CLASHING GEOPOLITICAL VISIONS:
IRAQ FROM THE FIRST WORLD WAR
TO THE 1958 REVOLUTION

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Abstract: The relationship of geography and politics does not only have a material dimension. Seeing politics from a geographical perspective also means addressing "geopolitical visions", i.e. ideas about geographical space. By using the concept of geopolitical visions, geographers can help to structure historical processes. This value of the concept of geopolitical visions is demonstrated in this article by the history of Iraq from the First World War to the 1958 revolution. Various geopolitical visions about Iraq clashed. Driving forces and turning points of Iraq's pre-1958 history become apparent within the frame of geopolitical visions.

Key words: Iraq, British mandate, indirect rule, geopolitics, geopolitical visions

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INTRODUCTION

Adherents of classical geopolitics focus on material structures in geographical space in order to find out how they influence politics or, more generally, the course of history: Halford Mackinder wrote that "my concern is with the general physical control"[1] of socio-political processes. Nicholas Spykman declared that "geography is the most fundamental factor in the foreign policy of states because it is the most permanent. Ministers come and go, even dictators die, but mountain ranges stand unperturbed".[2] Taking the perspective of Mackinder and Spykman, it is sometimes forgotten that there is more to geography than mountain ranges and the physical control of socio-political processes. Geography does not only have a material dimension. The meaning of geography to politics, which is without doubt bound to objectively given physical limits, varies according to the way human decision-makers ascribe values to places and geographical space. Geopolitics therefore also includes ideas and visions.

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[1] Mackinder H. J., (1904), *The Geographical Pivot of History*, "Geographical Journal", Anul 23, nr. 4, p. 422.
[2] Spykman N. J., (1942), *America's Strategy in World Politics. The United States and the Balance of Power*, Harcourt Brace, New York, p. 41.

Peter Taylor's term "geopolitical codes" is most frequently used by geographers when it comes to the non-material dimension of geopolitics. Geopolitical codes are cognitive values that politicians ascribe to places beyond the borders of their state: They indicate which foreign places should be linked to one's state (e.g. for economic reasons) and tell which other states are allies or enemies. Forming mental maps, geopolitical codes are the fundament for decision-making in foreign policy.[3] Yves Lacoste's concept of "représentations de l'espace" is very similar to but more elaborated than the one of Taylor. For Lacoste, geopolitics is a tool to examine the geographical reasons of the outbreak of wars. Geographers should look at political conflicts from a spatial perspective because practically every conflict is a conflict over configurations of space: "Par géopolitique, il faut entendre [...] toutes rivalités de pouvoirs et d'influences sur du territoire".[4] What matters from Lacoste's perspective is not geography the way it objectively is but geography the way it is subjectively understood and represented. Représentations de l'escpace, or representations of space, subsume all ideas about space. Nations, for example, are spatially delineated us-groups. The representation of space of a nation does not only define which territories belong to it but also who is a citizen of the nation and how it should be governed.

Lacoste further reasons that geographers should examine conflicts that have a territorial dimension as clashing representations of space. He shifts away from objectively given, material geopolitics to a geopolitical analysis of discourses. Methodologically, this implies to compare the speech acts advanced by the antagonist sides. Only the comparison and reconstruction of representations of space allows us to understand conflicts. In his own words: "L'analyse géopolitique [...] ne prend pas seulement en compte les enjeux territoriaux 'objectifs' des rivalités de pouvoirs; elle considère aussi leurs raisons plus ou moins 'subjectives', c'est-à-dire les idées vraies et fausses, les représentations que les protagonistes de ces conflits et l'opinion qu'ils influencent se font des raisons de leurs différences et de leurs désaccords".[5]

Lacoste's concept points in the right direction. It however takes the constructivist input to geopolitics too far. Following Lacoste, scholars of geopolitics have to carry out discourse analysis only. Lacoste's constructivist perspective cannot be combined with a realist or materialist version of geopolitics. If one considers subjective ideas about geography being essential, objective facts cannot be examined as such. From a constructivist viewpoint, everything matters only the way it is socially constructed. Constructivism is thus alien to Spykman's explanation of politics (the dependent variable) by mountain ranges (the independent variable). Its adherents argue that only the discourse about a mountain range can be the independent variable. Using Lacoste's representations of space therefore requires abandoning classical geopolitics. Sticking to classical geopolitics means neglecting Lacoste's approach.

Since I think that it is beneficial for realist geopolitics to comprise human actors and their decisions, I suggest studying "geopolitical visions". In distinction from geopolitical codes and representations of space, I define geopolitical visions

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[3] Taylor P. J., (1993), "Geopolitical World Orders", in: Taylor P. J., (ed.), *Political Geography of the Twentieth Century*, Belhaven Press, London, p. 37; Taylor P.J., Flint C., (⁴2000), *Political Geography. Word-Economy, Nation-State and Locality*, Prentice Hall, London, pp. 91-92, 371.

