

## Percy Cox and his Role in Shaping the Middle East (1919-1923)

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### *Abstract*

Sir Percy Cox played an influential role in defining the outcomes of various nations in the Middle East and protecting Britain's welfare throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Being a great negotiator, political agent, advisor and administrator, and having great competence in the different languages of the Gulf region, Cox served successfully in different countries in the Middle East, protecting British interests, and gained great success in the process. This article explores the role of Sir Percy Cox in the Middle East, focusing on the various positions that he assumed in different countries, including Muscat, Mesopotamia, Iraq and Kuwait. The article utilizes both primary and secondary sources and delves deeper to understand the influence of Sir Percy Cox's career in defining the politics and state of different countries across the Middle East.

Keywords: Political, treaty, war, Middle East, agent, state.

### **Introduction**

Sir Percy Cox was a British officer who had a significant role in defining Britain's presence in the Middle East during the twentieth century. He played a pivotal role in the political environment of the Gulf and in ensuring political order in the region. Cox set a clean record in the Middle East, as he dedicated a significant part of his personal and professional life to providing services that defended Britain's supremacy in the Persian Gulf. Through his professional life, Cox became a senior British administrator and diplomat, who had a massive influence on political decisions in Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq.

Born in 1864, Cox gained a public education and then trained at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst. He traveled to India in 1884, where he was posted to serve in the Bengal Staff Corps. He served in the Indian army from 1884 to 1890, before joining the Indian Political Service. Cox was socially adept and learned other languages quickly. He was posted to Somaliland in 1893. He served as an Assistant Political Resident in Berbera, Somaliland, a role that was administered by British India under the Bombay presidency. Cox then briefly returned to India and joined the Indian political landscape in 1899, serving as a consul and political officer to the Sultan of Oman. His Middle East role emerged

after he was appointed Britain's Consul in Muscat in 1899, as the Europeans were competing for the Arabian Gulf region. He then began defending Britain's system of imperialism in the Middle East, a role that largely defined his influence as a representative of Britain's influence in the region. He then held various political positions in the Persian Gulf region until 1914, when the First World War began. Cox continued defending British interests in the Middle East and the wider Persian Gulf, assuming various roles over the years. A significant part of Cox's role in the Middle East entailed creating contacts with rulers of the Arabian Gulf, carrying out diplomatic, administrative and advisory roles, engaging in pseudo-academic quests and co-opting the Gulf regional leaders through offering financial rewards. A critical analysis of Sir Percy Cox's role in shaping the Middle East provides a clear perspective on British influence in the region during the twentieth century.

### **Methodology**

The research involved a literature review of secondary sources to determine the critical role that Sir Percy Cox played in the Middle East. The theoretical data was collected from various verifiable sources, including books, journal articles and website publications. The review of secondary research throughout the paper helps in understanding and critically analyzing previous research on the importance of Cox in shaping the Middle East.

### **Literature Review**

#### British India and the Middle East

The question of British involvement in the Middle East has been prominent since the onset of British rule in India and during the leadership of Lord Curzon. Britain's position in the Persian Gulf was assailed by other European powers such as France and Russia with much energy. Having closely studied the challenge facing the Persian Gulf, Lord Curzon was profoundly interested and impressed by the significance of the challenges in the Middle East. During the years of Lord Curzon's assumption of the viceroyalty of India, the Indian government opted to extend the authority of the British in the Persian Gulf and over the Arabian states radically. British India wanted to gain territorial control over the Persian Gulf and it began expanding its imperial rule over the states that were located on the southwestern shore of the Persian Gulf during the eighteenth century. British India was initially concerned over the presence of foreign powers that existed in the Persian Gulf region. Therefore, throughout the course of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, the British began asserting an informal form of dominance in an attempt to force the

Persian Gulf into embracing the political and economic goals which were set in London.

However, the undefined dominance of the British in the Persian Gulf left the states in an indistinct position as they were neither completely independent states nor under the sovereignty of a bigger power. Nonetheless, Britain's initially solitary dominance in the Middle East was feared to be under threat by the end of the nineteenth century, following attacks by France, Germany and Russia, and this made the Indian government react dramatically. As a consequence, the policies and actions which were implemented by the Indian government in the Arabian Gulf eventually resulted in the aggressive expansion of the power of British India in the Middle East. The involvement of British India in the Gulf region eventually defined Sir Percy Cox's role in shaping the Middle East.

