

The British Economic Interests in Mesopotamia 1914-1918: A Study of Securing Oil, Trade, and Commercial Path

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How to cite this paper: Mahmada, A. M. Q. (2024). The British Economic Interests in Mesopotamia 1914-1918: A Study of Securing Oil, Trade, and Commercial Path. *Modern Economy*, 15, 274-295.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/me.2024.153014>

Received: January 16, 2024

Accepted: March 17, 2024

Published: March 20, 2024

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between British economic interests, oil exploration, commerce, and imperial policy in Mesopotamia from 1914 to 1918. It focuses on the reasons behind British involvement, strategies used to achieve economic dominance, and the repercussions on the region's economic and political landscape. The study uses a historical analysis approach, examining key events like the Mesopotamia campaign, the Gallipoli campaign, and the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The British government's interest in Mesopotamia was primarily driven by economic considerations, particularly the discovery of oil in Abadan. The British government sought to secure commercial areas like the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea to protect its oil interests and maintain control over trade routes. The paper also highlights the contentious debates between Great Britain and France regarding the division of the Near East for economic ambitions, culminating in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. The paper underscores the complex relationship between British economic interests, imperial strategy, and the emergence of the oil industry in Mesopotamia, emphasizing its enduring impact on the region's economic, social, and political development.

Keywords

Ottoman Empire, Mesopotamia, British, Great War, Oil Reserves, Trade, Commercial Path

1. Introduction

In the early 20th century, Mesopotamia's strategic importance grew due to the discovery of oil in Abadan. British interest in Mesopotamia led to its considera-

tion as a vital area for political and economic activities. In 1892, Lord Curzon, a British Parliament Member (1886-1898), emphasized the importance of Mesopotamia, stating that Baghdad should fall within British sovereignty. The British military began planning to control southern Mesopotamia before the Great War (Abdullah, 1918).

Britain's main concern was maintaining commercial interests in the Suez Canal, Dardanelles, Alexandretta, the Persian Gulf, and Mesopotamia. Concerns were raised about the Ottoman participation in the war, driven by Russian aggression against British Persian interests. Admiral Sir Winston Churchill convinced the British government to buy shares in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Alexandrite's presence in Mesopotamia ensured the safety of Britain's oil interests in the Persian Gulf and its land route to the Mediterranean (Basarin, n.d.).

The British primary focus was securing the area located within a triangle line of commercial interests, the line can be drawn from the Persian Gulf to the north at Mosul Vilayet to the west at the Mediterranean Sea. To obtain this strategy, the British Ambassador to Constantinople, Sir Louis Mallet (1913-1914) argued in favour of cooperation with an Arab movement that would help Britain control Mesopotamia, known for its enormous grain-producing areas and lucrative oil fields, without any trouble at all. The concerns encompassed potential disruptions to the supply of oil from Persia, safeguarding British interests in the Persian Gulf, and the potential occurrence of an uprising in India (Title File 3136/1914 Pt, 1914).

The Mesopotamia campaign and the Gallipoli campaign witnessed some terrible moments of British military action. The British had suffered some difficulties in his campaign, an example of which was the siege of Kut Al-Amara in 1915. The 6th Division was under siege by Ottoman forces from December 1915 to April 1916, and it ultimately gave up. Almost 13,000 British and Indian forces were marched into prison and subjected to horrendous mistreatment and hunger. A third died because of illness, hunger, and brutal treatment (Kappelmann, 2014).

During the Great War, some controversial debate happened between the two major powers in the region, Great Britain and its ally France, regarding the division of the Near East for their future economic ambitions. The most well-known agreement that solved the misunderstanding between them was the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, between Mark Sykes, the British member of the de Bunsen Committee, and the French ambassador in Beirut, George Picot (Yakoubi, 2022).

By analysing the interactions between oil exploration, commerce, and imperial policy in Mesopotamia from 1914 to 1918, this study seeks to understand the varied character of British economic interests there. We want to shed light on the reasons for British participation, the tactics used to attain economic dominance, and the effects of their activities on the economic and political environment of the area by examining primary sources, historical documents, and academic research.

To appreciate the larger context of colonialism, imperialism, and resource ex-

plotation during this key time, it is essential to comprehend the complex link between British economic interests, imperial strategy, and the establishment of the oil industry in Mesopotamia. We may learn more about the complexity of economic imperialism and its long-lasting effects on the economic, social, and political development of the area by looking at this historical case study.

This research focuses on the diplomatic and military actions of the British Empire in Mesopotamia, before and during the Great War. The structure includes two main sections: The British Pre-War Commercial Diplomacy in Mesopotamia, which examines the emergence of oil in the Near East and British ambitions in Mesopotamia. Section two focuses on the British War Strategies in Mesopotamia during the Great War 1914-1918, which covers British military objectives, the outbreak of the war, the Mesopotamia Campaign, and the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The conclusion summarizes the research findings and proposes future research directions in understanding this significant period of colonial history.

2. The British Pre-War Commercial Diplomacy in Mesopotamia

In the 1870s and 1890s, Britain faced competition from France and Germany due to their fleet plans and ambition for “a place in the sun”. The Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902 won naval security in the Indian Ocean and Pacific, and the British attempted to restrict imperial disputes over colonies through treaties (Harvie & Matthew, 2000). Britain’s strategic position in the Near East allowed them to expand their dominance in Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf, focusing on protecting pathways leading to India (Zinkin & Zinkin, 1964). The importance of India can be seen in George Curzon’s statement to Lord Balfour in 1901, which stated that, “As long as we rule India, we are the greatest power in the world... if we lose it, we shall drop straight away to a third-rate power” (Le-Donne, 1997).

