

British Policy  
*in*  
Mesopotamia,  
*1903–1914*

A black and white photograph of a steam locomotive pulling a train through a desert landscape. The locomotive is the central focus, moving from left to right. It has a large cylindrical boiler, a tall smokestack, and a prominent front-end. The train consists of several passenger cars and a freight car. The ground is dry and rocky, and the background shows a flat, open plain under a clear sky.

STUART A. COHEN

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**BRITISH POLICY IN MESOPOTAMIA, 1903–1914**

*Published by*  
Ithaca Press  
8 Southern Court  
South Street  
Reading  
RG1 4QS  
UK

[www.ithacapress.co.uk](http://www.ithacapress.co.uk)

Ithaca Press is an imprint of Garnet Publishing Limited.

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First Paperback Edition

ISBN 13: 978-0-86372-325-4

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Typeset by* Samantha Barden  
*Jacket design by* David Rose  
*Cover photograph* used courtesy of Library of Congress,  
Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-Matpc-04665

Printed by Biddles, UK

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*To the memory of my father*



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## Foreword

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There has been increasing interest in recent years in the study of the establishment of Britain's position in the Persian Gulf in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is partly a question of its relevance to the contemporary political situation. But there are also important historical questions concerned with analysing the establishment of an "informal" empire in an area of great power rivalry poised midway between the spheres of interest of the Foreign Office and Colonial Office in London and the government of India in New Delhi. European merchants, financiers and entrepreneurs also had a significant role to play. And over the whole enterprise, at least in its latter stages, there hangs the smell of oil.

Stuart Cohen has made a useful contribution to an understanding of the expansion of British interests at the northern end of the Gulf, in Mesopotamia. Unlike other historians, he is concerned principally not with the genesis of the Indian expeditionary force which landed at Basra soon after the start of the First World War but with the developing British efforts to consolidate a position in the Ottoman provinces of Iraq in the face of the threat posed by foreign, mainly German, rivalry and by the plans to build the Baghdad Railway. Using material from government archives, Dr Cohen describes the search for a coherent British policy in a skilful and convincing narrative.

Although this work is not directly about the internal situation in the Iraqi provinces, students of the Middle East will also find much interesting information relating to the politics and economics of the area. Early British contacts with politicians like Seyid Talib are described in detail, and there is as well a great deal of material relating to plans to develop the area by improving the system of irrigation and river transport.

**Roger Owen**



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## Preface

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This book is not intended to be either a comprehensive study in international relations or a detailed account of the domestic politics of Mesopotamia between 1903 and 1914. It has two more restricted, but nevertheless important, aims. The first is to measure the extent of official British interest in the region during this period, and in so doing to redress a traditional historical bias. Commonly, Britain's interest in Mesopotamia before 1914 has been treated merely as a prologue to the Mesopotamian campaign of the First World War and the subsequent British mandate over Iraq; the subject has been considered of little importance in its own right. The accelerating momentum of Britain's Mesopotamian policy (which the present work attempts to describe) suggests that this is to misinterpret the evidence. The British and Indian governments had long possessed a strategic interest in the region, because it constituted a highway to India. By 1914, they had also taken active steps to secure a position of prominence in all areas of Mesopotamian commercial development and to establish a claim on the political loyalties of the Arab inhabitants of the region. Britain's Mesopotamian policy before 1914 must therefore be treated as an important element in Britain's general policy towards the Middle East in the early twentieth century.

The second aim of this book is to weigh the various pressures which influenced British officials in the formulation of their policy towards Mesopotamia. This aim is restricted, and accounts for the exclusive concentration on the motives of the British government. However, it is also of wider relevance, since the subject forms part of a reassessment of the purposes of British foreign policy before the First World War. Thus the study aims to investigate not only the details of Britain's involvement in Mesopotamia but also the motives (idiosyncratic and collective) which accounted for the parabola of that involvement.

Such considerations have largely determined the structure of the argument presented in the following pages. The formulation and the nature of Britain's policy towards Mesopotamia between 1903 and 1914 is here treated in three chronological parts. These are preceded by an

examination of the government's attitude towards the Baghdad Railway in 1903; they are followed by an analysis of the reasons for the despatch of an expeditionary force to Basra in 1914. Together, the successive chapters attempt to describe the manner in which Great Britain became increasingly, albeit hesitantly, involved in the region. Individually, each of the parts also attempts to account for the pressures which at various points in time precipitated that process. Consequently, much of the book is devoted to an analysis of the tactics and strategy of individual "policy-makers". This is undoubtedly not the whole story. But it does seem an indispensable part of any fruitful enquiry into the factors which determined Britain's imperial policy.