The idea of the Persian Gulf states existing as a single geo-political unit emerged from the events of this period. The nations that formed the Middle East region included Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Iran and the Ottoman Empire. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Middle Eastern states were significant regional powers as they had large populations and an extensive history of diplomatic relations with greater European powers. Therefore, British India feared losing its influence in the Middle East and transformed its policies in the region and implemented different controls and orders under the stewardship of officers such as Cox.

#### Sir Percy Cox's Role in the Middle East

As a qualified British Indian Officer during Lord Curzon's rule, Cox's role was crucial in the process of repairing the information deficit for Britain in the Persian Gulf. Specifically selected by Curzon to serve in the Gulf region, Cox was appointed as a Captain of the Indian army and later into the Indian Political Service. As a consequence, Cox began gaining fame and became one of the most significant figures in the Middle East during that period. While in the Middle East, he was knighted three times for his service to the British Empire. He had a proclivity for learning new languages and his interests were broader than the military, making him a perfect selection for the Indian Political Service (IPS). Members of the IPS acted as a diplomatic corps for the Indian Government, representing it in various princely independent and neighboring states in the Middle East. After his previous engagement with Cox in Somaliland, Curzon re-established his relationship with him after attaining power. One of Curzon's policies was to increase the number of British agents who were fluent in Arabic to facilitate communication with the local elites, which improved the collection of information on which the decision-making processes in India could be based. Therefore, Cox's language proficiency played a crucial role in defining his role as a British Indian administrator and facilitating information gathering for the British Empire. Cox used his

extensive language abilities to exploit colonial knowledge, and this gave Britain a chance to expand its authority effectively over the Indian government.

Cox's role was majorly focused on protecting Britain's strategic interests and obstructing the interests of other European powers in the Middle East. He therefore focused on seeking peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region and forming alliances with some of the native tribal chiefs and the most recognizable figures in urban areas. The coalitions eventually led to the central role of the Persian authority being undermined. Also, the alliances became useful to the British during the First World War and gave them significant strategic control over the Persian Gulf. In person, Cox was a very persuasive individual, a trait that allowed him to gain the trust and confidence of several leaders in the Middle East during his time there. Cox would also conduct difficult negotiations on behalf of the British and Indian Governments. His commanding appearance, extensive knowledge, linguistic skills and sympathetic attitude made him stand out among other officers and significantly defined his role in shaping the Middle East.

Cox's impressive career can be attributed to the significant role that he played in the Middle East since his appointment as Britain's consul in Muscat. Being Britain's Political Resident in the Middle East, Cox was popular for his diplomatic activities, which were aimed at pacifying the relations between the rulers and princes of the Arabian Gulf and reassuring the leaders in the event of political threats. Having developed an admirable reputation and career, Cox's influence continued to increase even after the First World War, as he became the head of Political rulers during Britain's campaigns in its quest to occupy Iraq. He also played a fundamental political role in Britain as he actively lobbied rulers of the Northern region of the Arabian Gulf to support Britain during its fight against the Ottomans. Therefore, Cox's role in the Middle East was vital in promoting Britain's involvement and dominance in the region.

A significant part of Cox's career and role in shaping the Middle East region was determined by his work ethic and his personal and professional ethics, which made him stand out among his counterparts. Cox enjoyed his company and was very fond of nature, and these attributes gave him leverage in his professional life. He displayed mental and physical toughness and stamina that came in handy throughout his career. While in India, he was presented with great opportunities to study oriental languages and he learned several, including Arabic. Indeed, his aptitude for languages was a critical criterion that was used in his selection for a position in the IPS, a role which also required personal attributes such as trustworthiness and knowledge, which were critical in the operations as the officers were mostly deployed in Independent Native States across India. Cox's IPS service was successful

and unalloyed, leading to his promotion to the position of Acting Political Agent for the British in Muscat in 1899.

While serving in the different parts of the Middle East, Cox gathered data on the history, political geography and economy of these areas, and the information was used by the British to form the different Gulf polities into geographically defined states. The Gulf region's economies were dependent on maritime trade. As a result, a large portion of the population settled in the coastal region and the interior regions of the countries were sparsely populated and only vaguely demarcated, leading to tenuous control by the coastally focused governments. With an extensive history of trade and alliances in the Middle East, the Gulf region had developed into an area of key interest for the British and they needed to collect as much information as they could. Therefore, the British sought to determine the territorial frontiers of the Gulf region, in order to define the states geographically. This in turn helped the British to gain control of the interior regions as they aided in limiting the power of the given states. Therefore, Cox's role as a British political agent, who also explored and researched the history of the Middle East, was fundamental in helping Britain to assert its control by geographically defining the states.