Russian expansionism was a primary concern, linked to the “Great Game” in Asia. Inter-imperial conflicts, such as the Boer War and Russo-Japanese War, prompted Britain to tighten its grip on the Gulf. After the reconciliation of Russia and Britain, Germany became the new focus of Britain in the Near East (Cohen, 2008). The Anglo-Russian agreement of 1907 granted Russia large portions of northern Iran and the British more strategically important parts of Iran (the Southeast) (Allday, 2014).

The economic revolution in Persia began in 1908 when oil was found at Masjid-i-Suleiman in Persia (Woodhouse, 2009). Winston Churchill recognized the importance of this discovery and convinced the British government to switch the Royal Navy from coal to oil (Woodhouse, 2009). The Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) started building an oil refinery in Abadan in 1909, producing a range of heavy oil products important to British industries and commercial operators (Sykes, 1921).

The British Empire had important commercial investments in the areas of the

Suez Canal, Dardanelles, Alexandretta, the Persian Gulf, and Mesopotamia because of their strategic geographic positions and economic importance. The Suez Canal served as a crucial waterway linking the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea, enabling quicker and more effective commerce between Europe and Asia. British control of the canal secured their supremacy in trade routes to and from India, a valuable colony, as well as other regions of the British Empire in Asia and Africa (Piquet, 2004). The Dardanelles, geographically located between Europe and Asia, functioned as a crucial route linking the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara and, subsequently, to the Black Sea. Dominance over the Dardanelles was essential for ensuring entry to Black Sea trade routes and asserting control over the Ottoman Empire. (24/1 1915) Alexandretta, situated in present-day Turkey, served as a significant port city on the Mediterranean coast, giving access to profitable trade prospects in the Eastern Mediterranean area (Monroe, 1981). The Persian Gulf area, abundant in oil deposits, had significant economic importance for the British Empire (Busch, 1967).

a) *The Emergence of Oil in the Near East:*

Britain's coal industry, generating over 200 million tons annually, was a significant export for over a century, but petroleum products and technology revolutionized daily life for over a century (Wereley, 2018). Besides, British and German interest in Middle Eastern railways and the knowledge of Mesopotamian oil date back to the 1830s (Ediger & Bowlus, 2020). British interest in Ottoman oil was focused largely on Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf (Kent, 2005). Britain desired access to Ottoman oil resources but did not press the subject aggressively enough. The Ottoman Empire's Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra Provinces were rich in oil and gas fields (Maunsell, 1897). Britain's attempt to secure Ottoman oil concessions in the Hamidian Era during the later years of Sultan Abdul-Hamid II's rule attempted to limit German activity in the Ottoman Empire as an international adversary. Anglo-German competition for the region's oil resources can be observed dating back to the early 1900s. Whereas, Britain attempted to exert influence in the Ottoman Empire's Kuwait and Basra provinces. The United Kingdom had built solid connections with Kuwait's sheikh. It is possible that British political authorities desired control of the Persian Gulf region in order to safeguard Indian commerce and play a major role in managing the oil supplies of what is now known as Iraq (Yavuz, 2018).

Furthermore, in the early 20th century, the British official mentality put a high priority on the Ottoman province of Mosul. Mosul has long been a major commercial city in the Middle East. Mesopotamia, which included the Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul, was a region on one of the shortest routes to India. As a result, Mesopotamia and her three provinces were embroiled in a complicated web of British interests because they were close to the most significant area of the British Empire, and the discovery of oil in this region gave it high value (Risley, 2010).

b) *The British Ambitions in Mesopotamia:*

Britain began trading with Mesopotamia in the first half of the seventeenth

century. Significant changes in British penetration occurred throughout the nineteenth century in Mesopotamia. After Napoleon's Egyptian War, Britain attempted to find a new route to India that was shorter than the one around the Cape of Good Hope or even the land route through Egypt (Amin, 1957).

The British strategic interest in Mesopotamia was a result of her influence over India during the 19th century. When Olney talks about British India in the 1800s, he even says that Ottoman Mesopotamia should be part of the concept (Onley, 2007). Blyth describes how British Indian authorities viewed Mesopotamia as a potential Indian colony with "as many as twenty-five million Indian settlers" (Blyth, 2003). Headrick agrees by stating, "Imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century was predominantly a matter of British tentacles reaching out from India, Burma, China, Malaya, Afghanistan, Mesopotamia, and the Red Sea." (Headrick, 1981)

In the early 20th century, Mesopotamia was seen as a region with limitless commercial potential, and it was projected to become a large trading area in its own right. Plans for water and mining projects in Mesopotamia have been made public in the United Kingdom and Germany. It was both an economic and a strategic need to defend the path to India. The idea that "the present poverty-stricken condition of the land is due not to the niggardliness of nature but to the destructive folly of man" would have a significant impact on Britain's future Mesopotamian policy is false (Bell, 1914).

During the 19th century, the British government found it necessary to safeguard its geopolitical, economic, and diplomatic interests in Mesopotamia (Cohen, 1976). Although France had some cultural and religious activities in Mesopotamia, in the last phase of the nineteenth century, Great Britain appeared as the only European power with important interests in Mesopotamia. However, other European states had limited trade interests in Mesopotamia. Besides, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Britain had clearly established a significant political and commercial presence in Mesopotamia. Russia became particularly interested in Persia, and it collaborated with France to establish a presence in the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, Germany had political and economic ambitions in the Ottoman Empire in the last decade of the nineteenth century (Amin, 1957).