\* \* \*

I have many debts to acknowledge. Since this book grew out of an Oxford D. Phil. thesis, the foremost are to individual members of that university: to the late Mr A. Hourani of St Antony's College and to Mr D. K. Fieldhouse of Nuffield College for their strenuous supervision of the original enterprise and for their benevolent interest in its subsequent development; to the Master and Fellows of St Catherine's College for their warm encouragement throughout my stay in their midst; and to Miss E. Monroe of St Antony's College for the benefit of her advice and erudition. In addition, I would like to make special mention of the help and criticism received from the late Prof. M. Verete of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

My debt to the officials of the archives and libraries in which I have worked will be obvious, but it is nonetheless great for that. The unfailing patience and habitual courtesy of the staffs of the Public Record Office, the Commonwealth Relations Office, the British Museum, the Bodleian, the Cambridge University Library and the Middle East Centre, Oxford measurably increased the pleasures of historical research. Extracts from the material in their possession appear by their kind permission.

Thanks of a particular, and more recent, kind are due to those who have made the publication of this book possible: the directors of the Middle East Centre, who invited me to participate in their monograph series, and the Publication Committee of Bar-Ilan University, Israel, which contributed generously towards the cost involved.

My greatest debt, which is impossible to specify, is to my wife.

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## Guide to Abbreviations Used in Citations

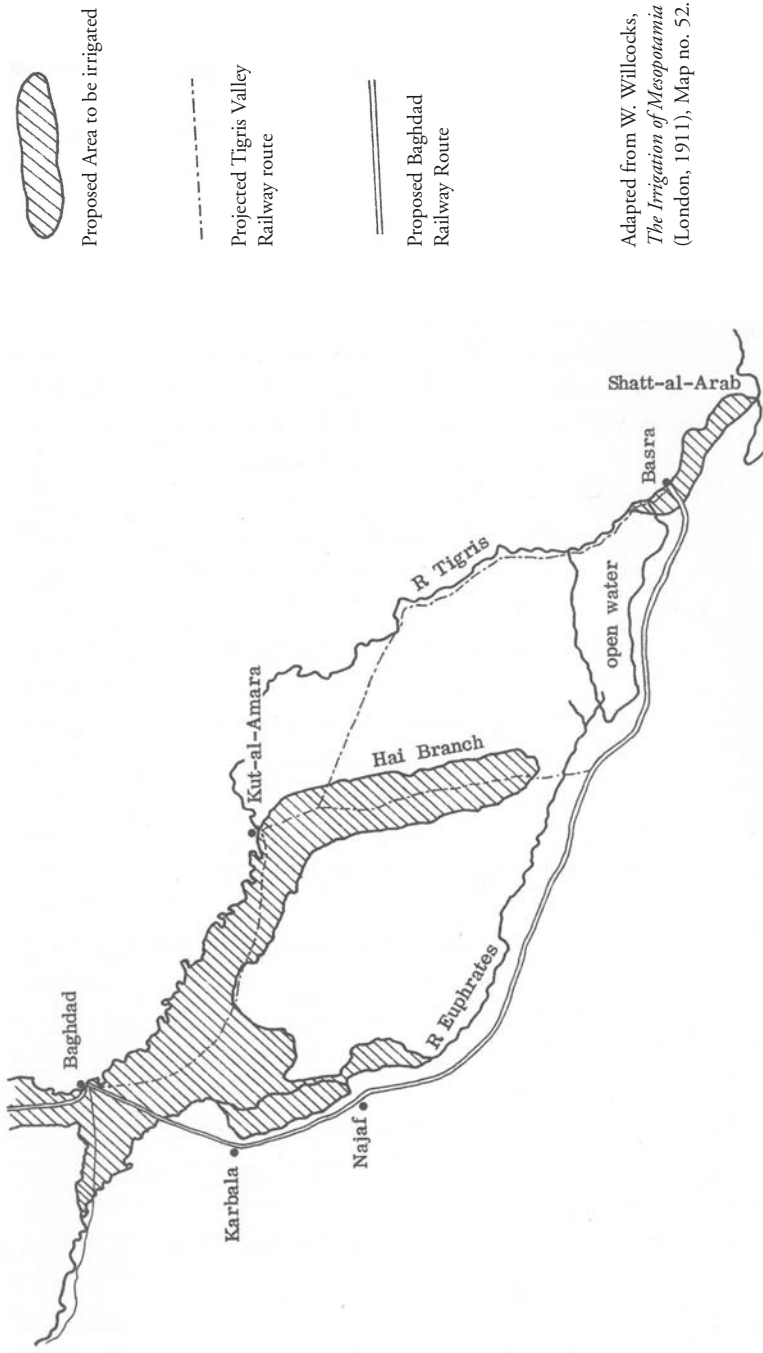
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<b>ADM</b>	Admiralty Records, Public Record Office (PRO), London.
<b>BD</b>	<i>British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914</i> , G. P. Gooch and H. Temperley eds. (London, 1926–1938).
<b>BS</b>	Babington Smith MSS, St. Antony’s Collection of private MSS, The Middle East Centre, Oxford.
<b>BT</b>	Board of Trade (B of T) Records, PRO, London.
<b>CAB</b>	Cabinet Records, PRO, London.
<b>CID</b>	Committee of Imperial Defence.
<b>DDF</b>	<i>Documents diplomatiques français, 1871–1914</i> (2nd series, Paris, 1930–1955).
<b>DNB</b>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i> : 1901–1911 (Oxford, 1912), 1912–1921 (Oxford, 1927), 1922–1930 (Oxford, 1937), 1931–1940 (Oxford, 1949), 1941–1950 (Oxford, 1959), 1951–1960 (Oxford, 1971).
<b>FO</b>	Foreign Office (FO) Records, PRO, London.
<b>GP</b>	<i>Die grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette, 1871–1914</i> , J. Lepsius, A. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and F. Thimme eds. (Berlin, 1922–1927).
<b>HARD</b>	Hardinge MSS, Cambridge University Library.
<b>L/P &amp; S/</b>	Political and Secret files of the India Office (IO), Commonwealth Relations Office, London.
<b>LANS</b>	Lansdowne MSS, PRO, London.
<b>NIC</b>	Nicolson MSS, PRO, London.
<b>PD</b>	Hansard, <i>Parliamentary Debates</i> , 1903–1914.
<b>WO</b>	War Office (WO) Records, PRO, London.



