



3 Sir Percy Cox (British civil commissioner in Iraq and first high commissioner under the British Mandate), c. 1918

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4 Gertrude Bell (oriental secretary to the British civil commissioner, Baghdad), c. 1921

This development was met with growing misgivings on the part of the military authorities and of Gertrude Bell, Wilson's oriental secretary. Having initially believed in the virtues of direct rule, Bell had become a strong advocate for Iraqi self-government under British tutelage. She had thus drawn closer to those British officials in London and elsewhere who favoured sharifian rule of Iraq, even if her reasons for doing so tended to differ from theirs. In London, the chief concern was the cost to the British Treasury of direct rule. Bell, on the other hand, had become convinced that Arab nationalism was developing an unstoppable momentum. For her, this meant that the British should work with the largely urban and Sunni nationalists to modernise the country and to end what she regarded as the reactionary and obscurantist influence of the Shi'i clerics and their tribal followings. This change of attitude caused a major rift with Arnold Wilson, but gave heart to the sharifian officers and others who were well aware of the split in British ranks. However, as contemporary accounts indicate, the Iraqis were often rather perplexed by the variety of opinions they encountered in the small world of British officialdom in Baghdad – and uncertain about its implications for their future and about how best to exploit these divisions.⁴



5 Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kailani (naqib al-ashraf of Baghdad and first prime minister of Iraq), c. 1920

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6 King Faisal I (king of Iraq 1921–33), c. 1932

Iraq tended to regard him as an interloper, although his identity was reassuringly familiar and suggested no radical departures from the old order.

Faisal had few illusions about the precariousness of his position or about the problems of trying to give some semblance of coherence to the state over which he now ruled. His reign, which was to last twelve years, was marked by his attempt to give some strength to an office characterised chiefly by its weakness. He was sovereign of a state that was itself not sovereign. He was regarded with suspicion by most of the leading sectors of Iraq's heterogeneous society, for what he was, for his association with the British and for his patronage of the small circles of ex-sharifian officers. At the same time, he was aware that the same forces which could easily bring him down also wanted to use him for their different purposes. This gave him a certain room for manoeuvre which he used to the full,