After India, Mesopotamia became the second primary trade focus for Britain after the expansion of trade. In other words, after the growth of British commerce, Mosul and Basra, both tactically and commercially, became the gateways for British trade (Speiser & Ireland, 1939). Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Mesopotamia in general and Mosul in particular remained major strategic and economic hubs. To give you a sense of the scope of this trade channel, from 1912 to 1914, Britain controlled over 70% of Mesopotamian commerce (Risley, 2010).

Lord Curzon put a lot of effort into defending Britain's interests in Mesopotamia. He said that "Baghdad... must be included in the zone of indisputable British Supremacy" (Curzon, 1892). Britain thought that Russia's position in Persia was very dangerous, so they came up with a lot of ways to fight back against it

(Speiser & Ireland, 1939). Moreover, the Berlin-Baghdad Railway Project between the Ottoman Empire and Germany caused new political and economic rivalry with Britain (Davis, 1994). Jastrow, Morris. *The War and the Bagdad Railway*, emphasis that “the railway would also prove to be a short cut to India and the farther East, and as such, the undertaking was on a plane of importance with the cutting of the Suez Canal” (Jastrow, 1918).

The British Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Lord Lansdowne, proposed that the Berlin-Baghdad Railway concession put British shipping companies at risk, as they had a monopoly on the area between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea (Earle, 1923). Britain’s concerns about the railway’s impact on their economic and trading interests in the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf led to changes in their minds about the railway. The British agreed to let Germany build a railroad from Baghdad to Basra, but any lines from Basra to the Persian Gulf will not be accepted (Davis, 1994). Furthermore, British officials were worried that a pro-German strategy in Mesopotamia would alienate the French and potentially prompt Russia to withdraw from the entente. They also feared antagonizing the Ottoman Empire, whose Sultan still claims religious authority and could endanger the allegiance of India’s Muslim population (Cohen, 1976).

3. British War Strategies in Mesopotamia during the Great War 1914-1918

a) *The British War Aims in Mesopotamia:*

In the first decades of the 19th century, the possibility of a land connection between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates was studied. The probable demise of the Ottoman Empire, which resulted in the conquest of Constantinople by the Russians and the British purchase of Lower Mesopotamia, altered the situation. The United Kingdom was entitled to compensation for its participation in the conflict. As a counterbalance to Russia’s rising dominance in that crucial area, it was important to restore Mesopotamia to its previous prosperity and connect it to the Mediterranean. The Admiralty had an additional and crucial stake in the region’s oil supplies. Russia would have access to Black Sea supplies at Constantinople; thus, Britain must have access to Mesopotamian resources at Alexandretta (CAB 24/1, 1915b).

Oil corporations pressured the Royal Navy to switch from coal to oil before the turn of the century. Oil fired was accepted due to its benefits, such as increased speed, range, and maneuverability. However, most believed it wasn’t in their best interest due to the lack of oil reserves in the British Empire. In 1911, Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, believed oil was the most suitable fuel for the fleet and convinced the British government to purchase shares in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (Basarin, n.d.).

In addition to that, Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, emphasized the importance of maintaining control over Alexandretta in the war, as it would allow Britain to arrive in Mesopotamia sooner and reduce the peacetime garrison size. This would also put a Russian offensive at risk, as Russia would

control Constantinople and France would dominate Syria. Additionally, he emphasized that Russians might pose a threat to Britain's control of Mesopotamia due to its potential for agricultural production and a solution to India's overpopulation. The region's rugged terrain and potential richness could be easily defensible, and a buffer from a Turkish or Armenian state would be ideal. However, a boundary with Russia was better than Franco-Russian dominance of the land route from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf (CAB 24/1, 1915a).

First Sea Lord Fisher (1904-1910) proposed a plan to attack the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, including raids on Alexandretta due to its oil resources and rail link to Mesopotamia, using antiquated British battleships built before the Dreadnoughts (Gilbert, 1972). Furthermore, the British Admiralty defended Alexandretta due to its vast natural harbor and strategic importance for their Mesopotamian and Persian oilfields. Admiral Sir Henry Jackson suggested establishing a Mediterranean port on the Baghdad Railway, as the Gulf of Alexandretta was a crucial global transportation hub. Beirut was considered, but only if the railway was extended (CAB 24/1, 1915c).

The naval historian Julian Corbett sent a letter to the First Lord of Admiralty John Fisher (1905-1911). There are two versions of this letter in Corbett's records, and it's unclear which one he wrote to Fisher. In both, he predicts that the Mediterranean will rise to prominence once again due to the approaching collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent Russian conquest of Constantinople. In both, he describes the chance to secure oil supplies in the Near East as "a gift of God". Furthermore, Haifa was chosen over Alexandretta as the Mediterranean exit point for the British oil pipeline. The Director of Military Operations (DMO), General Sir Charles Calwell, convinced the de Bunsen Committee, formed in April 1915 to evaluate British war objectives in the Near East, that the path from Alexandretta to Mesopotamia would have to pass via French territory. In some ways, Haifa was almost as excellent, and a railway via British territory might connect it to Mesopotamia. The only problem was that this railway would be unprofitable (NMM, 1915).

b) *The Outbreak of the Great War, 1914:*

During the Nineteenth Century, Britain remained a steadfast protector of the Ottoman Empire, ignoring its authoritarianism and corruption. Britain maintained strong diplomatic and commercial ties with the Empire, often providing preferential access to Sultans and decision-makers. Successive Sultans saw Britain's friendship as military assistance (Macfie, 1983). In the era before the outbreak of the Great War, unlike Britain, the Germans were successful in taking the Ottomans to their side, building up a strong relationship that could be helpful during the war (Gooch & Temperley, 1932). The Manchester Guardian Newspaper issued an article on November 2, 1914, addressed to the British that indicated that,

At the beginning of the war the British Government gave definite assurances that if Turkey remained neutral her independence and integrity would be respected during the war and in the terms of peace. In this France and Rus-

sia concurred. The British government have since then endeavored with the greatest patience and forbearance to preserve friendly relations, in spite of increasing beaches of neutrality on the part of the Turkish Government at Constantinople in the case of the German vessels in the Straits (*The Manchester Guardian*, 1914).