MAP ONE

The Various Proposed Railway Routes in Asiatic Turkey, 1903-1914

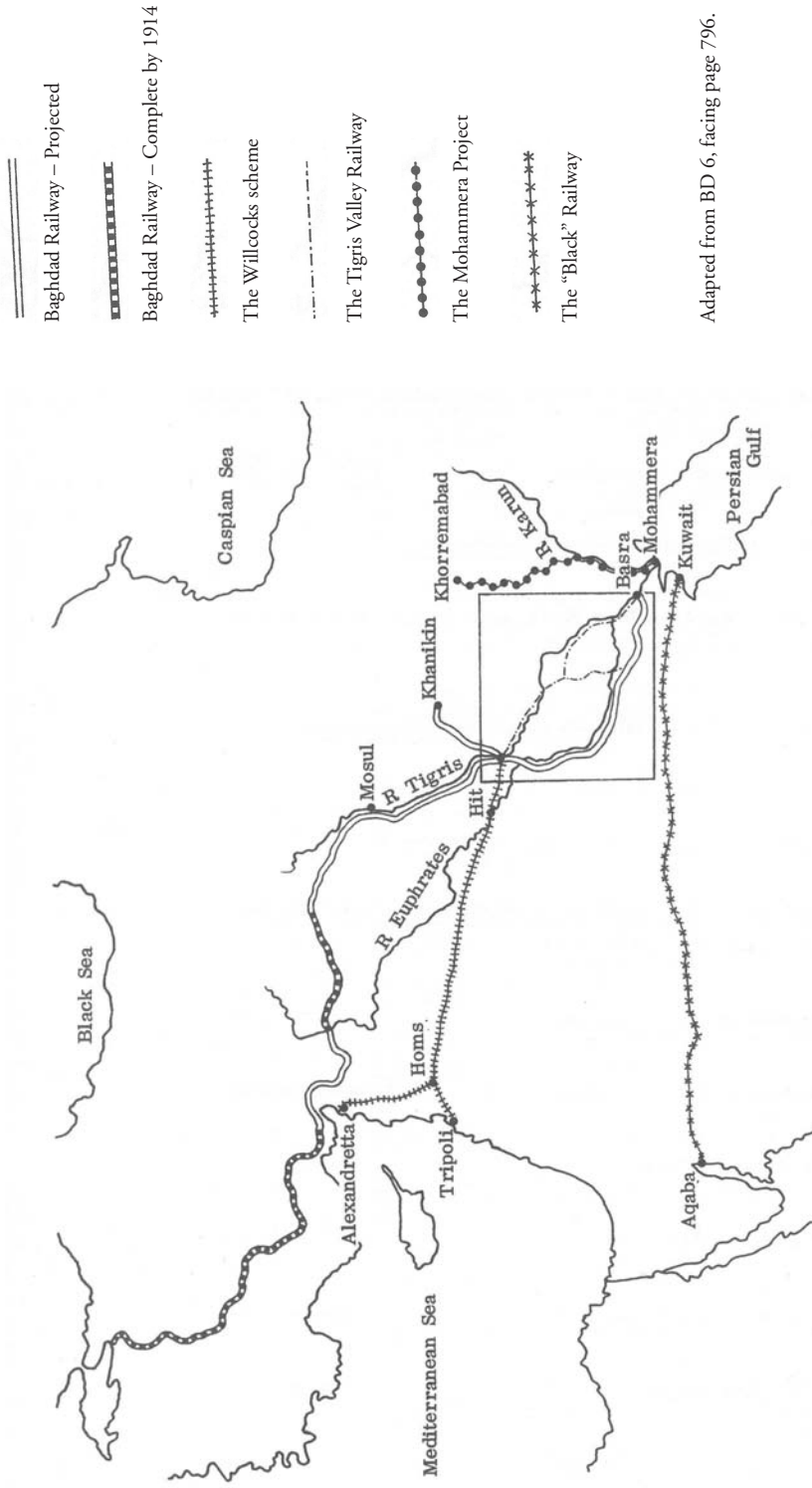


Adapted from W. Willcocks,  
*The Irrigation of Mesopotamia*  
(London, 1911), Map no. 52.



MAP TWO

The Proposed Tigris Valley Railway Route



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## Introduction

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The intensity of Britain's interest in Mesopotamia was indicated during the military and diplomatic Middle Eastern campaigns of the First World War. It was confirmed by the British government's acquisition of a mandate over Iraq<sup>1</sup> at the 1920 San Remo Conference. These events have long stimulated historical interest. Moreover, their study has been facilitated by the recent application of the "thirty years rule" to the relevant official British archives. However, one result has been a slight distortion in the balance of historical perspective. Britain's involvement in Mesopotamia after the watershed of 1914 has become a major subject of historical concern;<sup>2</sup> but British policy towards the area before the First World War has suffered proportional neglect. The imbalance is not rectified by the various studies of British interests in eastern Arabia during the early twentieth century. These studies have concentrated on either the Persian Gulf<sup>3</sup> or the Baghdad Railway.<sup>4</sup> The geographical limitations of the former and the conceptual scope of the latter are equally restricting. They have diverted attention from the extent and variety of British interests in the Mesopotamian interior. In the German context, it has already been acknowledged that "irrigation and other public works, foreign trade, cotton, oil and settlement came into the picture as well as railways".<sup>5</sup> The influence of similarly diverse factors on Britain's pre-war policy towards the Mesopotamian provinces of the Ottoman Empire has not been investigated.

