5. The Iraq civil war, 2007: A 1960s' prediction.

During my stay in Iraq from 1966 to 1969, I traveled nearly every free weekend and met many Iraqi from all major ethnological groups, who all gave me their vision of the situation in Iraq.

Gradually I started to understand that the Kurds, the Shiite and the Sunni ethnological groups hated each other with such an intensity that working together on developing Iraq as one country appeared to be impossible. My conclusion at that time was that this situation would ultimately lead to a civil war in Iraq. Unfortunately today my predictions have come true and Iraq since a few years is suffering from a terrible ongoing civil war.

My Iraqi friends joined me in most of my travels to the sides described in my agricultural series and visits to historical sites, while I made the trips to the archeological sites jointly with Dutch friends living in Iraq at that time.

In my trips to the Kurdish area in North Iraq, I was joined by Achmad, a Kurd from Makhmur. Mawfak, a Sunni Arab from Haditha, Euphrates, joined me in trips to the Sunni area in Middle Iraq and during my trips to the Marsh Arabs in South Iraq, I was always joined by my friend Saadoon, a Shiite Marsh Arab from Salaam a village in the middle of the Marshes. Obviously, each of them was not aware of my contacts and trips made with friends from the other two groups to their respective part of the country.

Each of these Iraqi friends brought me to their respective families, where their fathers, uncles and senior neighbors gave me their extensive views on the situation in Iraq in the 1960s.

My Kurdish hosts explained to me at great length how badly the Kurds were treated by the Central Sunni controlled Government. Many Kurds had been killed and many more remote villages had been bombed; some of the damage I have seen myself. Furthermore, already in those days, it was very difficult for any Kurd to obtain a senior Government position, even though many Kurds at that time had already obtained academic education. The central Iraqi government, already during the 1960s in the Kurdish area, controlled only the small strips of land along the main roads. Outside these areas the Kurdish people were in full control and would eliminate any Sunni soldier or official who dared to penetrate this area. My hosts in the 1960s expressed their sincere hope that one day it would be possible for the Kurds to become free and establish their own Kurdish country. The Kurds already in those days hated the Sunni Iraqi intensely.

My Shiite hosts in the Marshes in South Iraq told me similar stories about bad treatment by the Iraqi Central Sunni controlled Government. In the 1960s very few Marsh Arabs had obtained a formal education and my friend Saadoon was actually the first of his village to obtain an academic education. The Shiite Marsh Arabs formed part of a much larger group of Shiite Moslems in South Iraq, which had already in those days similar hopes for a free Shiite country in South Iraq in the future, without hated Sunni rulers. In the 1960s the Iraqi Shiite community had already close contacts with fellow Shiites in neighboring Iran, who often were actually relatives.

Visiting traditional Sunni groups in Central Iraq, Mawfak's father, uncles and neighbors explained to me extensively that these Iraqi Kurds were troublesome, emotional and greedy mountain people and the Shiite groups in South Iraq were uneducated farmers and herdsmen, who had a false understanding of Islam. They, the Sunni, were sorry for their government, which had so much trouble in controlling these unruly Kurds and Shiites.

Gradually during my stay in Iraq it became clear to me that the Sunni Government treated their Kurdish and Shiite citizens very badly and that the Kurds, the Shiite and the Sunni Moslems had an intensive hate of each other. All three groups had the same Moslem religion, yet each group had an entirely different interpretation of Islam. The result of this intense hate was the complete absence of a willingness to work together between the three groups to develop Iraq as one country with a place for each of the groups. In my understanding the differences between the Kurds, Sunni and Shiite Arabs were unbridgeable and would one day result in a bad clash and in a terrible civil war. The Kurds and Shiite wanted their own country while the Sunni wanted desperately to maintain the present status quo in which they benefited from the suppression of the two other groups. To me this situation must have been obvious to any observer of Iraq at that time.

Trying to understand what had caused this desperate situation, I searched for any information I could find and learned that these problems actually had been created in the early 1920s after the British had conquered that part of the Ottoman Empire, which area was before 1921 called Mesopotamia. After 1921 this area was renamed as Iraq, on the basis of the policies of Winston Churchill, the British Minister of Colonies at that time.

In the Cairo Conference, March 1921, Churchill and his staff, together with representatives of the British army and air force, worked out policies how to govern the lands conquered from the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I in 1918. These lands often indicated as the Middle East, or Golden Crescent included: Mesopotamia, which is today Iraq; Palestine, which today is carved up into Israel, West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, Jordan, Syria; and Arabia, today called Saudi Arabia.

In retrospect it appears that many of today's problems in the Middle East, both in Palestine and Iraq had their origin in the rather ruthless way the Middle East was carved up during the 1921 Cairo Conference. Churchill's complete ignorance of the actual situation in the Middle East and his aim to do this job with as little costs to the British treasury as possible as well as the hidden agendas of some of his staff played a major role in the decisions taken at that conference and ultimately for today's conflicts in the Middle East, in particular the Israel Palestine and the Iraq cases.

However, now back to the topic of my note: Iraq and how already in the 1960s it was very clear that the situation in Iraq was desperate and could only end in a civil war, which we are now facing today in 2007.