[4] Lacoste Y., (2001), *Géopolitique des grandes villes*, "Hérodote", nr. 101, p. 3.

[5] Ibidem, p. 4.

as strategies that possess a territorial dimension, as strategies that materialise in geographical space. The materialisation of geopolitical visions does not need to be successful or permanent but it has to have a material impact, which makes geopolitical visions more than speech acts. Geopolitical visions tell how a specific territory should be delimited and organised. Given that geopolitical visions are not about the way humans see and understand a geographical phenomenon but about the way they want that phenomenon to be delimited and organised, the constructivist trap is avoided – geopolitical visions fit in a materialist version of geopolitics as additional perspective as long as one conceptualises objectively given geography as opportunities and constraints but not as determining forces. Mackinder wrote that "man and not nature initiates, but nature in large measure controls".[6] Whereas adherents of classical geopolitics strictly limited their analyses to the control of nature, I shed light at the way man initiates, using geopolitical visions as a means of analysis.

In order to show the analytical value of the concept of geopolitical visions, I examine the pre-1958 history of Iraq.[7] I show how the clashes of geopolitical visions frame that period of the history of Iraq and help to understand the development of that country. In the first major section of this article, I explain three clashes of geopolitical visions (1. The Ottoman Empire versus Arab nationalism; 2. Arab nationalism versus British imperialism; 3. Imperialism versus national self-determination). These clashes serves as frame for the second major section – my explanation of the rise of the collaboration elite, sectarian divides, the political role of the army and the increasing repression that finally led to the 1958 revolution. While the first major section is focussed on geopolitical visions, the second major section addresses the drivers of Iraqi geopolitics. I conclude this article with a detailed overview of geopolitical visions that affected Iraq's pre-1958 history and suggest how to bring together the concept of geopolitical visions and the classical geopolitical approach in order to revitalise the materialist or realist perspective in geopolitics.

CLASHING GEOPOLITICAL VISIONS
The Ottoman Empire versus Arab nationalism

When the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War on the side of the Central Powers, Sultan Mehmed V, who was also the highest religious authority for all Sunni Muslims, declared the war against Britain and its allies to be a *jihad* (holy war). Because of this religious legitimisation, the British thought that Sherif Hussein ibn Ali was the ideal candidate for an Arab rebellion against the Turks. Hussein's legitimacy resulted from the roots of his family that can be traced back to the Prophet's grandfather. Yet nationalism had already begun to rise in intellectual circles in the Arab world. Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, a Syrian-born intellectual who already died in 1902, had called for an Arab

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[6] Mackinder, The Geographical Pivot, p. 422

[7] Except for quotations and key data, I will not indicate specific references in the empirical part of this paper. My explanations on Iraq's history are of a rather general nature compared to the meticulous studies provided by historians. I use standard literature on the history of Iraq as basis for the empirical part of my paper: Fernea R. A., Louis W. R., (eds.), (1991), The Iraqi Revolution of 1958. The Old Social Classes Revisited, Tauris, London; Fromkin D., (1989), *A Peace to End all Peace. The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, Avon Books, New York; Haj S., (1997), *The Making of Iraq, 1900-1963. Capital, Power, and Ideology*, State University of New York Press, Albany; Tripp C., (³2007), *A History of Iraq*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Caliphate that should replace the Ottoman Caliphate. In a context of rising nationalism, Hussein did, in the end, not lead a religiously legitimised movement but became the first key figure of Arab nationalism.

In May 1915, Hussein established contacts to an Arab secret society in Damascus. His son Faisal travelled from Istanbul to Damascus, where he received the "Protocol of Damascus". It specified the borders for an Arab state, which should include the entire Fertile Crescent and the Arabian Peninsula (except for British-controlled Aden). The Arabs had seen themselves for centuries as citizen of the Ottoman Empire, united by its Muslim identity. The geopolitical vision of a united Sunni Arab empire legitimised the rule of the Ottoman sultans. They were, first of all, fellow Sunni Muslims. Their Turkish ethnicity did not mater. First cracks in this geopolitical vision had been caused by the Ottoman *tanzimat* (reorganisation) from 1839 to 1876 – a reform period in which Turkish nationalism was promoted and the Turks were presented as the ruling ethnic group of the Ottoman Empire. The British efforts to launch an anti-Turkish rebellion put even more emphasis on the Arab ethnic identity. Defining oneself primarily as an Arab meant a recodification of geopolitics: For adherents of Arab nationalism, the "natural" unity of the Arab people had to be achieved within an Arab state, which by definition could not incorporate the Turks. The geopolitical vision of Arab nationalism did not only require a rearrangement of borders but also a rearrangement of political rule. Sultan Mehmed V was not a legitimate leader for Arabs anymore. He rather appeared being a foreign invader.

