



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

The Annual Conference for Historical Studies Seventh Session 2020

**100 years on from the 1920 Iraq Revolution:  
Narratives of the Nation State  
and the Struggle over Memory**

March, 28-30, 2020

Background Paper

The first quarter of the 20th century was unlike any other in Arab history, ancient or modern, in terms of impact on the Arab world. The seminal changes witnessed in this period came in the context of new international shifts that came with the fallout of World War I (1914–1918). The Ottoman state met its demise, in April 1920 Iraq and Palestine were placed under British Mandate, and Syria under French Mandate by the Supreme Council of the Principle Allied Powers, and the document on the British mandate over Palestine was crafted, providing for the creation of a Jewish agency for the “establishment of the Jewish national home”. These events saw the Arab world enter a stage of transition from the Ottoman period to the Mandate period, a stage that claimed to offer assistance in the creation of independent nation states, as stated in the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), but which led to the resolution of all issues divided up between the British and the French, from the Atlantic to the Gulf. Only Turkey was spared the fate of colonization according to the articles of the treaty, as it embarked on the establishment of its modern, centralized nation state. These transformations culminated with the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which gave rise to the new system of states across Turkey and the Arab world, and a new political and geopolitical structure of the existing Arab states. The change was so profound that some described it as the Oriental Treaty of Westphalia (1648).

The decisions arising from the San Remo Conference (April 1920) saw the Arab Mashreq – Greater Syria and Iraq especially – falling under semi-direct colonialism disguised under the term “Mandate”. In response, revolutions erupted in Syria, Iraq, and Palestine that aimed to establish nation states. Among the most prominent of these is what is known in Iraqi and Arab history as the “Great Iraqi Revolt” or the “1920 Revolution”.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), in its Annual Conference of Historical Studies, has conscientiously worked to reassess the history of this period in terms of actual events or historical narrative, exposing it to research, examination, review, and critique. The critical reappraisal of these events, a hundred years on, is part of the attempt to understand and critique the foundations laid during those years and that still remain standing.

The importance of this period is such that out of the six annual conferences of Historical Studies so far, the ACRPS has devoted three to subjects connected to these critical years. In the second session (2015), the Conference discussed World War I after one hundred years from an Arab perspective; in the fourth session (2017), it examined the Sykes-Picot Agreement one hundred years on; and in the sixth session (2019) it dealt with the “Arab Government in Damascus (1918-1920)”.

The seventh session turns to the 1920 Revolution in Iraq against British occupation, in its centenary year. This represents one of the most momentous events to occur in the Mashreq region, not only because it lay the foundations for national government in Iraq, but also because it led to a fabric of events that rippled through the Mashreq in general.

## Writing the History of 1920 Revolution: Different Motivations

Despite great changes in era and the political regime in Iraq, from the monarchy era to the republican era, and from left and the Baath to the Islamists, there is near consensus, across all eras, on the importance of the great popular uprising in Iraq against British occupation in the summer of 1920. Dubbed “the Great Iraqi Revolt”, and then from 1958 onwards, the “1920 Revolution”, this event has consistently been celebrated as the revolution that instituted national rule in the country. It is perhaps one of the rare subjects in the modern history of Iraq about which, bar a few details, there is general national consensus.

More importantly, its impact and significance extends to the rest of the Greater Arab Mashreq, where it played a prominent role in shaping the historical dynamic that established the political map of the region since that moment: the escape from Ottoman rule, the struggle with colonialism, and the establishment of the nation state which nurtured the major ideological currents in the Arab world in the 20th century.

