

# THE LITERARY DIGEST

for September 25, 1920

## TROUBLESOME MESOPOTAMIA



WHERE BRITISH GARRISONS ARE BESIEGED.

Mesopotamia, under British mandate, and its neighbors.

**M**ILITARY REENFORCEMENTS plus a high commissioner sent to Mesopotamia by the British Government must deal with "a critical situation" as the British press view it. News stories of the spread of "the war" feature besieged garrisons unrelieved; the killing or capture of British officers; communications and railways cut; the country around Bagdad dominated by insurgent tribal bands, and administrative officers driven from their posts in various districts. Press outcry against a drifting policy the *London Mail* expresses by saying, "The Government must make up its mind about Mesopotamia and stick to it. It must either go right in or come right out." Criticism of the War Office abounds for holding back news, for scattering units over a field infested with guerrilla tribesmen, for permitting the situation to get so out of hand that troops needed in India must be lifted for reenforcement. A Persian correspondent to *The Times* declared, "we are engaged in a war as expensive as and more exhausting than the South-African War." Among editorial exhortations to the Government in *The Times* we read:

"All the oil in Asia could not compensate us for the sacrifices we have made, the thousands of lives destroyed, and the hundreds of millions of pounds poured into that repellent region. The pretense that we are staying there for the good of the inhabitants is difficult to maintain. Unless there is a complete change of policy, Mesopotamia, which through the ages has been the grave of empires, is now likely to become the grave of the Coalition."

The appointment of Sir Percy Cox as high commissioner, however, is welcomed by *The Times* as evidence of changing policy. He belongs to the Indian Political Department, was political officer with the British forces in the Mesopotamian campaign that defeated the Turks in the Great War and initiated the temporary civil administration, was for years the principal British resident on the Persian Gulf, latterly serving as minister in Teheran, and he negotiated the Anglo-Persian Treaty. Semiofficial statements describe his mission as one of setting up "an independent state to be governed in accordance with the wishes of the people," conforming to the policy of the Anglo-French Declaration of November, 1918, in favor of "an independent Arab state by advice and assistance of a mandatory Power." The further semiofficial statement that military administration was never intended to be the permanent form of Mesopotamian administration, according to *The Times*, has been belied by the acts done. "If any one can form an Arab administration out of very unpromising material," Sir Percy Cox will do so, that paper declares, but first of all military occupation must cease at the earliest possible moment.

Colonel T. E. Lawrence, famous as leader of the Arab war on the Turks, however, is by no means satisfied: "The system represented by Sir Percy Cox will not square up; the people of England have been led into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honor." He writes in *The Sunday Times*:

"When conditions became too bad to endure longer, the Cabinet decided to send out as high commissioner the original author of the present system, with a conciliatory message to the Arabs that his heart and policy have completely changed.

"Yet our published policy has not changed, and does not need changing. It is that there has been a deplorable contrast between our profession and our practise. We said we went to Mesopotamia to defeat Turkey. We said we stayed to deliver

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the Arabs from the oppression of the Turkish Government, and to make available for the world its resources of corn and oil. We spent nearly a million men and nearly a thousand million of money to these ends. This year we are spending ninety-two thousand men and fifty millions of money on the same objects.

"We say we are in Mesopotamia to develop it for the benefit of the world. All experts say that the labor supply is the ruling factor in its development. How far will the killing of ten thousand villagers and townspeople this summer hinder the production of wheat, cotton, and oil? How long will we permit millions of pounds, thousands of imperial troops, and tens of thousands of Arabs to be sacrificed on behalf of a form of colonial administration which can benefit nobody but its administrators?"

The "tragedy of Mesopotamia" is that "the poison" of the Indian Government officialdom came in after the death of Sir Stanley Maude, who took Bagdad in 1917, and gradually won the enthusiastic support of the somewhat reserved Arabs, according to "one of Maude's officers," in the *Manchester Guardian*. This writer declares that the Arab follower of Mohammed will not tolerate the Hindu, whom he considers an inferior race. It is "hopeless folly"—now to be reenforced—to garrison the country with Indian troops. The Indian official "has no more qualification for governing the Arab than has the Eskimo for governing the Chinese. The direction of Mesopotamian affairs must be taken from India and placed in the hands of the home government. The Arabs must have a full share in working out their own salvation."

The situation is made doubly difficult by the division between British and French policy, observes the *Manchester Guardian*:

"The vision of a homogeneous Arab state, fostered by French influence in the north and by British in the south, becomes less likely of realization. Following the deposition of Emir Faysal by the French comes the appointment of his brother by the British Government to rule in their sphere of influence. Faysal himself is on his way to Europe, and will doubtless seize on the rift in Allied diplomacy to appeal to British sympathies. Meanwhile, so long has a firm and wise Allied policy for the whole region between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf been delayed that the actual warfare which the French have brought on themselves in the north has its counterpart in continued and often serious guerrilla fighting in the British zones. An attempt to fulfil the pledges of the Peace Treaty is being conscientiously but tardily made by Britain in the calling together of a national assembly at Bagdad."

Since the Government has neither the money nor men demanded for continued prosecution of "these distant and doubtful ventures," the *London Daily News* favors restricted occupation, saying:

"The southern part of the Basra vilayet—the line Nasiriya-Kurnah would be an obvious frontier, leaving the tribesmen of Bagda and Mosul to live their habitual life under our nominal suzerainty exercised under mandate. That might mean some loss of prestige. But at the present rate there will soon be little of it to lose."

But the *London Chronicle* repeats advice "to keep cool heads about Mesopotamia," while "attempts are being made in the usual quarters to work up an antigovernmental scare." Why should Great Britain render policing service to civilized natives against lawless tribesmen? To quote *The Chronicle*:

"A popular answer in some quarters is 'oil'; but it is one which can only be made in gross ignorance of in bad faith. The British Empire's interest in the region existed long before oil was thought of, and would exist if no oil were there. The 'jugular artery' of the Empire is the Suez Canal and Red Sea; and the further passage to India is dominated by the Persian Gulf. The Middle East countries dominating these seaboard—Palestine, Arabia, Mesopotamia, Persia—are countries which we have never tried to rule in the past, but which it has always been important for us to prevent from falling under the domination of a Great Power hostile to ourselves.

"Our aim must still be not to annex these countries, but to foster local free states in them. In Persia we have been and are practically the sole factor which keeps an independent state alive. In Palestine we hope to develop a free Jewish state. In the greater part of Arabia we look to King Hussein and the Emir Faysal. It has been suggested that we should hand Mesopotamia over to Faysal. It might be a good solution, if he is equal to the task; but that condition needs to be very carefully examined. Failing him, there is no visible alternative but either to undertake it ourselves, under the international mandate conferred on us, or to leave it open for future aggression by others. This last course may appear cheap and easy at the moment; but if we are really anxious 'to avoid future wars'—real wars, not local operations like those now in progress—we shall not take it."