Despite this, Britain established deals with Germany and the Ottoman Empire in 1914, just before the war, in an effort to stop German encroachment on British interests and to boost the Ottoman economy (NA, 1915). During the early months of the war, Great Britain attempted, via a series of ambassadorial meetings and letters, as well as pledges to guarantee the territory of the Ottoman Empire, to keep the Ottoman Empire neutral. However, these attempts were unsuccessful.

Furthermore, the primary focus of Britain was to maintain its commercial interests in the Suez Canal, Dardanelles, Alexandretta, the Persian Gulf, and Mesopotamia. Britain was worried about the Ottoman participation in the war because this would put her on the enemy side of the conflict. The intimation of Britain was motivated by Russian aggression against British interests in Persia; therefore (Fieldhouse, 2008).

In mid-August 1914, Sir Edward Grey the British Foreign Secretary (1905-1916) told the Russian foreign minister Sergei Dmitrievich Sazonov (1860-1927) that St. Petersburg could have compensation from Turkey after the war; on November 1, he offered the prospect of a free hand to dismember Turkey; and eleven days later, he specifically offered Russia Constantinople and the Straits to dissuade her from attacking Persia (Murray, Lacey, & Lacey 2009).

Throughout history, European nations have formed alliances for mutual defense, leading to conflicts. Prior to the Great War, alliances included Russia and Serbia, Germany and Austria-Hungary, France and Russia, Britain and France, and Japan and Britain. The murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand sparked the conflict in 1914 (Mullen, 2023). In other words, Austria-Hungary and Serbia went to war on July 28, 1914. Four days later, Austria's partner, Germany, declared war on Russia, Serbia's ally, on August 1. Germany then invaded neutral Belgium on August 3, declaring war on France (an ally of Russia). Because of this, on August 4, France's ally Great Britain declared war on Germany. The Ottoman Empire declared war on Russia in October of the same year. This can be clearly seen in the Herr Von Jagow (the Secretary of State of the German Foreign Office, 1913-1916) Telegraph sent to Constantinople from Berlin on August 4, 1914: "England will possibly declare war on us today or tomorrow. In order to prevent the Porte from breaking away from us at the last moment under the impression of the England action, the declaration of war by Turkey on Russia, if possible, today, appears of the greatest importance." (Moberly, 1923)

c) The Mesopotamia Campaign and the Siege of Kut.

The British campaign within the Ottoman Empire during World War I was an important aspect of their greater Middle Eastern strategy, seeking to weaken Ottoman forces, seize crucial regions, and eventually undermine Ottoman power in the region. To challenge Ottoman control in the Middle East, the British launched a diverse and significant campaign within the Ottoman Empire. The Allies launched the Gallipoli Campaign in 1915 in an attempt to capture control of the Dardanelles and Constantinople. The campaign was greeted with stiff Ottoman opposition and resulted in a high number of Allied casualties. Additionally, the British Sinai Palestine Campaign made an effort to undermine Ottoman rule from within with the aid of Arabs under T.E. Lawrence's leadership. The Mesopotamia Campaign was yet another front in the war against the Ottoman Empire. The goal is to conquer Mesopotamia in order to protect their interests in oil riches and establish control over vital trade routes (Basarin, n.d.).

The War Office in London and the Indian Army in India shared responsibilities for military information and strategy in Asia in 1914. India was in charge of Persia, the Persian Gulf, and Basra. The rest of Mesopotamia was located within the War Office area, although it received little attention (Wedgwood, 1917). As it appeared more apparent that the Ottoman Empire would join the war on the side of Germany, consideration was given to carrying out operations against the empire. The General Staff asserted that Russia would be able to repel any attack by the Ottoman Empire. An indirect threat to Egypt and the Suez Canal posed by an Arab uprising against Britain was one of the primary concerns in Mesopotamia. Other concerns included a disruption to the Persian oil supplies, the protection of the existing British position in the Persian Gulf, and the possibility that a Jihad would lead to a rise on India's Northwest Frontier or possibly even within India itself (Moberly, 1923).

Britain dispatched soldiers to the Ottoman province of Mesopotamia to safeguard its oil reserves when Turkey joined the war on the central power's side against the allies. If the British were to keep Mesopotamia, they would need to build a railroad to connect it to the Mediterranean, and Alexandretta was one of the most promising possible Mediterranean terminals. In a telegram sent to the Indian government on August 13, 1914, the British political resident in the Persian Gulf explained the rising anti-British and anti-Russian sentiment that had prompted this move. In addition, Sir Arnold Wilson, India's Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, wrote to the Indian government on August 17 to inform them that "the oil company's settlement at Abadan was nervous of being attacked by the Turks and had asked for the protection of a British warship. ...The Turks had requisitioned the coal at Basra belonging to Euphrates and Tigris Navigation Company (Merssr. Lynch), whereby mail steams were prevented from running." The British Ambassador in Constantinople, Louis Mallet, sent a telegraph to Sir Edward Grey on August 27th, 1914, titled "Events leading to the Rupture of Relations with Turkey" (Moberly, 1923).