## **Discussion**

### **i) Cox's Role in Muscat**

The imperial relationship between British India and Muscat began in the late eighteenth century and was extended in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through trade and diplomacy. Muscat and Oman were by far the largest and most significant of the Gulf States in the nineteenth century. Britain and France had competing interests in Muscat because, unlike other states in the Middle East, Muscat was comparatively stable and had a notable size and significance. In an effort to gain a higher level of control over the French and gain supremacy in Oman, the British decided to send Cox to Muscat. He served principally as a political agent in Muscat, where he was identified as a representative of the Government of India in Oman, and occupied himself with fulfilling his political duties at the Sultan's court and exploring the country. Much of Cox's time and effort in Muscat was dedicated to acquiring information that would be vital for the British Indian government. The political, geographical and historical information that he collated in Muscat helped British India to gain extensive regional power. The information collected by Cox and his colleagues was also important in controlling the associations between different actors in the Middle East, as it helped in the enforcement and delineation of borders between different polities in the region.

Cox's presence in Muscat also helped in asserting Britain's standing there. The French had been initially active in Oman, and they granted French flags, offered legal protection to Omani ships and established a coaling station near Muscat. Lord Curzon offered a memorandum to the Sultan of Oman, listing his government's problems in detail, and instructed the Sultan on how to respond. The memorandum acted as an ultimatum to force the Sultan into acting against the encroachment of the French. However, issuing the memorandum was not sufficient for Curzon, as it did not guarantee the Sultan's compliance. Therefore, British India provided more political representation in Oman by sending over political agents such as Cox to ensure that the Sultan obeyed the articles of the memorandum and that India's interests were fully represented in the new aggressive policy that was put in place.

Percy Cox's role in Muscat largely shifted British India's place in the Middle East as he aggressively translated and implemented policies put in place by the Indian government during his fieldwork. As a political officer in Muscat, his partiality to languages made it easier for him to gain vital information for the British Indian government regarding the French operations and various issues that arose in Muscat and Oman. Moreover, his ability to work far from home and in difficult conditions allowed him to gain powerful connections that aided in securing desired outcomes for the British Indian government. Moreover, Cox used his great negotiating skills to convince and skillfully manipulate the local elites of Oman and the Persian Gulf into conforming to the dictates of the British Indian government and ensuring that Britain's interests were upheld. Through Cox's efforts and that of other political agents in Muscat, French influence and control in Oman drastically reduced and France stopped granting its flags to Omanis, deserted its coaling station and abandoned plans for acquiring a port and a naval base in Oman. Also, the presence of Cox as a British Indian official in Oman helped in the unification of the political elites in the two states, hence improving relations between the two governments. As a consequence, it became easier for the Government of India to gain a higher level of control of Oman, considering that it was the largest and most significant Arab state during that time.

#### ii) Cox's Role in Mesopotamia

The invasion and subsequent occupation by the British of Ottoman provinces entailed elements of civil state-building and measures that were focused on mobilizing and obtaining local resources from the region. The retreating Ottoman authorities had left an administrative vacuum, making it crucial for the British to penetrate the economic, social and political patterns and intrude into the fabric of colonial society to ensure that the civilian resources available were diverted to military ends. However, the British and Indian administrators were faced with a lack of information at their end. Moreover, the downward penetration of the new external British administration into the local society would

result in conflict with the local tribes. In addition, creating an administrative framework that was based on the lines of an Indian province ended up being unsuited for the conditions that existed in the local Mesopotamian region. Cumulatively, the effects of the extension of administrative control and enhanced resource extraction eventually led to an increase in local hardship and grievances, which ultimately led to an open revolt in 1920. In 1914, Indian Expeditionary Force D engaged in a “capture and occupation” military mission in Basra city. The operation was crucial to the British occupation of Mesopotamia as it helped them secure a crucial strategic position as the leaders of the Persian Gulf, guaranteed the security of the installation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in Persia, and helped in gaining the loyalty of the Arabian tribal leaders and local notables. To promote their authority in Mesopotamia, the British needed to utilize local resources and address the logistical requirements in the region. The British also needed to pacify the occupied enemy territory and extend their centralized civil control so as to penetrate, mobilize and obtain local resources easily, in the form of manpower and food that would sustain the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force. To achieve these policy objectives during its invasion of Mesopotamia, Britain had to utilize the services of officers such as Cox to extract information and extend their civil control in Mesopotamia.