The roots of Arab nationalism in the Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul can be traced back to the years before the outbreak of the First World War. A secret society, consisting of not more than a dozen men, was established in Basra in 1913 under Talib Pasha. Talib Pasha and the like-minded people around him demanded the foundation of an Arab political entity within the Ottoman Empire. In reaction to the Young Turk movement, they called for equal rights for Arabs and Turks in one state. Their geopolitical vision was still compatible with the territorial status quo but not with the post-*tanzimat* way of governance in the Ottoman Empire. The group around Talib Pasha did however not gain much influence and remained a footnote in history. A similar organisation, the *ahd al-iraqi* (Iraqi Covenant), founded in 1914 by Aziz al-Masri, advanced a geopolitical vision that was totally incompatible with the status quo. It consisted of several high-ranking Arab officers of the Ottoman army. These officers did not envisage a state called Iraq. In these days, Iraq was just the name of a landscape. Similar to the term Levant, it did not have any political connotation. Moreover, before the British mandate, the provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul were poorly interconnected and there was no reason to think of their merger. What the *ahd* called for was an independent Arab state. They did however not say anything about the geographical location and boundaries of this state.

Yet the *ahd* remained as marginal as Talib Pasha's group. Due to the physical barrier between Mesopotamia and the Levant region, the Arab Revolt led by Hussein did not influence the military events in Iraq. Iraq was a major non-European setting for armed confrontation during the war: In November 1914, an Anglo-Indian expedition corps under orders from British India conquered Basra and marched upstream the Euphrates and Tigris towards Baghdad. The troops met heavy resistance and in April 1916, they suffered a decisive loss at Kut. For a few months, the Ottomans appeared to have gained

the upper hand in Mesopotamia but, with reinforcements and direct control from London, the British troops finally conquered Baghdad in March 1917 and even Mosul in November 1918. The effect of the war on the people living between Basra and Mosul was terrifying: About 90,000 of them were forced to serve in labours corps. All others suffered from high war-related taxes. Hunger revolts broke out in Najaf, Kufa and Abu Zuhair. Although these conditions were most favourable to anti-Ottoman and anti-British uprisings, Middle Eastern societies in general lacked a strong bourgeoisie as carrier of nationalism. Arabs served as soldiers in the Ottoman army. The geopolitical vision of a religiously united Ottoman Empire was still strong: When the British expedition forces started to conquer the provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, Sunni Arabs from what later became known as Iraq followed the call for a *jihad*. In the Shiite areas of the three provinces, tribal chiefs and local clerics, i.e. traditional authorities and not nationalists, organised resistance to Ottoman and British troops. Religiously defined organisations such as the *jamiyya al-nahda al-islamiyya* (Society of Islamic Revival), which was founded in Najaf in 1918, still played a bigger role than nationalists.

Support for Arab nationalism was far stronger in the Levant because the Arab Revolt took place there, meaning that nationalist intellectual circles could refer to a movement that achieved political progress. Hussein did not control a large army but his guerrilla tactics were effective against the Ottomans and their German allies. Cutting the railway lines in the Hejaz deprived the garrisons of the Ottoman army of their supplies, which meant that they had to be abandoned. First successes brought Hussein popularity and the number of Bedouin soldiers under his command grew to about 50,000, of whom almost 10,000 had rifles. In July 1917, they conquered Aqaba in what is today Jordan. In September 1918, Hussein and his army were the first to march into Damascus, even though the British troops were decisive in military terms. Because of the promises made by their British partners in the "Hussein-McMahon Correspondence", i.e. the letters in which Hussein and the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Henry McMahon, tried to specify the terms of their cooperation, Hussein and his adherents expected to become the rulers of a state that would unite all Arabs. Being the de-facto ruler in Syria, Hussein's son Faisal, who commanded the Bedouin army, began to build the first institutions for an Arab state, including a provisional government, the fundament of the later "Syrian National Congress". In March 1920, this congress declared Syria being an independent state ruled by Faisal as king.

Arab nationalism versus British imperialism

The British however intended to make Hussein some sort of spiritual leader and wanted to see political power in the hands of Lord Kitchener, who was, during the First World War, probably the politically most influential person in the Middle East. Within the elite circles of British officials, it was consent that Hussein should be thankful if they left him the rule of the Hejaz.[8] Again, a clash of geopolitical visions becomes apparent: The British planned to limit Hussein's power to the area around the two holiest cities of Islam. Hussein believed to become the ruler of the Arab state that was envisaged in the "Protocol of Damascus". In addition to this territorial difference, the ideas of how to organise

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[8] Fromkin, *A Peace to End all Peace*, pp. 168-174, 186.

the post-Ottoman Middle East were incompatible. The British planned to separate political from religious authority, keeping the former in their hands and granting only the latter to Hussein. Their Arab partner expected to become the key political and religious authority in the Middle East.