Through its dynamics, vision and discourse, the 1920 revolution embodied the forces that preceded it, be it the global rise of the nationalist model, or the struggle between the axes of the world’s major powers at that time culminating in World War I, or the rise of the constitutional movements in Iran and Turkey, or the attempt of the Arab movement to establish an independent constitutional state in Syria, and the contribution of Syrian Arabs in Greater Syria and Iraqi former officers in the Ottoman army in its construction and leadership. These were some of the people who joined the Great Arab Revolt (1916). Following the declaration of the Syrian Congress (March 1920), however, which was accompanied by the Iraqi Congress in Damascus’s declaration of Iraqi independence, the conflict against the British escalated. The movements involved prepared the Revolutionary Association, thus forming one of the 1920’s revolution’s early links. The nationalist Covenant Society, which became Iraqi with financial and political support and weapons from the new Syrian Arab government, adopted the city of Deir Ezzor as a base to launch attacks on British forces in Iraq. The level of these attacks on British forces increased during the first half of 1920, and King Faisal, who had led the Arab Northern Army during the Great Arab Revolt, and to whom the Syrian Congress had pledged allegiance as the constitutional monarch of Syria, assumed the position of Head of State in Iraq as king.

From that point onwards — that is, from its earliest days — the narrative of the revolution has been organically linked to this historical dynamic. The awareness, perception, and presentation of it were intrinsically and fundamentally linked to the realization of the birth pangs underway in the region. The conference says from its earliest days because those active in the revolution, potentially many of them, considered it to be an extension of the Great Arab Revolt of 1916, while other actors considered it an extension of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran.

If it is correct to make such an assumption, because of the different political and intellectual reference points of the revolutionary actors, it also becomes evidently clear that the unified version of the account of the revolution is the subject of much debate and argument.

Over the past one hundred years, the narrative of the 1920 revolution has risked being governed by conflicts, rivalries, socio-cultural divisions, the will to hegemony, and cultural and symbolic hegemony that reflect the development of ethnic, sectarian and social divisions in Iraq. Rivalry and struggle have thus developed over the account of the 1920 Revolution, which calls for renewed critical research into it, outside the stereotypes of those striving to acquire, control, and make use of it for their personal agendas.

Critical attempts by some scholars and thinkers to re-read the 1920 Revolution have indeed highlighted the need for a spirit of criticism outside dominant or prevailing narratives, on the lines of Iraqi sociologist Ali al-Wardi in the section on the 1920 Revolution in his encyclopedic work *Social Glimpses of Iraq's Modern History* (1969–1978). Or in the sense of some of the allusions made by Palestinian historian Hanna Batatu in his reference work *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (1978), or the call to skip one-sided readings made by Wamid Omar Nizami in his book *The Political, Intellectual, and Social Roots of the Arab National (Independence) Movement in Iraq* (1984), or others.

## The 1920 Revolution in the Context of Founding the Modern Arab Mashreq

The 1920 Revolution represents one of the most important Arab feats against colonialism in the first quarter of the 20th century. This conference will interrogate the account of national history, concluding this founding century to build a nation state, with its glories and tragedies, aspirations, stumbling blocks, and setbacks.

The nation state in the Arab Mashreq has completed its first century in tragedy, crippled with despotism, civil wars and disintegration, or the specter of disintegration, into something other than the nation state. Aspiring and struggling to build another, more just, democratic, and truly modern face of this state requires not only reviewing the foundational elements, but also the narratives concerning its history, as well as its counter-narratives, and how these concealed the factors of conflict or the failures of its foundation. Elements must also be considered that appeared on the margins of these narratives, the importance of which has not been recognized, since they have come back to life in non-state, identity-based directions in new historical conditions, where the external factor will be decisive in the disintegration of that state.

Despite the dominance of the general nationalist narrative in its history, some factional histories of the 1920 revolution have appeared early on. These come in the shape of ideological histories that focus on the role of some religious and ethnic groups in the revolution rather than others. This has gone

