the vicinity. Knox's reports had the dual purpose of protecting trade interests and maintaining the status quo that marked the official British presence in Kuwait (Muir, 2008). Consequently, Mubarak exploited the competition of foreign powers in gaining access to Kuwait to achieve his own ends.

Despite the secret British deal and the rather autonomous dealings of the Kuwaiti sheikh, however, Kuwait continued accepting Ottoman titles, providing tax to the Ottoman metropole, receiving revenues from Ottoman-provisioned date farms to the north, and even providing aid for the 1912–1913 Ottoman–Balkan War (Rush, 1991a). This was to perhaps prevent open conflict, along with the added benefit of securing continuous and significant revenues from the date farms in a power-balancing act.

In 1913, however, the Anglo–Ottoman convention was signed. The convention delineated the rather previously ambiguous northern borders between Basra and Kuwait, granted Kuwait the islands of Bubiyan and Warbah, and declared Kuwait autonomous but under “Ottoman suzerainty” (Pillai & Kumar, 1962, p. 118). During World War I, Anglo–Ottoman correspondences continued to detail Kuwait’s cession diplomatically. True recognition of the Kuwaiti state by the British Empire eventually occurred in 1914, with the outbreak of WWI, when Kuwait symbolically adopted a red flag with the Arabic word for its name (Rush, 1991b). Consequently, Britain achieved its goal in establishing a protectorate in Kuwait, as mentioned previously.

British interests in Kuwait continuously morphed throughout the 20th century as Kuwait went from being a key port and land post to a source of oil with the establishment of the KOC (Muir, 2008), meaning that Kuwait would have British support until its official independence. Kuwait’s nationalist endeavors to maintain its autonomy and the integrity of its borders continued until formal independence in 1961 in the face of Al Saud and Iraqi efforts, and even then, tensions remained with Iraq, later culminating in the 1990 Iraqi invasion.

### **Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra**

The discussion of imperial relations with Ottoman Basra and, later on, Iraq better explicates the border disputes between Kuwait and its neighbor throughout the 20th century.

Contrary to their rather clear-cut dealings with territories and tribes in the Gulf, British representatives found frequent difficulties in establishing a presence in the Basra province because of a far greater Ottoman grip represented by the regional administration’s jurisdiction and normative societal structures that were more complex compared to the very tribal relations in the Gulf (Clark, 2008). Additionally, Ottoman Basra represented a more highly multifaceted society, with deep variations in culture, religion, language, and local political affiliation (Simon, 2004).

The vilayets of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul came into Ottoman control under the reign of Sultan Suleyman I in 1534 (Yaphe, 2004). As discussed earlier, with regard to the importance of Kuwait’s geographic location, the vilayets were also instrumental to the Ottoman Empire because they were hubs for trade routes. Additionally, the vilayets were a separating frontier between the Ottomans and the Persians, which made them particularly challenging to manage and maintain long

before European powers showed interest. These tensions were a result of the multireligious and multiethnic nature of the vilayets' residents, who found similarities with their Persian neighbors, especially in Baghdad (Simon, 2004). This diversity led to frequent revolts by Shi'i sects, which the Persians used to their advantage. Arab Lakhnids and Ghassanids, Kurds, and Eastern Christians also represented factions in society that neighboring empires utilized to incite unrest, particularly throughout the 18th century (Simon, 2004). Social and political disturbance became a feature of the area throughout World War I and well into the late 20th century, especially in areas such as Kerbala and Baghdad (Yaphe, 2004).

### **The British and Iraq**

Prior to British occupation of Iraq in 1917 and the establishment of military rule, the British had entered Ottoman Basra through the British Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force in 1914 (Al-Hamdi, 2015; Simon, 2004). At the time, the British had identified the desire of local Arab Ottoman associates to become autonomous, albeit within the Ottoman system (Yaphe, 2004). Prior to World War I, the British had accumulated intelligence to infer certain dynamics within the Iraqi provinces among the various religious, nationalist, and ethnic movements. As the British began to settle in the recently conquered Iraq, however, their perceptions were found to be largely false; movements became more heterogenous and began to clash more violently and frequently, as mentioned previously (Wagner, 2015).