In the aftermath of the war, the British did not even hold the most basic promises they had made to Hussein. At the peace conference in Versailles, the Arab delegates were nothing but observers. The 1916 "Sykes-Picot Agreement", which was published by the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution and became known in the Arab World in the course of the year 1918, advanced a geopolitical vision for the Middle East that was totally opposed to the basics of Arab nationalism: The Middle East was divided into British and French spheres of influence. The French, who were granted control over the Damascus area, stopped the creation of an Arab state under Faisal within months. Their troops easily beat Faisal's Bedouin army, which was neither trained nor equipped for direct military confrontation. In June 1920, three months after the foundation of his state, Faisal had to take refuge in exile in Italy.

Arab nationalism however prevailed not only in Syria but also became a significant political force in other parts of the Middle East. Immediately after the war, the British planned to keep the provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul under direct rule. The military occupation was to be replaced by a civilian administration completely in British hands. This geopolitical vision – the three provinces as a British protectorate – and the corresponding political action resulted from Britain's dependence on the sea line to India. Moreover, oil resources began playing a relevant role in British geostrategy, although their quantity in Iraq was not exactly known. Already in 1913, First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill had declared that his country had to control the amount of oil that its economy and its military needed. Oil was the reason for Britain's occupation of the province of Mosul in disregard of the "Sykes-Picot Agreement". At the end of the war, 420,000 British soldiers were stationed in Iraq.[9] The new British High Commissioner Arnold Wilson explicitly stated that he wanted to make Mesopotamia a protectorate.[10] The number of British officials working in the administration of the three provinces rose from 59 in 1917 to 1,022 in 1920. Only four people in higher administration were locals.[11]

In March 1920, the *ahd al-iraqi* held a congress in Damascus and declared Iraq a sovereign state, ruled by Faisal's brother Abdallah. Abdallah's reluctance and the Franco-British repression of Arab nationalism in Syria and Iraq put an abrupt end to the organised activities of the *ahd*. Nonetheless, other groupings advanced Arab nationalism in opposition to British dominance: The *sharifiyyun*, officers of Faisal's beaten army, returned from Syria like a wave anti-British unrest. They and civilian officials from Faisal's short-lived state such as Sati al-Husri articulated and diffused the fear that Ottoman rule was about to be replaced by British rule. The *jamiyya al-ahali* (Organisation of the People), established by students of the American University in Beirut in the 1920s, became the key organisation of these bourgeois nationalists. They hoped to gain true independence via the ballot box. In Iraq, the *haras al-istiqlal* (Guards of Independence) were founded in response to anti-nationalist repression. Contrary to the *ahd*, which consisted almost exclusively of Sunni Arab officers from the

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[9] Quoted in Sluglett P., (1976); *Britain in Iraq. 1914-1932*, Ithaca Press, London, p. 104.
[10] Ibidem , p. 28.
[11] Ireland P. W., (1937), *Iraq. A Study in Political Development*, Cape, New York, p. 147.

former Ottoman army, the *haras* recruited their members predominantly among Shiite civilians. Clerics took a leading role. Prominent Ayatollah Sayyed al-Shirazi issued a fatwa that condemned British rule and, beginning in May 1920, mosques of both confessions became the places of public gatherings and organisation against the British administration. In the Kerbala-Najaf area, some Shiite tribal chiefs rebelled. British forces were too weak to control the rebellion. More uprisings in other parts of the country, most importantly in the north where Kurdish tribal forces captured some towns near the Persian border, were inspired by the general instability.

The anti-British uprisings were however rather a fragmented rebellion driven by small nationalist circles in the towns and small tribal militias in rural areas, not a mass movement. Its spread also depended on how local elites valued advantages and disadvantages of British rule. Around Amara and Kut, for instance, tribal chiefs worked against the rebellion because their excessive landholdings had recently been recognised by the British. Collaboration of local elites with the British in order to hold down socially progressive nationalist movements became a guarantee for British dominance during the next four decades.

Imperialism versus national self-determination

In the course of the 1920 rebellion, the British lost control of large parts of the three provinces. It took several months until British troops, using air bombardments against the tribes, stabilised the situation. More importantly, Britain had to invest around £40 million and suffered the loss of 453 soldiers. Immediately after the First World War, this was not bearable for the politicians in London. In 1921, Churchill, who had become the head of the Colonial Office, decided to replace direct by indirect rule.