so far as to legitimize talking about “quotas” in the history of the revolution since the 1960s. Quotas here has the sense near from “Power Sharing” concept, which acquired after the US invasion of the country in 2003. Abdallah al-Fayyad in his book *The Great Iraqi Revolt of 1920* (1963) concentrated on the role of the Shia ulema, a subject which became a mainstay of the writings on the revolution after 2003; while Abd al-Hameed al-Alwchi and Aziz Jasim al-Hijjiya focused on the role of the Anbar tribes in their book *Sheikh Dhari Al Mahmood* (1968). Iraqi Kurdish historian Kamal Mudhir Ahmad, meanwhile, addressed the contribution of the Kurds to the revolution in his book *The Role of the Kurdish People in the Iraqi 1920 Revolution* (1978). This conflict over history is driven by the way in which the divisions of Iraqi society have developed and the intensity of the conflict between social-political actors. On the other hand, the ideological historiography of the 1920 Revolution – class-based illustrating Marxist attempts to write the history of the revolution, nationalist that prevailed during the Baath era, or sectarian that flourished after the American occupation of Iraq – continues to express the rupture of the Iraqi self and its internal divisions and disagreements.

This, in addition to different political orientations. Despite an earlier claim that across all eras in Iraqi history the importance of the revolution has been consistent, the narrative of the revolution has in fact taken on new meanings with every political change as focus switches from one element to another, from the role of Arab-nationalist activists and Sharifian officers, to the role of Shiite holy cities and the Shiite religious authorities, and then its anti-Western content, and so on.

The 1920 Revolution thus serves as an ongoing example to understand how the narratives of national history are constructed and presented, and how their account became the subject of conflict and dispute and a tool for hegemony and control.

This is a problem the ACRPS proposes to study at the seventh session of the Annual Conference of Historical Studies, which will be held April 11–12, 2020 in Doha under the title “100 years on from the 1920 Revolution: Narratives of the Nation State and the Struggle over Memory”. The conference will encompass the historiography of the revolution and how it has been manifested since its contemporaneous documentation, and through the subsequent historiographical record.

## Conference Themes

The Academic Board of the Conference invites researchers interested in the 1920 revolution to contribute academic papers that meet the formal and objective academic research criteria adopted by the ACRPS. The focus is on providing new treatments or additions to the subject. The following suggested themes and issues focus on the historiographic level related to writing the history of the revolution, and addressing this in new ways:

- The historiographical critique of one-sided accounts or narratives and their sources and results, and analysis of the biased and prejudiced perspectives that govern their construction of history.



- Sources for writing the history of the revolution.
- How the literature of the revolution presented its image.
- Documentation of the revolution.
- The official version of the history of the revolution: the account of the (cultural) organs of the Iraqi state, across different eras, of the history of the revolution.
- The revolution in the writings of Iraqi historians across the generations.
- The Arab Movement and the revolution and the role of the Covenant Association.
- The 1920 Revolution in the school curriculum.
- The 1920 Revolution according to its actors.
- The 1920 Revolution in the Kurdish perspective.
- The 1920 Revolution in the British documents and writings.
- The 1920 revolution: Arab readings.
- The 1920 Revolution in Western studies.
- The 1920 Revolution at the heart of regional history (the Iranian, Turkish, and Russian literature).
- The 1920 Revolution as part of the fabric of transformations in the Arab Mashreq.
- Representations of the revolution in art.

## Taking Part

- Research proposals (around 700 words) in either Arabic or English, accompanied by a CV together with a list of references and sources, should be submitted to the Conference Committee no later than September 30, 2019. Proposals must meet the basic formal and quality standards (research question and main issues and hypotheses; methodology and theoretical frameworks used; and what new treatments, approaches, or results the research adds)
- The research proposal will be subject to internal adjudication, and the researcher will be notified of the result (acceptance, rejection or request for changes) within two weeks of the proposal's submission.
- Completed research papers (6000-9000 words) based on proposals accepted by the Conference Committee should be submitted by January 31, 2020. Papers must adhere to the formal and



objective criteria adopted by ACRPS (for details click [here](#)) and will undergo peer review. The work must be original and not previously published, in whole or in part.

- A specialist academic committee will conduct peer review and will notify the researcher of its decision (approval, rejection or request for changes) no later than March 1, 2020.
- The Conference Committee's approval of a research proposal does not imply automatic acceptance of the completed research at the Conference.
- All correspondence should be sent to the conference email address: [history.conference2020@dohainstitute.org](mailto:history.conference2020@dohainstitute.org).