The chronology of the present study corresponds to that of the Anglo-German Baghdad Railway negotiations. This convenient arrangement of dates conceals, however, the central subject of interest. The report of the 1915 British de Bunsen Committee,<sup>6</sup> rather than the railway clauses of the 1903 Turco-German convention,<sup>7</sup> stimulated my interest in Britain's policy towards Mesopotamia before the First World War. The reason lies in the retrospective character of the 1915 report. In 1915, the Russian and French governments suddenly announced the

[1]

spoils which they each expected to gain after the successful conclusion of the war against Turkey. In order to frame a British response, the de Bunsen Committee was asked to assess Britain's own desiderata in Asiatic Turkey. The committee completed its formal investigations, but did not fulfil its intended function. The de Bunsen report did not serve as a blueprint for future British policy in the Middle East. The committee concluded that British interests would best be served by a series of modest changes in Asiatic Turkey. These proposals were never officially approved by the British government; they were soon superseded by others whose more ambitious nature reflected the hasty march of war. Ultimately, therefore, the de Bunsen Committee summarised, rather than anticipated, Britain's Middle Eastern policy. Therein lies the historical interest of its report. This document provides a convenient digest of Britain's pre-war interests in the Middle East in general and in Mesopotamia in particular. The present study will attempt to discover the process whereby the policy enunciated in 1915 had gradually been formulated between 1903 and 1914.