Indirect rule also suited a new paradigm of international relations better. Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points" were implicitly opposed to the "Sykes-Picot Agreement". The American call for national self-determination was therefore regarded by British and French politicians as a means to weaken their standing in the Middle East and open a door for the Americans. The new American geostrategy – turning colonies into formally sovereign states that were then penetrated by American business and thus made dependent – clashed with the traditional European concept of linking economic exploitation to political control. The first reaction of Britain and France to the "Fourteen Points" was a joint declaration that explicitly promised independence to all Arab people formerly under Ottoman rule. As a second step, Britain and France had their de-facto colonies legitimised by the League of Nations as "mandated territories" that they, so the official language at the conference of San Remo, should prepare for independence – informal empire replaced direct rule.

In order pass power de jure into Iraqi hands, the Lloyd George government decided in 1921 to make its betrayed partner Faisal King of Iraq by plebiscite. On the one side, Faisal became a strong king: According to the new constitution, the king was the central figure in Iraqi politics. Not only did he appoint the members of the upper house, he also held the powers to prorogue and dissolve parliament, to choose the prime minister and to appoint the ministers on the prime minister's recommendation. Moreover, the king had to confirm all laws. He was not obliged to assent any draft law. Whenever the parliament was not sitting, he held vast competences in financial and security affairs. On the other

side, Faisal did not have any ties to the country. Iraq was foreign to him and he was foreign to Iraq. It is an often omitted detail of history that even the election of a famous Arab leader was manipulated by the British who had exiled Faisal's main rival Sayid Talib al-Naqib before the plebiscite. In order to rule, Faisal depended on British assistance. Faisal did not command any powerful executive forces (e.g. an army), whereas all tribes were armed. His weakness and the interest of the new elite to conserve the existing political and socio-economic system guaranteed the status quo, meaning the prerogative of British interests.

Because of Britain's drive towards subtle and legalised dominance, Britain made Iraq sign the "Anglo-Iraqi Treaty" in 1922. According to this treaty, Britain had to bring about Iraq's membership in the League of Nations in 1942. Until then, Iraqi authorities were obliged abstain from any action that might be in contradiction to British interests and coordinate all policies that affected British interests with British officials. The British High Commissioner remained the highest political authority in Iraq and British instructors had the last say on all decisions taken by Iraqi ministries. In military affairs, the Royal Air Force controlled the air bases in Iraq and the new Iraqi army was formed under British supervision.

Yet public resentment forced the Iraqi ruling elite to press for a new treaty. It was signed in 1930 and stated that Iraq should become independent by joining the League of Nations. This happened two years later. Iraq gained formal independence. The British High Commissioner, being the most demonstrative symbol of Iraq's inferiority, was replaced by an ambassador. The new treaty however gave important privileges to Britain for the next 25 years: Iraqi politicians had to consult the British Ambassador on issues relevant to British interests. The Royal Air Force kept control of the air bases in Habbaniyya and Shuaiba. British troops were granted the right to pass through the country in case of war.

Lastly, the oil sector, Iraq's most important asset for Britain, also remained in British hands. In 1925, the Iraqi government, being in short supply of money, had to renounce a 20% share of the "Iraqi Petroleum Company" (IPC). The predecessor of the IPC, the "Turkish Petroleum Company" (TPC), had been founded before the First World War. Since the early 1920s, it was predominantly controlled by Britain: The "Anglo-Persian Oil Company" and "Royal Dutch Shell" owned each 23.75% of the TPC's shares. France and the United States were the other big players. The "Compagnie Française des Pétroles" and a US-based consortium owned each another 23.75% of the TPC's shares.[12] The British expanded their control of the oil sector to the entire country in 1938. Then, the Iraqi government was in urgent need of financial resources because of a bad wheat harvest – wheat was the most important export good in Iraqi hands. The Iraqis addressed the IPC, demanding a higher share of the oil revenues, which were paid as royalties. The IPC agreed but gained further concessions for oil exploitation in exchange: Instead of formerly 400 square kilometres, it controlled 100,000 square kilometres from then on, owning a de-facto monopoly of oil production in Iraq.[13]

With oil totally in British hands, Iraq's economy did not develop. The country was mainly agricultural. Food crops such as dates and grain dominated production, while cash crops such as cotton did not flourish because of a lack of

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[12] Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, pp. 58-59.
[13] Fürtig H., (2003), *Kleine Geschichte des Irak. Von der Gründung 1921 bis zur Gegenwart*, Beck, München, p. 29.

investment. Suggestions made by British advisor Hilton Young in 1930, who strongly opposed great landownership and tax exemptions for great landowners, were ignored because they did not match the interests of Iraq's elite. Manufacturing was based on small workshops and pre-industrial technologies. Industrialisation almost exclusively depended on investment by the government, which chronically ran short of money. This socio-economic structure, which was disadvantageous for the development of the country, had crucial political reasons.