The Ottoman Empire in Istanbul, during the over three hundred years of occupation of this area, wisely governed the Kurds, the Sunni and the Shiite societies, directly from their capital in three entirely independently ruled provinces or vilayets, which system worked well during the entire period of Ottoman occupation of Mesopotamia. Mosul was the capital of the Kurdish area, Baghdad the capital of the Sunni area and Basra the capital of the Shiite area. The Shiite formed 55%; the Kurds about 22 % and the Sunni about 20 % of the Iraqi population, while other minorities amounted to about 3%.

In 1921, during the Cairo Conference, Churchill was confronted with the fact that his government had to govern an additional colony while British Government Funds at that time, were utterly depleted as a result of the First World War 1914-1918. Yet controlling Mesopotamia would be essential for further development of India, the most important colony of Britain in that period. Controlling Mesopotamia would secure and shorten the road from Britain to India with at least ten days travel. India, at that time Britain's main colony, already contributed much to the depleted British Treasury and offered many prospects for further development. For this reason Churchill's main concern, during the discussions of how to organize and establish British control of Mesopotamia, was to do this at the lowest cost possible to save money.

Entirely ignorant of the actual sensitivities between the Kurds, the Sunni and Shiite, Churchill accepted readily the suggestions of his advisors, Sir Percy Cox, the British High Commissioner for Mesopotamia and his staff members Gertrude Bell and T.E. Lawrence.

Unfortunately, Gertrude Bell and T.E Lawrence, two romantic minded Arabists had their own hidden agenda. These two Arab specialists were very close to the Hashemite family of Sharif Hussein of Mecca. The Hashemite family was a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. The leader of the family at that time Hussein was The Sharif or the Guardian of the holy sites Mecca and Medina. Hussein and his equally ambitious sons Abdullah and Feisal wanted to increase their power and felt that their family, as direct descendants from the Prophet, was entitled to become again the Caliph, the spiritual leader of the Faithful, considered to be the representative of God on earth. The title of Caliph was carried by the Turkish Sultans since the rise of the Ottoman Empire nearly six hundred years ago in 1453 after conquering Istanbul formerly called Constantinopel.

Gertrude Bell and T.E Lawrence, fully aware of Churchill's need to find the cheapest possible solution for ruling Mesopotamia, proposed to him combining the three Turkish vilayets- provinces: Mosul, Baghdad and Basra into one country, to be ruled by a neutral ruler from outside Mesopotamia, for whom they suggested, it would be easier to control the three different population groups of Mesopotamia. They therefore proposed for this position, their favorite, Feisal the son of Hussein, whom they could highly recommend. Silently they hoped that this position would help the Hashemite family in their aims to obtain the Caliph title.

Churchill readily accepted this proposal as it appeared to be the cheapest and easiest solution. In his view selecting an Iraqi leader as ruler would give England less control over Iraq and would be more costly.

Since those days the British consistently favored the Sunni in Iraq. After granting Iraq independence in 1936 the Sunni, actually a minority group with only 20% of the population, further consolidated their control over Iraq and by the 1960s completely dominated the country and ruthlessly oppressed the Kurds and Shiite.

Talking with my Iraqi friends from the three groups and realizing the insurmountable differences between the three groups it was very clear to me already in the 1960s that this situation could only end one day in a terrible civil war. Unfortunately, today due to unwise and ill advised American interference in the country, this has happened with terrible consequences for all Iraqi citizens regardless if they are Kurd, Shiite or Sunni. In my humble opinion the situation can only be solved if the country is split up again in three autonomous ruled territories as during the Ottoman Empire's rule of Mesopotamia, a solution also suggested by Galbraith, in chapter 11 of his book "The end of Iraq".

Preparation of this Note:
During my stay in Iraq, 1966-1969, I collected extensive notes on the political situation in Iraq, combining information from my interviews and discussions with Iraqi from the three groups, newspaper and journal articles and monographs accessible to me at that time. Unfortunately, these references are today no longer available.

Recently I read the below listed recently published monographs on the political situation of Iraq and observed that these fully supported and expanded my 1960s understanding of the Iraq situation. I therefore rewrote my notes and include the additional information taken from the new monographs.

Recent References:
-Catherwood C. 2004, Churchill's Folly: How Winston Churchill created modern Iraq, Carroll & Graf Publishers New York
-Galbraith P.W. 2006 The end of Iraq. Simon & Schuster London
- Simmons M.R. 2005. Twilight in the Desert The coming Saudi oil shock and the world economy Wiley New York
-Wallach J. 1999 Desert Queen: The extraordinary life of Gertrude Bell: Adventurer, adviser to Kings, ally of Lawrence of Arabia. Anchor books New York.

I also consulted:
-The Letters of Gertrude Bell compiled by her mother Florence Bell, 1927, Ernest Benn.
-Encyclopedia of the Middle East, 1969 by Ch. Jansen, Parool- in Dutch, which encyclopedia, contains most of the references I used during the 1960s.
-Biegel L.C. 1967. The Middle East, Section Iraq p166. De Haan in Dutch
-Hodgkin E.C.1966 The Arabs, The section on Iraq, Oxford University Press
-Jansen G.H. 1979. Militant Islam. The sections on Iraq. Pan Books