Sir Louis Mallet, the Ambassador to Constantinople, argued in favor of cooperation with an Arab movement led by friendly chiefs such as Ibn Saud and the

Sheikh of Kuwait. The capture of Baghdad should be the initial move and would be much better than attacking the Dardanelles. Admiral Sir Edmond Slade, the Admiralty's oil expert, agreed, claiming that Ibn Saud and the Sheikh of Kuwait were very pro-British and would revolt against the Ottomans at the merest suggestion of British support. This would give Britain control over Mesopotamia, which is known for its enormous grain-producing areas as well as its immensely lucrative oilfields, without any trouble at all ([Title File 3136/1914 Pt, 1914](#)).

Moreover, both the Ottoman Empire and Germany would suffer a significant setback in the event that Mesopotamia were to be lost. Germany has significant interests in the region and has been attempting to displace Britain and India there in order to further those interests. Barrow, who was the Military Secretary to the India Office, was also in favor of cooperating with the Arabs. He believed that this would eliminate any possibility of a jihad and would, as a result, secure India, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. He believed that oil might be used as a pretext for this operation, which is a fascinating inversion of the conventional wisdom that everything in the Near East revolves around oil. In September 26, he drafted a memo in which he argued in favor of a landing: "at Mohammerah or at Abadan Island, ostensibly to protect the oil' installation, but in reality, to notify the Turks that we mean business and to the Arabs that we were ready to support them" ([Moberly, 1923](#)).

Furthermore, an Indian army division took control of the port of Basra in November 1914. General Sir John Nixon, the British commander, advanced further into Mesopotamia after receiving reinforcements in the form of a second division. Britain hoped that a successful war here would encourage the Arabs to unite against the Turks. One group of soldiers crossed the Euphrates River and headed towards Nasiriya. Major General Charles Townshend led the other, the 6th (Poona) Indian Division, which traveled 100 miles (160 kilometers) down the Tigris to capture the city of Amara on June 4, 1915.

Townshend was tasked with continuing from Amara to the provincial capital of Baghdad, located some 250 miles (400 kilometers) away. On September 28th, 1915, his division marched into Kut after inflicting severe casualties on the Turkish defenses. It was just 25 miles (40 kilometers) from Baghdad by mid-November. It was clear that such an operation required more manpower than a single division could provide. Illness and a lack of artillery, ammunition, and supplies had already significantly reduced Townshend's army. Unfortunately, even if he had managed to take Baghdad, he would not have had the resources to keep it. At Ctesiphon, the Turks halted Townshend from November 21 to 23, 1915. After suffering severe losses, he returned to Kut.

On November 24, 1915, Lieutenant Henry Gallup from the Royal Field Artillery explained the situation by stating that,

After several hours' fighting the enemy's chief position was carried and occupied by our troops, and we then turned our attention to their left flank, where our people were not getting on well at all and were in fact retiring. It

was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon that the Turks counter-attacked so strongly. We found afterwards that they had been re-enforced with about 5000 fresh troops. The 82nd Battery and ourselves were sent forward to try and stop it. I think we managed to do so, for a time anyhow, but it was a very warm time. They then attacked from another quarter and drove our infantry in, and we had to limber up and get out as quickly as we could under a most beastly hot fire ([National War Museum, n.d.](#)).

The 6th Division was under siege by Ottoman forces from December 1915 to April 1916, and it ultimately gave up. Townshend, bowing to Nixon's demands, limited his withdrawal south of Kut on the Tigris ([George, 1917](#)). The Turks encircled Townshend's camp of 10,000 soldiers and 3500 camp followers on December 7. They continued their assaults on the Kut defenses throughout the course of the next several weeks. In addition to the consistent bombardment, this continued to take a toll on the garrison, which barely had enough food and supplies to survive for two and a half months at this point. The defenders eventually died of starvation ([The British National Archives, 1915](#)).

Besides that, starvation and illness had spread across the Kut garrison by the end of April 1916. Townshend was tasked with opening discussions with the Turks since no relief was in sight. Simultaneously, the garrison began destroying its supply of ammunition and weapons. Since they were running out of food, the remaining members of the division destroyed all of their heavy weapons and explosives on April 29th, 1916 ([Abd al-Razzaq al-Hassani, 1935](#)). When Townshend finally gave up, almost 13,000 British and Indian forces were marched into prison and subjected to horrendous mistreatment and hunger. A third would die as a result of illness, hunger, and brutal treatment. One of the British Empire's worst setbacks of the war occurred during this chapter. The British spent the rest of the year reassembling their troops after the Tigris Corps withdrew to Basra ([Kappelmann, 2014](#)).

The British chaplain, Harold Spooner, was with the garrison in the town of Kut. From December 1915 to April 1916, the British and Indian troops were sieged by the Turkish forces for about (147) days. During that time, Spooner took a number of photos and wrote diaries. He explains the situation in his dairy, written on February 4, 1916, which was archived in the British national archive under the name *Diary from the Siege of Kut*, and states that,

The weather was 'bitterly cold' and Turkish guns were a constant menace. Moreover, the efforts of Anglo-Indian forces under General Aylmer to break the siege were failing. 'We were expecting news of our relief,' ... "Please transmit the following message from me to General Townshend. The bravery & endurance with which you and the troops under your command have resisted the attacks of the enemy have excited the admiration of all and I am confident resistance will be maintained until help reaches you in the near future. India thinks of you and your troops all the time." ([The British National Archives, 1916a](#))

Many Britons were taken aback when Townshend's force capitulated in late April 1916; up until that point, the Mesopotamia war had seemed like a distant

and ultimately victorious undertaking. Despite Kitchener's quick response to preserve the honor of the British and Indian men at Kut-al-Amara, the truth remained that the Allies had suffered yet another loss at the hands of the hated Turks after the humiliating withdrawal at Gallipoli. While a parliamentary commission of investigation examining operations in Mesopotamia was established in London as a result of the fall of Kut-al-Amara, even more dreadful consequences were taking place on the ground. During the march to Turkish prisoner-of-war camps in Anatolia, captured British and Indian troops were subjected to cruel treatment. Out of the 11,800 soldiers taken from Kut-al-Amara on May 6, 1916, 4250 did not make it to the prison camps where they were held ([The British National Archives, 1916b](#)).