Policies to "civilize" the Arabs in Iraq into an independent state after World War I were deliberated rather haphazardly and chaotically by several British governmental entities: the War Office, the Foreign Office, the Arab Bureau, and the India Office (Yaphe, 2004). In the vein of their methods of Indian rule, the British attempted to create cleavages in Iraqi society by giving tribal leaders considerable agency with tax collection and dispute resolution based on tribal customs and land ownership, for instance, which had been largely absent during Ottoman rule. This favoring of tribal provincial rule was an attempt to counter the increasing influence of city folk, who had overwhelmingly nationalist ideas (Yaphe, 2004); however, because Britain was implementing a one-size-fits-all strategy in Iraq, domestic stability soon evaporated and tribal sheikhs became increasingly authoritarian and brutal, thwarting political development (Yaphe, 2004).

Unrest became especially pronounced after World War I, and Foreign Office officials sensed nationalist sentiment growing at an "unstoppable momentum" (Simon, 2004, p. 36). Not long after, the 1920 revolt began and was a

unifying event, joining the multiple religious sects and residents of differing socioeconomic status to combat hypertaxation, unemployment due to the appointment of British officials in the British Civil Administration, and even calls for an independent Arab Islamic state (Wagner, 2015).

After quelling the rebellion by force, the British government worked to reconsolidate control by abolishing military rule and setting up a Western-inspired constitution in 1921, promising representation, checked power, and democracy (Wagner, 2015). Following this came British deliberations on whom to appoint, these being easily manipulated, pliable leaders and officials. As a result, an inexperienced Sunni religious official leader was chosen, as well as a Hashemite Arab, King Faysal I, who had no particular affiliation with any faction of Iraqi society at the time (Simon, 2004). The result was something termed an institutional façade (Yaphe, 2004, p. 33), a method for more indirect British control of Iraq.

Now with an established government, treaties, such as the binding 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, detailed the formation of the country of Iraq in the joining of the three vilayets of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul—with no mention of Kuwait (Pillai & Kumar, 1962). Upon Iraqi independence in 1932, another frontier-management agreement was drawn, with Sir Percy Cox issuing a memorandum with Prime Minister al-Askari, to detail Kuwaiti–Iraqi borders once more based on the 1913 Anglo–Ottoman convention (Al-Hamdi, 2015), reiterating its legitimacy despite its ratification being previously interrupted by World War I.

Once a very Western-influenced and maladjusted Iraqi government was in place, certain dynamics began to play out both domestically and bilaterally, with Kuwait, throughout the 20th century.

### **Kuwait and Iraq**

As discussed previously, Pan-Arab/nationalist movements continued with fervor even after the British had assigned an Iraqi constitutional government (Al-Hamdi, 2015). After Faysal I's death following Iraqi independence, however, a very staunchly nationalist Ghazi I was king and was highly maximalist in his diplomatic stance. To disseminate his ideology broadly, Ghazi I ran a radio station; propaganda was rampant in the press. Using his media channels, Ghazi I illustrated ideas such as that Kuwait was an illegitimate state and was instead part of Iraq. To support this view, he cited Ottoman-era relations despite border delineations spanning back to 1913 (Pillai & Kumar, 1962). By 1938, Ghazi I's claims reached their height; a

military attack was planned, but when he unexpectedly died, the plan was abandoned (Muir, 2008).

The advocacy of nationalist and pan-Arab sentiment endured with politicians as well. Prime Minister al-Said, under Faysal II, promoted secular pan-Arab sentiments and threatened to annex Kuwaiti islands when Kuwait refused to join a Hashemite union (i.e., AHU) to contribute funds (Al-Hamdi, 2015). Additionally, al-Said's fervent desire for Kuwait to join a Hashemite union might have been an implicit diplomatic gesture to imply that Kuwait belonged within Iraqi borders.

As the monarchy was overthrown in 1958 and a republic was established under Qasim, however, nationalistic policies and diplomacy increased in aggressiveness and frequency, with Qasim refusing to acknowledge Kuwaiti independence in 1961, publicly stating that Kuwait was "an integral part of Iraq" (Clark, 2008, p. 9). At this time, Kuwait had already established its position in the international arena—at times even with help from the Iraqi government to join international organizations—and had considerable influence on the British market economy (Muir, 2008). This implicit threat by Qasim led to Kuwait requesting British assistance preemptively, as well as a UNSC meeting being held. Iraq took this opportunity to harness growing anti-British sentiment among Arab nations, but it received little support from fellow Arab nations in opposing Kuwait (Al-Hamdi, 2015). As Qasim's successor, Arif of the Ba'athist regime, continued to push the claim on Kuwait, Iraq suffered domestic political unrest and a significant loss of diplomatic ties (Muir, 2008).

