

## Repeat of 1920 Iraqi Revolt?

With the Oct. 9-10 breakout of clashes between U.S. troops and Shi'ite residents of the Al-Sadr City in Baghdad, the 1920 Iraqi revolt against the British occupation forces came back to mind. Then, as now, Shi'ite religious scholars led the revolt after a long period of self-restraint. Then, the British were dragging their feet on granting the Iraqi people full independence.

The British army was mobilized to invade Iraq in late 1917, following a previous attempt by the British India army, which was crushed in 1915-16 in the city of Kut Al-Amara in southern Iraq. A British army under the leadership of Major-General Stanley Maud captured Baghdad on March 11, 1917. Then, as now, the invaders proclaimed that they came to Iraq to "liberate" the Iraqi people—from Ottoman imperial tyranny—and promised independence and the right to choose a sovereign government as soon as the war was over. Of course that was not the intention of the British Empire. The secretly-drawn Sykes-Picot agreement with the French, dividing Ottoman spoils, played the role of today's neo-conservatives' "Clean Break" plan for redrawing the map of the Middle East.

The Iraqi resistance was initially a passive one, whereby they attempted to persuade the British to fulfill their promises. When British Consul in Iraq Arnold Wilson and his assistant, Arab Bureau agent Gertrude Bell, per-

sisted in their rejection of Iraqi demands and required "direct rule," active armed attacks started against British army posts, first in October 1919 in the Kurdish area in northern Iraq. In the South, where the population and the tribes rallied around the religious leadership of the Hawza in Karbala and Al-Najaf, they were met with violence and arrests, and the exile of leading tribal and religious leaders. The exiles included the son of highest religious personality in Karbala, Sheikh Mohammed Taqi Al-Shirazi, who emerged as the political leader during the revolt. Al-Shirazi issued a *fatwa*, or religious decree, prohibiting Iraqis from any cooperation with the British occupation, while still demanding restraint.

In July, the protests turned into a full-fledged armed revolt in many parts of Iraq. The British army used all the brutal force it had available, including using chemical weapons (mustard gas bombs) against Kurdish villages. The revolt was not fully put down before October 1920. The British reportedly suffered 2,000 casualties, including 450 dead. It was estimated that more than 15,000 Iraqis were killed.

This revolt forced the British to modify their plans from direct colonial rule, to establishing an Iraqi government under a British mandate. Although the revolt did not achieve all its objectives for a true independence, it became a reference point in the modern history of Iraq, which Iraqis proudly teach in their schools. If the lessons of this history are not learned quickly by the Bush Administration, a repeat of that revolt could become inevitable.