Despite the heavy losses that British and Indian troops suffered in this siege, it has to be said that the House of Commons's attitude toward this defeat was in a positive manner toward the efforts that their troops had given in the campaign so far. Following the fall of Kut on May 4, 1916, Lord Kitchener stated in a speech before the House of Commons that he understood the significance of the position that General Townshend and his troops were holding at Kut-el-Amara. When it came to defending that area, his preparations were so thorough and effective that the adversary had little chance of succeeding. There were around 2970 British soldiers and about 6000 Indian soldiers and their followers stationed there. General Townshend's last telegram from Kut stated as follows: "We are pleased to know that we have done our duty and recognize that our situation is one of the fortunes of war." "We thank you and General Goringe, and all ranks of the Tigris force for the great efforts you have made to save us." ([The British National Archives, 1916a](#))

In spite of the crushing defeat at Kut-al-Amara, the British position in Mesopotamia was by no means in a hopeless state. In December of 1916, the British and Indian troops, totaling 150,000 men, had strengthened their troop divisions and appointed General F. S. Maude as their new head. In February of 1917, the Ottomans' lines of communication with Baghdad were successfully severed by the British and Indian forces, and Kut-al-Amara was retaken on February 24 of the same year ([Moberly, 1923](#)). Furthermore, the Ottoman defense was able to leave the field before the trap shut, unlike the 6th Division ([Joffe, 2012](#)). These troops continued their advance north until they captured Baghdad on March 11, 1917. On his arrival, General Sir Stanley Maude gave a speech to the people of Baghdad. The declaration includes a mention of the King of Hedjaz and other Arab monarchs,

Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators. ... It is the wish not only of my King and his peoples, but it is also the wish of the great nations with whom he is in alliance. Therefore, the British Government cannot remain indifferent as to what takes place in your country now or in the future, for in duty to the interests of the British people and their Allies, the British Government cannot

risk that being done in Baghdad again which has been done by the Turks and Germans during the war (Hayman, Christy & Lilly, Ltd., 1917).

The way had been paved for an advance into northern Mesopotamia, which would eventually lead to Anatolia, the very center of the Ottoman Empire. When the war with Turkey was finally over on October 30th, 1918, British troops in Mesopotamia had advanced all the way up to the north and had taken control of the oil-rich area of Mosul on the 3rd of November. More than 31,000 officers and soldiers from the British and Indian forces had perished in action or through sickness during the four years of warfare in the area (The British National Archives, 1917).

With regards to the British advance towards Mosul, the occupation came after the Turks and an Allied representative signed the Armistice of Mudros on October 30, 1918, at which time the British armies were twelve miles away from the city of Mosul (Hussain, 1955). Hostilities were to cease under the terms of the armistice, and each of the warring parties was to remain in their positions occupied at the time of the signing of the armistice (Fathallah, 2002). However, a telegram from the British War Office to the British Commander-in-Chief on November 2, 1918, set out the terms of the armistice and expressly ordered him to continue to advance to occupy Mosul, according to articles seven and sixteen of the terms of the armistice (Wilson, 2023).

d) *The Local Attitude of the British Campaign:*

Before the outbreak of the Great War, Mesopotamian Arab political interests were independent within the Ottoman Empire. The Arabs had been waiting for this dream for a long time under the Ottoman rulers, but without any positive outcome from the Ottoman side. In contrast, the Arabs and Kurds also dreamed of their autonomy and suffered from the harsh Ottoman policy. Thus, when the British Campaign entered Basra vilayet on November 6, 1914, a number of Iraqi Arabs were in favour of supporting British troops against the Ottoman existence, such as the Basra merchants, who had a very good relationship and commercial ties to British and Indian merchants. While some others were religiously tied to the Ottomans and considered the British infidels (Yaphe, 2004).

According to Abdulla, the Arabic historian, who pointed out that the British plan in Mesopotamia was only to occupy the Basra Vilayet, but its forces' success in occupying Basra changed their plan and progress towards occupying Baghdad in accordance with policy considerations, in which they found the situation in Iran calming. The removal of the Ottomans from the military rally in Mesopotamia will affect the British occupiers in the future. Also, for the strengthening of Britain's status in India by making it difficult for the Ottomans to communicate with Afghanistan and inciting its border tribes with India to revolt against it (Abdullah al-Fayyad, 1963).

Moreover, Ali Al-Wardi stated that the British occupation used rumors and lies as a preponderant weapon among the inhabitants of cities and clans through their spies. The British spies were successful in persuading the Arabs (Mesopo-

tamia) that the Turks were defeated and that the victory was for the British troops. Those rumors and myths circulated that the power of the British, their wondrous sciences, their weapons, and their unlimited wealth would defeat the Turks, crush them, and liberate Arabs from them, and these rumors found popularity and acceptance among the inhabitants. This can clearly be seen, especially after they found the promises of liberation, progress, and prosperity that accompanied every step of the progress of the British occupation army, compared to the clash and hatred that existed between the Ottomans and the Arabs during the Great War (Al-Wardi, 2005).

e) *The Sykes-Picot Agreement and Sharing Out the Spoils of the Ottoman Empire*

The first official team to examine the British war effort in the Ottoman Empire was the de Bunsen Committee, which Sir Maurice de Bunsen led. The report, released on June 30, 1915, considered the goals of allies and potential future competitors, aiming to determine the objectives of the British war effort (NA, 1915).