Claims to Kuwait were based on historical Ottoman links, despite the technical autonomy of Kuwait during that time and despite conventions detailing borders, as mentioned previously. This was in part because Kuwait could provide Iraq closer access to the Gulf and, after the discovery of oil, to more than 15% of the world's oil reserves (Pillai & Kumar, 1962). Furthermore, Iraq had experienced tensions and border disputes with its neighbor Iran spanning from the days of Ottoman rule, eventually leading to an economically devastating war with Iran under Saddam Hussein (Yaphe, 2004). The Iraq–Iran War brought an already politically turbulent and economically feeble Iraq to its knees, instigating the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to reconstitute losses on the grounds of reclaiming the "rogue" state of Kuwait back into Iraqi control (Simon, 2004).

## Power Balancing: Consequences and Effects

Ilai Saltzman's 2011 book, *Securitizing Balance of Power Theory: A Polymorphic Reconceptualization*, reimagines common theories and strategies of power balancing in international relations—such as soft- and hard balancing, buck-passing, and bandwagoning—in a revised, multifaceted framework with security at its core. Relatedly, Randall Schweller's 2006 book, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*, explores the causes for underbalancing in terms of both domestic and international threats by discussing elements such as social/elite cohesion and regime vulnerability. In this section, the theories presented in the two books will be used to discuss and tie in the factors that led to Britain gaining influence in the Ottoman Gulf and contributing to Iraqi domestic unrest, which encouraged border disputes and later, the 1990 Iraqi invasion.

### The Ottomans

In the context of the Ottoman Empire in the mid- to late 1800s, Schweller's ideas of underbalancing are very much relevant, as mentioned earlier, with the complaints of Ottoman officials regarding a lack of "forward" policies, along with the Ottoman policy neglecting the British presence. What prompts a state to delay reactive policy toward governmental threats or concerns? According to Schweller (2006), incoherent policies result from factors such as a lack of elite consensus, governmental regime vulnerability, and threats to social cohesion. Additionally, an important fact to consider is that decisions by individual policy makers occur after assessments of perceived threat rather than of what is, which could lead to mishaps in deciding power-balancing policies (Saltzman, 2011). All of the previous factors have been exhibited, with the rise of Pan-Arabism and other social divisions in Ottoman provinces, the threat of European powers, and the tumultuous reforms in Ottoman administration, all discussed previously, leading to what Schweller termed policy paralysis, which is caused by a weakened government generally having less policy capacity (2006, p. 57). Furthermore, a compromised sense of governmental legitimacy as a result of fragmented social cohesion would limit a state's options to enforce hard-balancing policies for fear of antigovernmental action in response. Relatedly, limited domestic social cohesion often means that outsider threats do not have the usual effect of increasing cohesion but rather disband ingroups further, as with Iran and Shi'i groups in Basra, for instance.

Jack Snyder, however, has also suggested that instability in a state's regime would bring about another reaction in policy making: overexpansion (as cited in

Schweller, 2006). Overexpansion was what the Young Turks attempted after their assumption of power in the years before World War I. It should be noted that overexpansion could refer to both spatial expansion and expansion of executive power. Synder identifies two elements to a government's decision to implement overexpansion (which must not be confused with overbalancing): a weak central authority and several concentrated interest groups (as cited in Schweller, 2006). In the Ottoman Empire under the Young Turks came the continual development of pan-Arab sentiment, conflict among the Young Turks themselves, and conflict between Ottoman liberals and the Young Turk administration (Hurewitz, 1914), which led to policies that Arabs viewed as increasingly antagonizing (e.g., tighter military and naval presences, and Turkification policies), eventually encouraging Arab leaders to seek soft-balancing policies with European powers (e.g., Kuwait's agreement with the British).

### **The British**

Although the Ottomans in the 19th century and early 20th century did not engage in overbalancing with regard to Arab provinces, the British in many ways did so as they gained more control of the region through the early and mid-20th century. Along with overbalancing both during and after World War I, the British initially implemented various soft-balancing techniques to gain a larger presence in the Gulf in their quest to establish protectorates in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, etc.