The de Bunsen Committee concluded that Britain possessed three main interests in Mesopotamia. The first was strategic, the need to maintain Britain's supremacy in the Gulf and, in doing so, to protect India's western flank. Basra was therefore to be "incorporated into Great Britain's possessions", and all non-Turkish powers were to be excluded from Baghdad and Mosul.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, the committee acknowledged Britain's commercial interests in Mesopotamia. It proposed to preserve the trade of the region for British merchants, to retain the petroleum resources for British enterprise and to ensure that Mesopotamia provided India with a granary in time of famine.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the committee indicated Britain's interest in the future complexion of Mesopotamian politics. The Arab inhabitants of the region were not to be permitted self-government. Neither, however, were they to be alienated by the replacement of Ottoman suzerainty with direct Indian rule. Britain's need for stability and friendship was to be served by a "devolutionary scheme" which provided for Turkish rule with indirect British supervision.<sup>10</sup> These three interests – strategic, commercial and political – were all apparent, although in varying degrees, in 1903. The purpose of this introduction is not to compress Britain's Mesopotamian policy before 1903 into a few pages, but to indicate the incidents and trends which ensured the continuity of interest finally enunciated in 1915.

Britain's strategic interest in Mesopotamia was a consequence of its control of India. In the early twentieth century, the German naval threat and the Anglo-French and Anglo-Russian agreements increasingly concentrated Britain's attention on Europe.<sup>11</sup> The defence of the Indian empire remained, however, an established principle of British foreign policy<sup>12</sup> to which the "whole British military and naval machine was heavily geared".<sup>13</sup> In 1904, India was both the largest consumer of British goods<sup>14</sup> and the greatest concern of the recently formed Committee of Imperial Defence.<sup>15</sup> Curzon<sup>16</sup> asserted that "as long as we rule India we are the greatest Power in the world".<sup>17</sup> But Britain's control over India imposed upon it responsibilities concomitant with the attendant benefits. Palmerston once asked whether, because he might possess one house in York and another in London, he need also own all the inns in-between. The expansion of the British Empire had provided a positive answer. Successive British governments had determined to secure India from all possible attack. They had therefore found it necessary both "to safeguard all the routes leading to India"<sup>18</sup> and to establish control over all the bases from which those routes might be threatened. Initially, these motives had dictated the acquisition of a string of *places d'armes* from Gibraltar to Singapore. In the late Victorian age, they also dominated the workings of British policy in eastern and central Africa.<sup>19</sup> The route to India had also stimulated British interest in Mesopotamia. The area constitutes a natural depression between the mountains of Iran and of Armenia, the deserts of Syria and of north Arabia and the waters of the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. The valley formed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers thus bestrides a natural land highway between India and Europe.

Traditionally, British strategy relied on control of the maritime lanes to India. The Royal Navy dominated the route via the Cape and, after 1875, British finance controlled the destiny of the Suez Canal. The British government had also, however, responded to successive foreign threats to make active use of the Euphrates route. The initial reaction had been modest. The despatch of a permanent agent to Baghdad in 1798 was Britain's only local counter to Napoleon's supposed intention to march across Mesopotamia to India.<sup>20</sup> But in subsequent decades a combination of technological inventions and diplomatic circumstances stimulated more serious British interest in the overland route. In the 1830s, Palmerston feared that France might benefit, and that Britain's