Before the conflict, Britain aimed to maintain the Ottoman Empire's existence by claiming a portion of it. Six arguments included permanent recognition of Britain's position in the Persian Gulf, the removal of discrimination against British commerce, fulfilling pledges to Arab leaders and citizens, the development of industries like river navigation and irrigation systems, irrigation projects potentially attracting Indian immigration, and maintaining Britain's strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf with minimal defense spending.

The vilayets of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul were where the majority of British economic interests could be found in Turkish Asia. Promises made to the local populace and their leaders prevented Britain from returning the Basra vilayet to the Ottomans after the country had already chosen to acquire it. If another power took over Baghdad, it would be completely useless. Mosul was essential for establishing a secure mountainous border. Baghdad would serve to defend the oil reserves that are now located near the border with Iran. Any foreign force that managed to get its hands on the oil in Mosul would be doing damage to British interests. Irrigation systems relying on water from Mosul might restore Mesopotamia's former role as a source of food for Britain. It was planned for Russia to take Constantinople. If Greece were to join the war, it would be given the Smyrna vilayet (NA, 1915).

Admiral Jackson said at the second meeting of the Committee on April 13, 1915, that the Admiralty felt Britain should not take over more land than was necessary. Britain's control over the Baghdad and Basra vilayets was critical due to the importance of its oil. His idea prompted Slade to show up to the meeting two days later and talk about oil. De Bunsen opened the discussion by noting that Mesopotamia was home to significant oil reserves and that, due to Britain's obligations to APOC, it was crucial to understand what might be done to safeguard these interests. According to Slade, it was crucial to safeguard the Persian

Concession's interests. There was a lot of oil in Asian Turkey,

A strip of oil-bearing regions was known to run from the southern extremity of Arabia along the west coast of the Persian Gulf, through the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates, and so on to the northern coast of Asia Minor almost to its European end. There was also known to be a valuable oil district in Palestine to the south of Haifa... it would be sufficient, however, from our point of view if we secured the vilayet of Mosul, as that district contained some very rich oil-bearing lands connecting with the Persian oil fields, which it was essential we should control to prevent undue competition with the Anglo-Persian Concession. It would of course be necessary to connect the fields by a pipeline with the Mediterranean ...Haifa would do quite well as the terminus port.

Most of this oil, except for Palestine, was not found at the time but has since been located. De Bunsen concluded by saying that Slade's opinions on Britain's oil needs were almost in line with the committee's recommendations regarding the inclusion of the Mosul vilayet in the area that we would be seizing (NA, 1915).

Oil had played a significant role in Britain's military objectives. Britain had interests in Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf, as well as a desire to safeguard the road route to India. As a result, even if there had been no oil in Persia or Mesopotamia, it would have desired some sort of authority over the Basra Vilayet. Conquest, a dominion, or a zone of influence may have been involved in achieving this. The Committee concluded that in order to govern the Basra Vilayet, it was also required to control the Baghdad Vilayet. The obvious reason for Britain's involvement in the Mosul Vilayet was oil. Oil was no longer a major driver of British policy, and it is unclear how much influence the Committee's discussions had on the government; it is not addressed at all in Hankey's journal, and there are only a few casual allusions to it in his Overall Command (Hankey, 1961). On the other hand, the British government's initial efforts to define military objectives in the Near East led to the conclusion that one of the nation's interests in the region was oil.

Based on what is mentioned above, Great Britain and France struck an arrangement in May 1916, with Russian approval, to divide the majority of the Ottoman Empire into five regions. It was called in honour of the primary negotiators, Sir Mark Sykes, a member of the de Bunsen Committee, and Francois Georges Picot. Each country would have a zone under its direct control and a zone inside its sphere of influence that the Arabs would run. Palestine was to be governed by the international community. The territory under direct British administration comprised the vilayets of Basra and Baghdad. Due to the fact that Mosul was inside the French area of influence, historians assert that Sykes-Picot offered France the potential oil of Mesopotamia. Kent contends that this was due to Britain's lack of a defined oil strategy in 1916 (Kent, 1976).

While Mejcher mentions very little about Sykes-Picot, he argues that the trea-

ty granted Mosul to France in its entirety (Mejcher, 1976). Jones admits that Sykes-Picot granted France the oil of Mosul; this poses less of a difficulty for him since he does not think that the United Kingdom had a clear oil strategy during this time. He does note that Sykes-Picot declared that earlier British rights to oil in French zones would be honoured, but he disputes whether the Grand Vizier's letter of June 28, 1914, really granted the British oil exploration rights (Williams, 1983). Yergin sees it as a careless error that numerous British authorities challenged and then spent a lot of time and effort correcting (Yergin, 1991). According to David Fromkin, the British government gave over Mosul's oil (Fromkin, 2004). In general, the majority of historians who specialize in the Near East do not consider the oil of Mosul to be a concern until after the conflict.

As Edward Fitzgerald has shown, Sykes-Picot only allocated approximately half of the Mosul vilayet to France. In the north of the vilayet, France was given Mosul, while in the south, Britain was given Kirkuk. Since Sharif Hussein of Mecca was the target of British promises to convince him to lead an Arab uprising against Ottoman authority, it was Britain that first proposed the negotiations. So that the French wouldn't discover that the assurances made to Hussein were a cover for an actual danger to French interests in Syria, Sir Edward Grey offered bilateral discussions. The French Foreign Ministry had enough warning about the oil in Mosul, according to pre-war assessments (Fitzgerald, 1994).