DRIVERS OF IRAQI GEOPOLITICS
The rise of the collaboration elite and sectarian divides

In order to realise indirect rule, the British created a well-functioning system of proxies. In the first months after the war, they abolished institutions of self-rule such as the municipal councils and replaced them with political officers who interacted directly with local notables. In this spirit, they had already introduced the "Tribal Civil and Criminal Disputes Regulation" in 1916. It was encoded into Iraqi law in 1924 and gave tribal sheikhs, designated by the British, the power to handle all disputes that concerned members of their tribe and collect the taxes for the central government. The new order, which the British describes as "natural", was in fact the outcome of their interaction with traditional authorities.

The British High Commissioner moreover introduced a land reform in 1918 in reaction to the first anti-British unrests. This land reform transferred the tribal common property to the tribal chiefs and wealthy urban families. About 90% of the arable land of Iraq was from then on owned by a thin class of great landowners. Iraq became the "country of the 1,000 sheikhs". This way, the British hoped to create an elite loyal to them. After having fundamentally changed economic power, the British worked towards the creation the *hizb al-hurriyya al-iraqiyya* (Party of Iraqi Freedom), founded in 1922, as political organisation that united the new elite. Virtually cementing the dominance of the new elite, the election law gave only citizens with sufficient property (either land or money) the right to vote and to be elected. The new parliamentary system was therefore practically open to the 1,000 sheikhs only.

In military affairs, the British instrumentalised the Assyrian minority. They encouraged Assyrian settlement around Mosul in order to influence a referendum on the adherence of the province to Iraq or Turkey. The Assyrians understood that they could only uphold their position against the Kurds and Arab Sunnis in collaboration with the British. Hence, they were eager to participate in an army under British control, the 5,000 men strong Assyrian Levies. This army helped to fight anti-British forces during the post-war unrest.

In the following years, the British refined their approach of confessional and ethnical division, which had been successfully tested with the Assyrians. In 1919, Percy Cox, who had replaced Wilson as High Commissioner, proposed exclusively to the Sunni Arabs to form a national government. The Sunni Arabs (about 21% of all Iraqis compared to 54% Shiite Arabs) had already been privileged under Ottoman rule because the Ottomans suspected the Shiites of being closer to Shiite Persia than to the Sunni Ottoman Empire. As a direct result of British influence, the new Iraqi administration was dominated by Sunni Arabs, most often ex-Ottoman officials. Posts in the wider administration became an easy way for Sunni Arabs to rise to powerful positions. Shiites were excluded from senior posts.

However, in order to stabilise the situation in the Shiite areas, the British and King Faisal partially integrated the Shiite sheikhs, separating them from *mujtahids* (Muslim jurists) who did not only envisage real independence for Iraq but also social change. The sheikhs, both Sunni and Shiite, were given roughly 40% of the seats in the constituent assembly, were granted with tax exemptions and, in some cases, received lucrative posts in the state apparatus. The British also managed to divide the Shiite clerics: In 1922, about 200 Shiite notables met at a conference in Kerbala, calling for an end of the mandate. Two years later, the British made exiled Shiite clerics, who wanted to return to Iraq, sign pledges to abstain from politics.

The centralisation of governance moreover paved the ground for a new system of patronage. Given that most key decisions were from then on taken in the capital, local leaders from the provinces needed patrons in Baghdad. Still, in order to keep the periphery calm and supportive, the political elite in Baghdad depended on clients in the provinces. The currency of this new system was land property. Land was the means for the authorities to purchase social standing and a way of self-enrichment. It also proved credibility and weight in political circles – again, the power given by the British to the 1,000 sheikhs becomes clear.

Bringing together these developments and the conceptual frame of geopolitical visions, the British managed to divide those forces who called for a de jure and de facto independent Iraq into two camps: The new Iraqi elite were in favour of national sovereignty but their vision for Iraq included socio-economic stability. Because the new elite considered socio-economic stability being more important than national sovereignty, they supported, in the end, the British. The outcome was a de jure but not de facto independent Iraq. The Arab nationalists struggled for a sovereign and socio-economically revolutionised Iraq. Their vision for the country appeared being the major threat to Iraq's collaboration elite.

The political role of the Iraqi army

After the death of Faisal in 1933, the ruling elite tried to increase its power vis-à-vis inexperienced 21-year-old King Ghazi. The army under Bakr Sidqi suppressed various local revolts, most prominently the 1933 Assyrian uprising, which ended an anti-Assyrian pogrom by the army. Being the popular force that guaranteed national integrity, the army gained a political role. Sunni Arabs from then on hoped that the army was able to foster nation-building across confessional and ethnic divides. The army used its new power to launch a coup in 1936. They installed a civilian cabinet. Prime Minister Hikmat Suleiman, who ruled de facto in cooperation with Bakr, proclaimed national modernisation following the examples of Persia under Reza Khan and Turkey under Mustafa Kemal as main objective. Bakr, who had Kurdish origins and favoured Iraqi nationalism over pan-Arabism, was however assassinated by a pan-Arab officer in the following year. This murder revealed the deep rift between two nationalist geopolitical visions: Pan-Arabism (*qawmi*) aimed at a state of all Arabs. Iraqi nationalism (*watani*) envisaged a truly independent Iraq. This confrontation led to a series of military coups.

