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A British Woman Agent in Mesopotamia: Gertrude Bell and her Historical Role

Mezopotamya’da Bir İngiliz Kadın Ajanı: Gertrude Bell ve Tarihsel Rolü

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Abstract

Irak’ın zengin petrol rezervleri, ticaret yollarına hâkimiyeti ve tarıma elverişli geniş zirai alanları emperyalist devletlerin bu bölgeye yoğunlaşmasına neden olmuştur. Ortadoğu’daki ticari ve siyasi menfaatleri nedeniyle bölgedeki varlığını daim kılmak isteyen İngiltere, Osmanlı Devleti’nden hoşnut olmayan Arap kabileleri ve aşiretleriyle doğrudan irtibata geçmiştir. Bu süreçte kullanmış olduğu yöntemlerden birisi de misyoner, arkeolog ve seyyah gibi ünvanlarla çalışan ajanları vasıtasıyla bölgede yürütülen istihbarat faaliyetleridir. “Çöl Kraliçesi” namıyla ünlenen Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) bu isimlerin başında gelmektedir. İngiltere, sömürge yolları üzerinde bulunan Irak coğrafyasını istihbarat uzmanları vasıtasıyla detaylı bir şekilde etüt ederek, kendi konumunu güçlendirici bir siyaset tayinine çabalamıştır. Gertrude Bell, Arap coğrafyasındaki kabile ve aşiretlerin haritalarını ve özelliklerini belirleyerek, yerel güçleri Türklere karşı İngiltere’nin yanında yer almaya ikna etmeye çalışmıştır. Newcastle Üniversitesi’ndeki Gertrude Bell Archive’da 1874-1926 yılları arasında yazılmış 1600 mektubundan ve 1877-1919 yılları arasında yazılmış günlüklerinden onun bu çalışmalarını takip etmek mümkündür. 1900’lü yılların başlarından itibaren Arap bölgesinde gerçekleştirdiği seyahatlerde demografik yapı, siyasal dinamikler ve mezhepsel ayrımlara odaklanmış; aşiretlerin bölgesel stratejik önemi hakkında değerli istihbarat bilgileri sağlamıştır. Ayrıca, mezhepsel ve etnik yapıyı analiz ederek, kabilelerin birbirleriyle, merkezi yönetimle ve yabancılarla olan ilişkilerini tespit etmek için çaba göstermiştir.

Öz

Iraq’s rich petroleum reserves, control over trade routes, and vast agricultural lands suitable for cultivation have drawn the attention of imperialist powers to the region. Due to its commercial and political interests in the Middle East, Britain sought to maintain its presence in the area and established direct contact with Arab tribes and clans that were dissatisfied with the Ottoman Empire. One of the methods employed in this process was the use of intelligence activities carried out by agents working under the guise of missionaries, archaeologists, and travelers. Among the most notable of these figures is Gertrude Bell (1868–1926), known as the “Queen of the Desert.” The British Empire aimed to thoroughly study the geography of Iraq, which lay along its colonial routes, through intelligence specialists in order to shape policies that would strengthen its position. Gertrude Bell attempted to map out the tribes and clans of the Arab world, identifying their characteristics and working to persuade local powers to side with Britain against the Turks. Her efforts can be traced through over 1,600 letters written between 1874 and 1926 and diaries kept between 1877 and 1919, which are preserved in the Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University. Starting from the early 1900s, her travels throughout the Arab region focused on demographic structures, political dynamics, and sectarian divisions. She provided valuable intelligence regarding the regional strategic importance of various tribes. Furthermore, she analyzed sectarian and ethnic structures, striving to determine the relationships between the tribes, central authorities, and foreign actors.

Keywords

Gertrude Bell · Iraq · Mesopotamia · Britain · Ottoman Empire · Arab Revolt



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**Anahtar
Kelimeler**

Gertrude Bell · Irak · Mezopotamya · İngiltere · Osmanlı İmparatorluğu · Arap İsyanı

1. Introduction

With the Industrial Revolution, Britain became the world's largest industrial power, a status that significantly influenced its foreign policy, shifting it towards a trade-oriented approach. In this context, Britain, increasingly dependent on raw materials and foreign markets to sustain its industry, pursued a path aimed at protecting and expanding its economic interests. This situation heightened the importance of strategic regions such as the land and sea routes to Britain's Far Eastern colonies, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Straits, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf. Consequently, the quest for raw materials and new markets in these regions became central to its foreign policy. However, the fact that these areas were under Ottoman control reshaped Britain's relationship with the Ottoman Empire, leading it to adopt a policy focused on preserving the territorial integrity of the Empire. Meanwhile, Britain sought to protect its commercial and strategic interests by pursuing a balance-of-power strategy against rival powers such as Germany, France, and Russia¹.