communications with India might suffer, if Mehemet Ali continued to control both Egypt and Syria. At the same time, Chesney called the country's attention to the possible utility of steam boats on the Euphrates. In 1836, therefore, the British government financed an expedition to investigate the possibility of navigating the great river from its source in Syria to its outlet on the Persian Gulf.<sup>21</sup> By the 1850s, railways had captured the popular imagination. During this period, Russian advances in Persia appeared to threaten Britain's Middle Eastern communications. Andrew's scheme for a Euphrates valley railway from the Mediterranean to the Gulf therefore evoked public sympathy and aroused official interest.<sup>22</sup> Support for the scheme increased after the 1857 Indian mutiny had revealed the deficiencies in Anglo-Indian communications. It intensified after 1869 when, despite British opposition, de Lesseps opened the Suez Canal and thus threatened to place France in control of a maritime route to India. As a result, in 1871, a select Parliamentary committee was asked to investigate the possible value to Britain of a Euphrates valley railway.<sup>23</sup> Finally, the 1875 Eastern Crisis appeared to emphasise Britain's need for this alternative. In order to prevent a possible Russian sweep upon Mesopotamia and the Gulf, Parliament was again asked to consider, and the public were again asked to support, various railways designed to traverse the overland route between the Mediterranean and the Gulf.<sup>24</sup>

None of the overland schemes materialised in the nineteenth century. Chesney's expedition foundered in a storm and was finally abandoned in 1842. Neither Andrew nor his various successors obtained sufficient public funds or sustained official support for a Euphrates valley railway. In any case, Britain had no need of the overland route. In 1840, Palmerston, by a masterly settlement, simultaneously confined Mehemet Ali to Egypt and deprived Russia of some advantage at the Dardanelles. In 1878, Disraeli claimed to have been equally successful: the acquisition of Cyprus safeguarded Britain's position in the eastern Mediterranean and secured a new staging post on the route to India. Furthermore Gladstone, by reluctantly occupying Egypt in 1882, had reinforced Britain's control over the Suez Canal. Nevertheless, the various British reactions to the successive threats to the Mesopotamian route proved significant. They indicated that even if Britain itself did not need to use the Mesopotamian route, it would not allow any other European power to control it.

This attitude also dominated Britain's reaction to the later German scheme to construct a railway from the Bosphorous to the Gulf. In 1887, Sir William White, Britain's ambassador at Constantinople, reiterated that the government should adopt "a friendly but reserved" attitude towards the scheme.<sup>25</sup> His advice did not, however, allay official fears that the line might threaten Britain's communications with India. Indeed, the German project continued to progress. In 1888, the Deutsche Bank appeared to have won the confidence of the Porte, and in 1901 the Anatolian Railway Company obtained a provisional concession for the Baghdad Railway (as the line was popularly known). The subsequent Anglo-German *pourparlers* concerning this project in 1901 and 1902 were desultory and indecisive.<sup>26</sup> Curzon, however, had already indicated the tone of future British policy. In 1899, he concluded a "bond" with Mubarak, the sheikh of Kuwait. Mubarak received Rs 15,000; in return he agreed not to cede any Kuwaiti territory (particularly for a railway terminus) and also not to receive the representatives of any foreign state without the consent of the British Resident at his court. Curzon himself feared a Russian, as much as a German, line to the Gulf.<sup>27</sup> His action demonstrated Britain's continued fear of foreign control over the overland Mesopotamian route to India. The subject soon assumed greater importance. In 1903, the German financiers obtained a final Baghdad Railway concession from the Porte. Meanwhile, the Foreign Office had encouraged the formation of a British financial syndicate interested in the railway. The Germans, represented by Gwinner<sup>28</sup> and the Deutsche Bank, sought the City's financial support for the scheme. The British, represented by Cassel,<sup>29</sup> Dawkins<sup>30</sup> and Revelstoke,<sup>31</sup> aspired in their turn to secure a measure of British control over the railway. Both sides were supported (and at times hindered) by their respective governments. Another diplomatic struggle for the overland route was about to commence.

The apparent unity of purpose in Britain's Mesopotamian policy during the nineteenth century is deceptive. The demands of commercial expansion were no less insistent than those of Indian security. The relative importance of "political" and "commercial" motives in British policy during the era of the "New Imperialism" is debatable;<sup>32</sup> but the existence of both factors is undeniable. The defence of the route to India was, in the last analysis, an economic as well as a strategic requirement. Moreover, once the British government had acknowledged its strategic