In addition to the clash of nationalists and pan-Arabists, leading Iraqi politicians of the 1930s can be divided into two camps: The dominant minority wanted to maintain a close partnership with Britain. Nuri al-Said, the key political figure in Iraq from the late 1930s onwards, was their most prominent representative. A radical majority regarded Fascist Germany being the better

partner. Bakr and Rashid al-Gailani – the latter became prime minister by coup in 1940 – were key representatives of the pro-German camp. They were convinced that Germany, being the arch-enemy of Britain, would help the Arabs to get rid of British dominance. Moreover, the general attractiveness of fascism in the 1930s caused a boost of fascist intellectual circles in Iraq. The split between pro-British and pro-German factions also occurred within the army. Highest ranking officers such as chief of staff Ahmad Fawzi were pro-British. Younger officers were pro-German.

Although Prime Minister al-Gailani was only moderately pro-German, the British ended his rule in January 1941. They declared vis-à-vis the Hashemite regent Abd al-Ilah, who was ruling for minor King Faisal II after Ghazi had died, that Iraq would lose Britain's "friendship" if al-Gailani remained in power.[14] Four young army officers – Salah al-Din al-Sabbagh, Kamil Shabib, Fahmi Said and Mahmud Salman, also known as the "Golden Square" – were unwilling to tolerate British interference in Iraqi politics anymore. On 1st April, they carried out a successful coup and handed over power to al-Gailani. It does not need much imagination to anticipate that the British did not tolerate this. On 17th April, British troops from India landed in Basra. They marched into Baghdad on 1st June, accompanied by Abd al-Ilah and leading pro-British politicians, who had escaped the country after the coup.

Increasing repression and the 1958 revolution

After the Second World War, Iraq experienced a short episode of liberalisation under Prime Minister Tawfiq al-Suwaidi from February to March 1946. It ended when al-Suwaidi called for a reform of the 1930 treaty with Britain. In the beginning Bloc Confrontation, every call for reforms was understood by the British, and more importantly by the Americans, as Communist subversion. Their fear for a rise of Communism in Iraq was justified in the mid-1940s. The presence of British troops had sharply increased the demand of manufactured products, paving the fundament for industrialisation. The Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) was strong among oil, port and railway workers. In 1946, it controlled twelve out of sixteen legalised trade unions. The ICP frequently organised strikes that brought key sectors of the economic to a standstill. It led the strike at a pumping station near Haditha and the subsequent *masira al-kubra* (Great March) towards Baghdad, which was stopped by the army near Fallujah. In the following years, Iraq's elite around Nuri brutally and successfully stoke down Communist activities in the oil sector.

In foreign affairs, the Iraqi regime also provoked the anger of many of its citizens. The separate ceasefire with Israel during the Israeli War of Independence was regarded as a treachery to a common Arab cause. Supporting for the Royal Air Force, which used air bases in Iraq during the 1956 Suez Crisis, led to mass protests. In 1955, a government headed by Nuri moreover signed a treaty of military cooperation with Britain. This treaty, the "Baghdad Pact", reflected Anglo-American geostrategy of the early Cold War. In order to contain the Soviet Union and threaten its "soft underbelly", Middle Eastern states were pressed into pro-Western military alliances. For the Arab people, these alliances symbolised the continuing dominance of the former colonial powers. The vast majority of the Iraqi people, probably also the majority of the

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[14] al-Hashimi T., (1967), *Mudhakkirati. 1919-1943*, [publisher unknown], Beirut, pp. 372-373.

elite, did not share the Cold-War geopolitical vision according to which all states could be divided into those supporting "Western freedom" and those cooperating with "Soviet expansionism". According to an official summary provided by British Ambassador John Troutbeck on opinions expressed in Iraqi newspapers, most Iraqis saw the world as divided into imperialist oppressors and oppressed people.[15] The only way Nuri could make the parliament ratify the treaty was to surround it with tanks.