According to a secret agreement signed between France and Russia in 1800, France planned to establish dominance over the Eastern Mediterranean, encompassing Syria and Egypt, while Russia aimed to expel the British from India and create a vast eastern empire that would include India, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Bukhara region². Napoleon's attempt to invade Egypt, although targeting a territory of the Ottoman Empire, was primarily directed at Britain. The belief that the route to London passed through Egypt was the impetus behind this campaign. Britain, with its pragmatic, conservative, and balance-of-power-oriented foreign policy, responded to France's initiative by aligning itself with the Ottoman Empire in a way that served its own interests. Previously, Russia's expansionist move under Empress Catherine, marked by the annexation of Crimea and its southward territorial expansion, had also caused concern in Britain. The expansionist policies of both France and Russia toward the Mediterranean were viewed in London as actions that disrupted the balance of power in Europe³. The shift of inter-state rivalry back to the Mediterranean initiated the process that led Britain to place the Ottoman Empire at the center of its regional foreign policy. As seen, the fact that the routes to Britain's interests in the East passed through Ottoman territories compelled London to make this decision. Throughout the 19th century, the foreign policies of British statesmen such as William Pitt, Lord Palmerston, and Benjamin Disraeli were based on the principle of "preserving the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire".

In an environment where imperial rivalry was rapidly driving the world toward the First World War, Britain decided to fully mobilize all its institutional powers. The primary factor behind this decision was the realization that the Ottoman Empire could no longer maintain its territorial integrity, particularly against Russia. The 1877–78 Ottoman-Russian War clearly demonstrated this vulnerability. Britain recognized the risk of these strategically significant lands, closely tied to its own interests, falling under the control of another power. Britain's presence in Ottoman territories was motivated not only by strategic concerns such as securing the Indian trade route but also by a perceived social mission, often framed as "bringing civilization to the East." Thus, both material and moral motivations played a role in Britain's engagement

¹ Nurcan Özkaplan Yurdakul, *İngiltere Ortadoğu'ya Nasıl Girdi?*, Kronik Publishing, İstanbul, 2021, p.25-27.

² Osman Köse, "Hindistan'dan İngilizleri Kovma ve Yeni Bir Sömürge Kurmaya Yönelik Proje: Fransa – Rusya Gizli Görüşmeleri (1800)", *History Studies*, Vol.4, Issue 3, October 2012, p.87.

³ Peter Neville, *Historical Dictionary of British Foreign Policy*, Scarecrow Publishing, Plymouth, 2013, p. 243.

in the region. Imperialism, Liberalism, Conservatism, Orientalism, and Social Darwinism are known to be influential ideas shaping British foreign policy. While Britain advocated for a liberal economic approach, it maintained a conservative stance regarding the preservation of the existing political order. Social Darwinism, which argued that only the strong would survive and that those unable to adapt would disappear, and Orientalism, offering a social and political perspective based on the notion of “advanced” and “backward” civilizations, influenced the British Foreign Office. Both served as ideological frameworks that legitimized the imperial policies of the era.

On the other hand, many leading educational institutions that trained the ruling elite such as Eton, Oxford, and Cambridge were implementing a curriculum that instilled this perspective. Consequently, when graduates from these institutions reached important state positions, they inevitably drew upon what they had learned in the formulation and execution of policies. In this context, it can be said that serving the British Empire was regarded as equivalent to serving civilization and humanity, and thus, for many members of the ruling elite, being in the service of Britain was regarded as a mark of superiority. This social structure, whether intentionally or not, eventually transformed serving England’s interests into a family tradition. This cognitive framework facilitated the establishment of a robust intelligence network by providing England with voluntary servants. Indeed, the primary duty of every British citizen who underwent such an educational process was to serve the interests of Great Britain, regardless of where they resided in the world. These individuals, privileged by their education as British citizens, were not to act merely as ordinary citizens in their respective locales but were missioned to behave as political, military, economic, and cultural representatives of their country with a sacred mission. Consequently, even in the absence of an official mandate, many British travelers, explorers, missionaries, artists, and merchants were observed to spontaneously prepare reports about the places they visited and present them to their homeland. Many of these reports made significant contributions to the foreign policy initiatives of British statesmen and institutions⁴. It can be asserted that the primary objective of these institutions was to establish the necessary conditions and foundation for England’s noble interests. As demonstrated, Britain maintained its presence in all areas of interest through both institutions and missioned individuals it had trained, aiming to create conditions and a groundwork conducive to British interests. One such individual was Gertrude Bell, who worked tirelessly day and night for Britain’s interests in Iraq and achieved significant success.