interest on the littoral of Asia and Africa, it could not subsequently ignore Britain's commercial position in the interior of those continents. The achievements of British merchants and the growth of foreign competition demanded an official response. Specifically, the de Bunsen Committee stressed Britain's commercial stake, as well as strategic interest, in Mesopotamia. Vasco da Gama's rounding of the Cape in 1497 had heralded the decline of the Persian Gulf as a major trade artery between East and West.<sup>33</sup> Centuries later, the construction of the Suez Canal confirmed the ascendancy of the Egyptian route. But in the early twentieth century, Mesopotamia was thought to possess limitless commercial potential: the region therefore promised to become an important trading area in its own right. Hitherto, neglect had prevented the utilisation of Mesopotamia's vast agricultural resources, and ignorance had precluded the exploitation of the enormous petroleum reserves. Both failures, it was believed, would soon be rectified. Sensible conservation of the spring floods of the Tigris and Euphrates would improve the grain, rice, cotton and date crops. The remains of ancient irrigation canals indicated, and the wonders of modern engineering promised, that the quality and quantity of those crops could be vastly increased. Similarly, the sustained investment of European capital would speedily expand the amount of Mesopotamia's petroleum production. By 1903, plans for the development of irrigation and mining works in Mesopotamia were being publicised in England and Germany.<sup>34</sup> Britain's subsequent Mesopotamian policy owed much to the belief that "the present poverty-stricken condition of the land is due not to the niggardliness of nature, but to the destructive folly of man."<sup>35</sup>

The value of the existing trade, no less than the hope of future exploitation, intensified Britain's interest in Mesopotamia. By 1903, Britain had ceased to dominate the overall Turkish market, just as its influence had also waned at the Ottoman court. German merchants had increased their share of Turkish trade.<sup>36</sup> French financiers controlled the majority of Turkish investment.<sup>37</sup> The situation in Mesopotamia, however, was markedly different. Firstly, Britain controlled the carrying trade to the area. Between 1900 and 1902, ships totalling 478,000 tons called at Basra; and of these, 453,000 tons flew the British flag.<sup>38</sup> Secondly, the British Empire was the region's largest trading partner. India was second only to Persia as an importer of Mesopotamian dates, hides and wool. The United Kingdom supplied sixty-five percent of the

Mesopotamian market, with goods valued in 1903 at £2½ millions per year.<sup>39</sup> The vast majority of this trade consisted of cloth, which was exported from Manchester.<sup>40</sup> Finally, British merchants also controlled a significant portion of the carrying trade within Mesopotamia itself. The Euphrates and Tigris Steam Navigation Company had been established in 1859 by one of Chesney's lieutenants, H. B. Lynch.<sup>41</sup> Under the control of his nephew, H. F. B. Lynch,<sup>42</sup> it remained a family and a British concern. In 1903, the Porte permitted the company to run only two steamers in Mesopotamia, each of which was capable of carrying 400 tons of cargo in winter and 280 tons in summer. The Lynch service was not a monopoly: the company faced competition from both native sailing craft and, more particularly, from the Oman Steamship Company, sponsored by the Turkish government. Nevertheless, and despite its high tariffs,<sup>43</sup> the Lynch company had captured the major part of cargo traffic on the Euphrates.

Britain's commercial predominance was complemented and paralleled by its unique political privileges in Mesopotamia. Lynch's position itself testified to this combination of commercial achievement and political pressure. The vizierial letter of 1861 which permitted the company to run two steamers on the Euphrates was based on earlier *firman*s of 1834 and 1841, which had conferred these privileges on British government vessels.<sup>44</sup> Lynch's rights were subsequently contested. Thus in 1883 the Porte attempted to rescind his warrant to fly the British flag in Turkish waters.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the Lynch company had itself tampered with these rights by unilaterally transferring to the river Tigris the privileges originally applied to the Euphrates.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, the British government reiterated its determination to retain this outward sign of British prestige. Moreover, Britain's local representatives themselves built upon the foundations which British merchants had secured. The East India Company had established its first representative at Basra in 1764, and had opened a native agency in Baghdad in 1783.<sup>47</sup> By 1903, both the prestige and the duties of the latter post had increased. The consul general at Baghdad styled himself the British "resident" in Turkish Arabia, and lived in the most imposing building in the town.<sup>48</sup> He also maintained his own steamer (the *Comet*) on the Tigris, and was protected by his personal sepoy detachment. This unit had, in 1800, been established merely as an "honorary guard". By 1904, it had grown to a mobile force of over forty cavalry and infantry.<sup>49</sup>



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