After being summoned to discussions by the British, the French realized that they were in a position to demand greater land, which led to their interest in gaining control of the area. Prior to this realization, the French had no interest in gaining control of the region. They were successful to some extent as a result of Britain's desire for France to control the northern portion of the Mosul vilayet and Britain's insistence that the region around Kirkuk remain under British control. It was anticipated that Russia would rule the eastern portion of Anatolia after the war, and Britain desired to have a buffer zone between its zone and the zone controlled by the Russians. By 1919, Mosul's oil had become a significant problem. Balfour, who was serving as Foreign Secretary at that time, saw that Kitchener, who had passed away at that point, was the one who, for reasons of security, desired a French buffer zone between British and Russian land. Balfour, who was the First Lord of Admiralty at the time of the Sykes-Picot agreement, said that it could now be seen that this was a mistake, despite the fact that he had agreed with the decision at the time. However, he did admit that he had supported the decision at the time (Fitzgerald, 1994).

James A. Paul, in his article "Great Power Conflict Over Iraq Oil: The World War I Era", argued that, in the secret Sykes-Picot Accord of 1916, the British relinquished most of the oil-producing territory in northern Iraq to their French allies. British diplomatic and military preparations were adjusted to reclaim territory lost. In August 1918, Balfour reminded the British Dominions' Prime Ministers that Britain must be the "leading spirit" in Mesopotamia to supply a major resource. He responded, "I do not care under what system we keep the oil. But I am quite clear that it is all-important for us that this oil should be availa-

ble.” Several days after the ceasefire, British soldiers hurried to conquer Mosul. Britain outmanoeuvred the French, creating a military *fait accompli* in Northern Mesopotamia’s oil zone. The Frenchmen were angry. France lacked oil reserves in its native territory; therefore, its politicians and imperial strategists regarded Mesopotamia as a major resource for economic and military strength. Oil generated the most tension between the allies following the ceasefire (Paul, 2022).

4. Conclusion

The British economic interests in Mesopotamia during the period of 1914-1918 can be attributed to the securing of oil, trade, and commercial paths. This interest was strategically pursued to protect British trade routes, ensure the availability of oil, and enhance Britain’s economic dominance in the global market. Furthermore, the momentous decision to transition the Royal Navy from coal to oil was made, and efforts were made to ensure the flow of oil. The discovery of enormous oil deposits in Mesopotamia transformed the region’s importance to British economic interests. Oil production and export became pillars of British economic policy, ensuring both economic success and control over a vital resource with global ramifications.

The Great War, which started in 1914, played a crucial role in shaping British interests in Mesopotamia. Britain was at war with the Ottoman Empire, which had a strong presence in Mesopotamia. To ensure access to the Persian Gulf, a British protectorate was established in Mesopotamia. This led to the eventual annexation of Mesopotamia by the British Empire. In terms of securing oil, Mesopotamia was a key location for British oil interests. The region had significant oil reserves, which were considered vital for the British war effort. To ensure access to these oil reserves, the British took control of Mesopotamia and began developing its oil infrastructure.

Furthermore, Mesopotamia also had potential for expanding British trade routes. By gaining control of Mesopotamia, the British were able to protect their trade routes with India, a significant market for British goods. Additionally, the British were interested in using Mesopotamia as a base for trade with Persia, further enhancing their economic interests in the region. To ensure the economic stability and growth of Mesopotamia, the British focused on promoting trade and infrastructure development. This included building roads, railways, and ports, as well as implementing policies to stimulate local agriculture and industry. By doing so, the British aimed to turn Mesopotamia into a profitable colony for the British Empire.

The de Bunsen Committee’s report on the British war effort in the Ottoman Empire highlighted the importance of oil in Britain’s military objectives. The Committee concluded that controlling the Basra and Baghdad vilayets was critical due to the significance of oil in the region. The Mosul vilayet was also seen as essential for securing oil reserves and preventing competition with the Anglo-Persian Concession. The Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 divided the Ottoman Empire, with France gaining control over the northern portion of the Mo-

sul vilayet, which was rich in oil. However, Britain later realized the mistake and sought to reclaim the territory, leading to tension between the allies. Overall, oil played a significant role in shaping British policy and military actions in the region during 1914-1918. Despite the casualties and challenges Britain had faced during the Mesopotamia Campaign, however, Britain insisted on implementing its commercial and strategic schemes. The heavy losses in the Siege of Kut-Al-Amra are a good example of this.

Furthermore, the examination of British economic interests in Mesopotamia from 1914 to 1918 illustrates the complex web of oil, commerce, and imperial policy that determined the region's history. It emphasizes the reasons, techniques, and outcomes of British participation, highlighting the intricacies of economic imperialism and its long-term influence on the region's economic, political, and social fabric. We may obtain insights into the larger dynamics of imperialism and its impact in the contemporary world by comprehending this historical backdrop.

To sum up, this study enhances our understanding of British economic imperialism in Mesopotamia during the early 20th century and its enduring effects on the economic, social, and political progress of the area. It is crucial to recognise the constraints of this study, which mostly focuses on British viewpoints. Further research is required to investigate the experiences and views of local communities impacted by imperial policy. Future study might explore the socio-economic impacts of British imperialism in Mesopotamia by including viewpoints from all stakeholders to provide a more detailed picture of this intricate historical era. Future research may enhance our knowledge of the lasting impact of imperialism in the area and its effects on current socio-political dynamics by overcoming these constraints.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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