1.1. An Adventure from Oxford to the East: Gertrude Bell’s Journeys and Observations

1.2. The Life and Career of Gertrude Bell

Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell was born on July 14, 1868, in County Durham, in the northeast of England, to a wealthy noble family of merchants⁵. Growing up within such a social stratum afforded Gertrude Bell significant privileges. A successful education, access to elite political circles, and a profound interest in art, literature, and history were only some of the advantages she enjoyed. She pursued a career path unusual for a woman in Victorian England by entering Oxford University in 1886, where she made history as the top graduate in Modern History. A well-educated and adventurous individual, Gertrude Bell embarked on her first journey to the East shortly after graduation, visiting her uncle, Sir Frank Lascelles, the ambassador to Iran. Prior to her trip, she studied Persian, and in 1894, she published her observations of Iran in a book titled *Safar Nameh: Persian Pictures*. During this period, she attained near-fluency in Persian, even translating Hafez’s Divan into English by 1897. In 1899, she traveled to Jerusalem to study Arabic, and from April to

⁴Riyad N. Er-Reyyis, *Osmanlının Çöküş Döneminde Arap Casusları*, Trans. D. Ahsen Batur, Selenge Publishing, İstanbul, 2006.

⁵Rosemary O’Brien, *Gertrude Bell: The Arabian Diaries, 1913-1914*, Syracuse University Publishing, 2000, p. 4; T. Niyazi Karaca, *Sınırları Çizen Kadın-İngiliz Casus Gertrude Bell*, Kronik Publishing, İstanbul, 2018, p. 41.

June 1900, she explored Palestine and Damascus. She joined the excavations at the ancient city of Palmyra (Tadmor), located approximately 200 kilometers northeast of Damascus. Equipped with her camera, which she always carried, Bell meticulously documented the noteworthy places and people she encountered, amassing an extensive photographic collection. Additionally, she applied her visual intelligence to create maps of the region, which would later prove invaluable to the British government. Another notable aspect of her travels was her assessments based on information she gathered about Germany. In October 1898, German Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm II visited Jerusalem and its surroundings. Bell observed and recorded public reactions to his visit, noting in a letter dated March 2, 1900, that Germany’s growing influence in the Levant was increasingly leading Arabs to sympathize with the British. She also remarked that Arabs, regardless of whether they were dealing with tourists or colonizers, harbored a strong dislike for Germans, and that the Emperor’s visit had only intensified this sentiment⁶.

1.3. The Formation and Effects of Gertrude Bell’s Interest in the Middle East

Gertrude Bell was born into a society that esteemed the acquisition of knowledge as a source of pleasure and venerated exploration and discovery. Driven by her innate curiosity and efforts to understand the world, she continued her expeditions to the region for a decade following 1900. In this context, she undertook her second major expedition in 1905. She began her journey in January, traveling across the entirety of what is now Syria before redirecting her path toward Anatolia. By May, Gertrude Bell had arrived in Istanbul. During her third major expedition in 1907, her route was predominantly through Mesopotamia. In this regard, she commenced her journey from Damascus and reached Aleppo by delineating a crescent-shaped path. Consequently, by completing all geographical segments of the region, she acquired comprehensive knowledge of its characteristics. After extensive visits to Istanbul, Tehran, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Baghdad, Gertrude Bell dedicated her final major expedition to the deserts of Arabia. In 1913, she embarked on her journey to Hail, which conferred upon her the title of “*Queen of the Desert*.” Moreover, throughout her travels, she had the opportunity to closely observe the struggle between the two rival local powers, Ibn Rashid and Ibn Saud⁷. Based on her observations, she noted in her diary, “*the future belongs to Ibn Saud*”⁸. As a result of her expeditions, Gertrude Bell discovered that there was no inherent cohesion within the geography of the Middle East and that tribal structures constituted the predominant power. Through her journeys, Bell sought the cornerstone of social equilibrium and ultimately found what she was searching for. By observing that daily life in this region was conducted through tribal affiliations, she developed her own theory that, following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, only these tribal frameworks would remain intact.