The outbreak of hostilities between the different states in the Middle East led to most European countries forming alliances as they sought to control the situation. However, this was also the period when Cox was appointed as the chief political officer in Mesopotamia under Indian Expeditionary Force D. He continued serving as a Political Resident in the Persian Gulf until 1920 and was also appointed as High Commissioner in Mesopotamia, a role that required him to engage in negotiations to improve the working relations between Britain and the Mesopotamian government and lead to the formation of a government that was predominantly Arab. The negotiations were also required to safeguard the obligations and interests of the Mesopotamian government. The British set up a garrison in Mesopotamia to assert their authority and control. Cox’s role as High Commissioner also entailed preparing and submitting for approval the necessary measures that defined government relations.

Cox helped the British administration to expand and entrench its position in the region, securing British influence and interests, and guaranteeing British sovereignty over the country. Cox also played a fundamental role in facilitating the establishment of a civil administration in Basra and safeguarding Britain’s administrative control in Mesopotamia. His administrative role in Mesopotamia also protected India’s interests as the country was intimately involved in issues pertaining to the Gulf region. During his time in Mesopotamia, Cox also researched the history of the region to provide the intellectual foundation required for the expansion of the British Indian presence in

the region. As a way of documenting colonial knowledge, Cox would go into the field to collect information and he made an explicit commitment to acquire and construct the intellectual justification to support British India's control over Mesopotamia and other regions of the Arabian Gulf. Cox's skills as an advisor and diplomat were also tested during his service in Mesopotamia. He was expected to engage in difficult negotiations with the Arabian rulers. While engaging in political discussions and negotiations he also formed a relationship with most of the living rulers in the different states, and this allowed him to play a role in the formation and approval of successors in the region. Cox established an efficient method that he used in influencing the behavior and decision of foreign powers to act in the interest of the British government through both dialogue and negotiations. Therefore, Cox's role in Mesopotamia was majorly administrative as he engaged in negotiations to reduce conflicts in the Middle East, formed alliances with the local rulers and collected information that was crucial in promoting British knowledge of the region and establishing their control in Mesopotamia.

### iii) Cox's Role in the Establishment of the State of Iraq

Cox's role in Iraq was critical in the formation of the state of Iraq and in bringing an end to the British military rule in the country. By the end of the First World War, Iraq had become a part of the British Empire, while the Ottoman Empire allied with Austria and the Germans. The British had initially invaded and occupied Ottoman territories which form modern-day Iraq during the war, and the different Arabian groups supported the British and the French against the Ottoman Empire. However, the Arabs had revolted against the Ottomans in an attempt to form an independent Arab state, whereas the capture of Iraq by the British was an attempt to promote civil-state building and implement measures that would aid in the mobilization and extraction of local human resources, fodder and food. During the war, Britain made arrangements and negotiated with various Arabian leaders regarding the future of the Middle East region, and Cox played a crucial role in the dialogues. These agreements eventually shaped the relationship between the Middle East and Europe in the different regions of the Ottoman Empire.

After being sent over to Persia by Lord Curzon to negotiate an Anglo-Persian treaty, Cox returned to assume the role of High Commissioner in Iraq in 1920. As High Commissioner, the Supreme Allied Council had placed Cox under the British mandate. While in Iraq, he formed a ministry that was all Iraqi with a provincial administration that was supervised by the British. One of the measures he embraced was to create an administration which filled the vacuum that was left by the Ottoman provincial authorities as they retreated from Iraq. Cox's formation of a temporary administration was sanctioned on the condition that the Government of India would not transform this foreign



territory into an Indian district. Cox's role in Iraq was crucial in the the initial steps in the creation of a civil administration. He also engaged in dialogues and negotiations, facilitating the growth of a new nationalist government in Iraq, which acknowledged the social, economic and political grievances of the Iraqis. New socially and politically diverse groups were formed in Iraq in the protests against British rule. Young educated nationalists started becoming actively engaged in pro-independence propaganda and started working toward the unification of the Shia and Sunni groups against the British administration. The civil rights movements expanded beyond Baghdad to other cities in Iraq, laying the foundation for the formation of a nationalist movement that played a significant role in the creation of the Iraqi state.