Although still a confrontational method of power balancing, soft balancing often does not feature open conflict. Instead, soft balancing can include diplomatic maneuvering, nonmilitaristic policies, and institutional binding, and hard balancing may be only a plan B to avoid widening conflict within the current balance of power (Saltzman, 2011). In this instance, one example is the British cooperating with the administrations of Sultan Abdulhamid II and the Young Turks while dealing with local leaders in the Arabian Peninsula to secure personal interests and undermine the Ottoman Empire from within. A prime example, of course, is the previously discussed British deal with Kuwait, in which Kuwait also played an expertly tuned game of soft balancing with the Ottomans and rivaling European powers. Although the British's soft-balancing measures were sound in upholding British interests with regard to the political climate in the Arabian Peninsula and the insufficient, underbalanced Ottoman response, the British began to significantly misinterpret and misperceive the status quo as time wore on. In decision-making, state officials must judge the level of threat domestically and internationally, as well as determine the "resource extraction potential" at their disposal (Saltzman, 2011, p. 33)—that

is, how capable their state is politically, militarily, diplomatically, and economically to undertake certain policies. On one hand, it can be assumed that by 1917, as the British moved into Ottoman Mesopotamia, British officials considered their resource-extraction potential high. This perception was due to their successes in the Gulf and their advantage in World War I. On the other hand, the threat of the occupied society dissenting is also perceived as high because of British militaristic rule and drastic policies aiming to dramatically assert British control in an effort to occupy the power vacuum left by the Ottomans. Snyder regards overbalancing policies as both very costly and very likely to take away privileges from various factions in society (as cited in Schweller, 2006). That being said, the overbalancing policies of the British in what later became Iraq repressed significant portions of society and highly privileged a select few, fueling dissent and instability as the public refused the new balance of power that the British were attempting to instill, and the British left a maladjusted, volatile Iraqi political environment in their wake as they retreated by 1932.

### Conclusion

As demonstrated in the previous section, it is important to note the crucial connection between domestic politics and external policies throughout the discussions of Ottoman policy (or lack thereof), Kuwaiti alliances, and British presence in the Gulf. That is to say, domestic shifts in power have all led to definitive events connected to Kuwaiti independence and Kuwaiti–Iraqi border conflicts: Muhammad Al-Sabah’s assassination, Curzon’s assumption of the position as viceroy of India, Pan-Arabism’s gaining of support, and the Ottoman Empire’s suffering through various unsuccessful reforms.

Building on the Ottoman Empire’s internal political tumult, it becomes clear that the once finely tuned system to govern and administer provinces has become ineffective. This ineffectiveness was exhibited by the numerous movements dissenting from Ottoman cohesion, as well as the failure of Ottoman officials overseeing these areas to appease the growing ethno-religious movements (e.g., Orthodox Christianity, Shi’i Islam, Pan-Arabism) or to recognize that they were a threat that might need intervention by the Ottoman metropole, in the aforementioned “communications problem” (Kumar, 1962).

As discussed above, these growing separationist sentiments were attractive to European imperial powers aiming to gain further influence around the Ottoman Empire’s borders and slowly chip away at its core. Meanwhile, leaders in areas such as Kuwait took advantage of their territories’ political, geographic, and

economic importance to achieve their desires of autonomy by balancing various powers appropriately over time. Once imperial powers gained further access and influence into the Gulf through agreements such as this with local leaders, however, their policies were not as predictable, as seen with Iraq and the British.

Britain's miscalculations in power balancing during World War I and throughout the early 20th century in what was once Ottoman Mesopotamia reiterated Ottoman convictions that British presence in the Arab provinces was akin to a civilizing mission—the British disregarded the complexities of the occupied community and assumed that all those from a general geographic location required similar policies (which were mostly built on a more aggressive divide-and-rule method once the British assumed power).

Legacies of imperialism include governmental infrastructures that the now “free” people are left to grapple with to define their new national identity. In the case of Iraq, this proved a detrimental move by the British, later inspiring major upheavals domestically as well as bilaterally. Relatedly, as previously mentioned, domestic conditions are a great determinant of political decisions, meaning that the raging clash of movements within Iraq left leaders with limited options for maintaining control and nationalistic identity. Further, outsider threats (whether real or perceived) are one method of improving cohesion, further encouraging Iraqi authorities to instigate conflict over border integrity throughout the 20th century, with heightened claims in times of economic distress or war, culminating in the 1990 Iraqi invasion on Kuwait, a territory largely autonomous before its independence and fully sovereign at the time of the attack. Power-balancing shortcomings by both Ottoman officials and the British government with regard to Arab territories hence contributed to major political changes in both Kuwait and Iraq, with some being quite detrimental.