As demonstrated, Gertrude Bell, who placed learning new cultures and different languages at the center of her life, undertook expeditions to regions such as Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Mesopotamia at various times. During these travels, she participated in archaeological expeditions, discovered and documented significant historical relics, and contributed to archaeological research. Bell played a pivotal role in uncovering the legacy of ancient civilizations in the Mesopotamian region and subsequently in the establishment of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. Additionally, throughout her extensive travels across this vast geography, including desert areas, she forged close relationships with local tribes, gathered information about these tribes, documented their lifestyles, interregional transit routes, strategic locations, and water sources, thereby accumulating crucial data on the region’s topography and mapping its geography. The information she acquired had a significant impact on the academic world as well as on Britain’s military and

⁶“Letter from Gertrude Bell to Her Stepmother, Dame Florence Bell”, Jerusalem, 2 March 1900, *Newcastle University Gertrude Bell Archive*.

⁷Raymond P. Dougherty, “Miss Gertrude L. Bell”, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 23 (Oct., 1926), pp. 28-29.

⁸“Diary Entry by Gertrude Bell”, 2 March 1914, *Newcastle University Gertrude Bell Archive*.

political strategies in the region. Furthermore, Bell’s work led to her rapid recognition as a Middle Eastern expert and opened the necessary doors for her to work at the Arab Bureau in Cairo, where Britain was shaping the Middle East.

1.4. Intelligence in the Middle East within the Scope of British Imperial Aims: The Encounter of Gertrude Bell and T. E. Lawrence

Gertrude Bell visited the Carchemish excavation site, located approximately five hundred meters from the construction zone near the Upper Euphrates of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway, which was being built by the Germans and was at that time considered a threat to Britain’s trade and influence in the Persian Gulf. Carchemish served as an observation point where the British in the region relayed their observations, letters, and photographs concerning the Germans back to England for evaluation. On May 20, 1911, Gertrude Bell came to the excavation site to visit David Hogarth, who was conducting excavations at the ancient city of Carchemish; during this visit, she met Thomas Edward Lawrence, with whom she would later collaborate in the Arab Revolt⁹. In a letter dated May 21, 1911, to her stepmother, Gertrude Bell described Lawrence as “a strange young man”¹⁰.

Gertrude Bell and Lawrence both operated in the Middle East during the First World War, working to support Britain’s interests in the region. Prior to the war, Gertrude Bell extensively traveled throughout the area, establishing deep relationships with Arab tribes in Iraq and Syria and gathering intelligence. Lawrence, on the other hand, worked to support the Arab Revolt initiated against the Ottoman Empire in the Arabian Peninsula. Lawrence, a key figure in the 1915 Arab Revolt, during which Arabs rose against the Ottoman Empire in their pursuit of independence, served in the Arab Bureau in Cairo, an intelligence organization. There, he gathered information on the locations and objectives of Turkish forces in Syria and Palestine, prepared maps, conducted interrogations, and provided guidance on the attitudes, political strategies, and interactions with the local population for those engaged in warfare in the Middle East. He also published special bulletins for these purposes.¹¹As seen, both Lawrence and Bell supplied intelligence to the British during the war and played critical roles in shaping British policies in the Arab world. After the British capture of Baghdad in 1917, Gertrude Bell joined the British Political Bureau in Baghdad. Following her appointment, she began collaborating with Lawrence on Arab policies, finding common ground in their support and understanding of Arab nationalism. Together, they worked toward the goal of placing Faisal, son of Arab leader Sharif Hussein, as the King of Iraq¹².

1.5. Britain’s Imperial Strategy in the Middle East: The Historical Role of Gertrude Bell

In the final period of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the Arab regions, unity of opinion had been lost, and the Committee of Union and Progress (İttihat Terakki) government was searching for its own formulas to restore it. Since the blocs prior to the Great War had now crystallized, the Ottoman Empire remained the sole power that could threaten Britain’s interests in the East. “The security of the Indian trade route and Iranian oil” were important issues to which Britain attached great sensitivity. It was necessary to protect these areas not only by ensuring land and sea security but also against internal dynamics. Therefore, it was imperative to act with an understanding of the components of social balance and the principal actors in

⁹Karaca, *Sınırları Çizen Kadın*, p.148-149; Janet Wallach, *Çöl Kraliçesi*, Trans. Püren Özgören, Can Publishing, İstanbul, 2004, p. 141.