Cox played a further crucial role in the organization of the Iraqi army in his role as High Commissioner. He also conducted a referendum in Iraq, which led to the election and crowning of King Faysal I, leading to the end of British rule in Iraq. He overcame serious challenges in the establishment of the Iraqi constitution and the formation of an efficient political structure that was used by the state. He then signed the Anglo-Iraq Treaty, which was ratified in 1924 and provided for a 20-year alliance between the nations. The creation of the Iraqi government was a measure used by the British colonial administrators as a strategy for ruling Iraq whilst keeping their influence hidden, as Cox helped in perpetuating British agendas. When King Faysal I developed a health condition that made him unable to rule, Cox took over as the acting King and asserted British control over Iraq until the King resumed his rule. Nonetheless, the creation of the new state of Iraq helped in curbing the open revolts against British rule that were experienced in the country. Cox's role in Iraq was crucial in ending the direct British rule and the creation of the state of Iraq. He then moved to Iran where he acted as Political Resident in Tehran during the conclusion of the Anglo-Iranian agreement.

#### iv) Cox's Role in Kuwait

Cox played a further fundamental role in the creation of the independent state of Kuwait. He worked to bring the sheikhs and rulers of Kuwait to support the British and he cultivated contacts and created a good relationship with them. Kuwait began its relations with India in 1899 when India paid the country a sum of money as a consideration as an incentive to discourage piracy among its people. Kuwait's relations with British India commenced after European powers had taken an interest in other regions in the Middle East. Germany was interested in Kuwait and the German government was considering establishing a Gulf terminus for a railway scheme in Kuwait. Moreover, Britain was also facing a potential threat from France and Russia, with the intent of the total collapse of British dominance in the Gulf waterway and much of the Arabian shore. Competition arose between the different European nations over the Gulf waterways and Kuwait happened to be one of the

key areas of interest. Therefore, the British needed to implement intelligence, diplomatic and military efforts in an attempt to curb the expansion of other European powers and secure its frontiers. However, the British had inadequate knowledge of geography, history and the current affairs of Kuwait, so they sought to repair the major information deficit in the British Indian government by sending Cox to Kuwait and utilizing his skills and expertise.

Cox served as a political agent in Kuwait, and he played a vital role in representing the Government of India there. His role in Kuwait was particularly vital in the Anglo-Ottoman Convention of 1913, where he facilitated the formation of the independent state of Kuwait within the Ottoman Empire. Cox's great diplomacy and dialogue skills also aided in improving his relations with local rulers and opened room for negotiations within the Government of Kuwait. The Anglo-Ottoman Convention of 1913 further helped in solidifying the international rights that Britain had in Kuwait. By establishing the state of Kuwait, provisions on international boundaries, trade, the Baghdad railway and oil concessions in the country were discussed at length, therefore safeguarding both Kuwait's and Britain's interests. Therefore, Cox played a vital role in crafting treaties, engaging in dialogue with local rulers and establishing rules which were fundamental in promoting Kuwait's autonomy as a state and protecting Britain's rights in the region.

### **Conclusion**

Cox is remembered in history as one of the most significant British Indian officers who offered excellent services in the Middle East. He served the British Indian government in various positions, among them being several diplomatic posts across the Middle East, serving in the army, acting as a High Commissioner, an administrator, a political agent and a key negotiator for various treaty agreements. He was instrumental to the British Indian government as he played a major role in helping restore good relations among states and protecting British interests in the Arabian Gulf. A skilled negotiator and advisor, he worked seamlessly with different Arabian leaders and developed great alliances that served the interests of the British Indian government well. He consistently sought to promote peace and stability in the Middle East through all means possible. He formed close friendships with the Sultans and sheikhs, which proved useful for the Middle Eastern region and for the British. His proficiency in the different Arabian languages and his attributes both as a leader and an officer made it easier for him to thrive in the various roles that he assumed in different parts of the Middle East, such as Kuwait, Mesopotamia, Iraq and Muscat. Cox's journeys and explorations were critical in shaping the region and redefining its political climate. By the time he retired, Cox had been highly successful

and was one of the most renowned British Indian officers in the Middle East of this time.

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