## References

- Al-Hamdi, M. (2015). The consistency of the Iraqi claims on Kuwait during the monarchy and the republic: 1921–1963. *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 9(3), 209–224. doi:10.1386/ijcis.9.3.209\_1
- Archive Editions. (2020). Administration report of the Kuwait political agency for the years 1916–8. In *The Persian Gulf Administration Reports, 1873–1957*: Vol. VII. 1912–1920. Cambridge Archive Editions.
- Blumi, I. (2012). *Foundations of modernity*. Routledge.
- Burdett, A. L. P. (Ed.). (1998). Extracts from official proclamation to the Arab people, 3 December 1914, 27 May 1915, further pamphlet, 30 March 1915, 'To the People of Arabia' [FO 141/710]. In *Islamic movements in the Arab world, 1913–1966: Vol. 1. 1913–1924*. Archive Editions.
- Çetinsaya, G. (2003). The Ottoman view of British presence in Iraq and the Gulf: The era of Abdulhamid II. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 39(2), 194–203.
- Clark, T. (2008). Iraq. In H. Arbuthnott, T. Clark, & R. Muir (Eds.), *British missions around the Gulf, 1575–2005: Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman* (pp. 81–166). Global Oriental.
- Dawn, C. (1988). The formation of pan-Arab ideology in the interwar years. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 20(1), 67–91.
- Hurewitz, J. C. (Ed.). (1956). Kingdom's recognition of Kuwait as an independent state under British protection. Letter from political agent to British government of India, 3 November 1914. In *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East: A documentary record: Vol. II. 1914–1956*. D. Van Nostrand Company.
- Kayali, H. (1997). *Arabs and the Young Turks*. University of California Press.
- Kumar, R. (1962). The records of the government of India on the Berlin–Baghdad railway question. *The Historical Journal*, 5(1), 70–79.  
[www.jstor.org/stable/3020507](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3020507)
- Muir, R. (2008). Kuwait. In H. Arbuthnott, T. Clark, & R. Muir (Eds.), *British missions around the Gulf, 1575–2005: Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman* (pp. 169–226). Global Oriental.

- Pillai, R., & Kumar, M. (1962). The political and legal status of Kuwait. *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 11(1), 108–130.  
[www.jstor.org/stable/756163](http://www.jstor.org/stable/756163)
- Rush, A. (Ed.). (1991a). Lt. Col. Meade to government of India, 30 January 1899; Notes exchanged by ruler of Kuwait and British political agent constituting secret Anglo–Kuwaiti agreement, 23 January 1899 with translation [IOR: R/15/1/472]. In *Ruling families of Arabia: Vol. 4*. Archive Editions.
- Rush, A. (Ed.). (1991b). Ruler’s honorific adoption of distinctive flag, 1914–1915. Extract from Col. S. G. Knox’s summary, 4 January 1915 [IOR:L/P/P&S/10/827]. *Ruling families of Arabia: Vol. 4*. Archive Editions.
- Saltzman, I. Z. (2011). *Securitizing balance of power theory: A polymorphic reconceptualization*. Lexington Books. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.aus.idm.oclc.org>
- Schweller, R. (2006). *Unanswered threats: Political constraints on the balance of power*. Princeton University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctt7rkxt
- Simon, R. S. (2004). The view from Baghdad. In R. Simon & E. Tejirian (Eds.), *The creation of Iraq, 1914–1921* (pp. 36–49). Columbia University Press.
- Tallon, J. (2019). Allies & adversaries: Anglo–Ottoman boundary negotiation in the Middle East, 1906–1914. In J. Olmstead (Ed.), *Britain in the Islamic world: Imperial and post-imperial connections* (pp. 89–105). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wagner, S. (2015). British intelligence and Arab nationalism: The origins of the modern Middle East. In T. Fraser (Ed.), *The First World War and its aftermath: The shaping of the Middle East* (pp. 63–76). Gingko Library.
- Yaphe, J. S. (2004). The view from Basra: Southern Iraq’s reaction to war and occupation, 1915–1925. In R. Simon & E. Tejirian (Eds.), *The creation of Iraq, 1914–1921* (pp. 19–35). Columbia University Press.