Given this context of domestic repression and a foreign policy that was widely rejected by the Iraqi people, reforming the political system and getting the majority of the Iraqis to support the government would have been the only way to prevent the coming revolution. Yet as one of Troutbeck's statements highlights, the political and socio-economic system of Iraq was immune to any attempts to reform it. Troutbeck remarked that "whatever the colour of the prime minister, Iraq is at present governed by the old guard of landowners whose leader is Nuri".[16] Michael Wright, Troutbeck's predecessor correctly pictured the situation in the mid-1950s as a race between development and revolution. On the one side, the benefits from the oil wealth began to trickle down to ordinary people. There was progress in education, health, house building and other issues of everyday life. On the other side, young intellectuals and young army officers considered this progress being too slow and only superficial because it did not change the dominance of the ruling elite. While Wright overestimated positive effects and argued that Iraq was stable, Sam Falle, a younger British official who travelled through the country, reported to his superiors that rural poverty laid the fundament for a coming revolution.[17]

Politically, Nuri neither managed to integrate the emerging middle class. Nor did he break the political power of the tribes that were hardly controlled by the central government. Because of the brutal repression of any opposition, major opposition organisations formed a joint national front in 1954. Michael Ionides, British member of the "Iraqi Development Board", warned that if Nuri and the ruling elite fell, British influence in Iraq would end.[18] Earlier, Troutbeck had already summarised the problem of Britain in Iraq in one sentence, saying that "one of our main embarrassments here was that everyone tended to identify us with the elder statesmen".[19] In July 1958, young army officers, led by Abd al-Karim Qasim and Abd al-Salam Arif, took over power in Baghdad and assassinated Nuri, Faisal II and Abd al-Ilah. The geopolitical vision of the anti-British nationalists finally became reality.

CONCLUSION

By using geopolitical visions as a frame for Iraq's pre-1958 history, it is easy to highlight which ideas about the country, which ascriptions of value to territory that we call Iraq, mattered for its political development. This perspective moreover provides a framework for identifying the geopolitical drivers and the turning points of the history of Iraq – the transformation of three Ottoman

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[15] Louis W. R., (1984), *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951. Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Postwar Imperialism*, Clarendon, Oxford, p. 713.

[16] Quoted in Louis W. R., (1991), "The British and the Origins of the Iraqi Revolution", in: Fernea R. A., Louis W. R., (eds.), *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958. The Old Social Classes Revisited*, Tauris, London, p. 39.

[17] Ibidem, pp. 45-46, 54-55.

[18] Ibidem, p. 44.

[19] Ibidem, p. 38.

provinces into a sphere of British rule into a mandated territory into a de facto dependent state into a sovereign country. Table 1 gives an overview of the competing geopolitical vision that I have addressed in the previous sections. It shows the clashes of each geopolitical vision and thus summarises the key elements of Iraq's pre-1958 history.

Table 1. Clashing geopolitical visions about Iraq (author's draft)

geopolitical vision	explanation	clashes
religiously defined Ottoman Empire	pre-*tranzimat* system; unity of the Ottoman Empire results from the Sunni Muslim identity of its citizens	ethnicity-based geopolitical visions
Turkish dominated Ottoman Empire	Turkish nationalism changes the idea how to organise the space controlled by the Ottoman Empire	pre-*tanzimat* system, Arab nationalism (as a reaction to Turkish nationalism)
Arab nationalism	various visions of a political entity defined by the Arab ethnicity of its people; clashes of subvisions: pan-Arab (*qawmi*) versus nationalist (*watani*)	religion-based geopolitical visions, Turkish nationalism, British imperialism
directly British-ruled Middle East	division of the Middle East according to the "Sykes-Picot Agreement"; direct colonial rule	Arab unity, Arab / Iraqi sovereignty
Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points"	self-determination of nations ends direct British and French rule and makes indirect American influence possible	direct British and French rule in the Middle East
indirectly British-ruled Middle East	"mandated territories" as internationally legitimised way of indirect rule; rise of pro-British collaboration elites	Arab unity, Arab / Iraqi sovereignty
truly independent Iraq	various forces in Iraq struggle to end indirect British rule; mostly in connection with far-reaching socio-economic change	British indirect rule, Middle East as a part of anti-Soviet containment
Iraq as partner of Britain during the Second World War and the Cold War	Britain intervenes (sometimes forcefully) in order to keep Iraq a subordinated ally against Fascist Germany and the Soviet Union	Iraqi-German partnership, Third Worldism

Concerning geopolitical visions as an approach to geopolitics, the next step to advance this concept should be its incorporation in classical geopolitical reasoning. In this article, I demonstrate the use of geopolitical visions as a perspective on political processes. Yet my analysis does not incorporate classical geopolitical thinking. I do not ask how location and physical geography, i.e. nature in order to use Mackinder's words, exert a control in the clash of geopolitical visions about Iraq. Nonetheless, first hints appear in my analysis: Arab nationalism had almost no effect on Iraq during the First World War because Iraq was far away from Hussein's tribal forces – location matters. The decision of the British to seek control of Iraq after the war resulted from Iraq's abundance in oil – physical geography matters. Even the success and failure of geopolitical visions can be explained by geography: Those who advanced the pro-German geopolitical vision during the Second World War failed because the British could easily send troops from India to Iraq, whereas German support was not at sight. It is these connections between geopolitical visions as initiatives by human actors and location and physical geography that should be examined in order to bring a materialist or realist version of geopolitics back into the scientific debate.

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