¹⁰“Letter from Gertrude Bell to Her Stepmother, Dame Florence Bell”, 21 May 1911, *Newcastle University Gertrude Bell Archive*.

¹¹For details, see: Nazmiye Yozgat, Cengiz Kartın, “Arap Bürosu’nun Gizli Raporları: Arap Bülteni”, *Sinop University Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol.5, Issue 2, 2021, pp.247-286.

¹²Orhan Koloğlu, *Lawrence Efsanesi*, Yeditepe Publishing, İstanbul, 2018, p. 18 et al; T. E. Lawrence, *Çölde İsyan Osmanlı Ortadoğu’yu Nasıl Kaybetti?*, Trans. Oğuz Satır, Kronik Publishing, İstanbul, 2023, p.10; Karl E. Meyer-Shareen B. Brysac, *Ortadoğu Tarihi-Kral Yaratanlar*, Trans. Emine Eminel, Ankara, 2016, p. 280-300.

critical regions. It is worth noting immediately that the Ottoman Empire’s ability to maintain its presence in these territories under its sovereignty largely depended on strengthening its defense by organizing local tribes in its favor.

To protect the Indian trade route and Iranian oil from potential threats, Britain unilaterally abolished Ottoman sovereignty by annexing Cyprus on November 5, 1914, and Egypt on December 18, 1914. Additionally, on November 3, 1914, British forces landed in the Persian Gulf and established a presence in Abadan, near Iran’s oil fields. Given the necessity to maintain control over the region’s social structure, Gertrude Bell, who possessed an intimate understanding of the area’s social fabric, proved to be exceptionally well-suited for this role. In the summer of 1914, while in London, Gertrude Bell went to France to work with the Red Cross following the outbreak of the war¹³. However, at the end of 1915, her life entered a new phase with an invitation she received one morning from David Hogarth. Hogarth had written, “*only you can map Northern Arabia, where no one can trace*”, and a week after this correspondence, Gertrude Bell went to Cairo. In Cairo, she began working at the Arab Bureau with Hogarth and Lawrence, whom she knew very well, but she did not stay there for long. At the beginning of 1916, due to communication difficulties arising in the relations between Basra and India, she was assigned to Basra by the Viceroy of India, Lord Hardinge. Gertrude Bell’s mission soon became clear: “*To convey information about the local tribes to the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force*”. Quite pleased with the task assigned to her, Gertrude Bell described her state of mind in a letter dated May 14, 1916, in which she wrote that her work was more political than military: “*I have begun to feel that I am truly being useful. I know the Arabs very well. The intimacy and friendship I established with them before are now benefiting me*”¹⁴.

It is evident that, throughout this mission, the “Queen of the Desert” served Britain well. By gathering intelligence on tribes and clans, she wrote reports advising the British administration on the strategies and rhetoric they should adopt. She met individually with tribal and clan leaders, exerting considerable effort to encourage them to side with the British against the Turks¹⁵. Her primary mission was to orchestrate a domino effect among Arab tribes against the Ottoman Empire, thereby playing a historic role in the event known as the Arab Revolt. According to Sir Percy Cox, a British colonial administrator and diplomat who served as the High Commissioner for Iraq, Gertrude Bell rendered great services to Britain through her extensive experience with Arab traditions and Bedouin customs, as well as the knowledge she had gained from her previous travels and the people she had encountered¹⁶. Cox continues, stating, “*It was through her that we learned how interdependent the tribal issues between Iraq and Syria truly are*”¹⁷. Additionally, from Cox’s accounts, we learn that Gertrude Bell possessed enough knowledge to prepare an informational note on each tribe¹⁸. David Hogarth, one of the influential figures of the Arab Bureau, also mentioned that Bell’s notes on the Shia tribes along the banks of the Euphrates proved highly useful during the Great War¹⁹. In the atmosphere of the time, the general consensus was that there was hardly anyone who hadn’t heard of the “Queen of the Desert” or didn’t know her personally. Indeed, poems were even written for her, referring

¹³Elizabeth Monroe, “Gertrude Bell (1868-1926)”, *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)*, Vol. 7, Issue 1, 1980, p. 17-18.

¹⁴Monroe, *ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁵For a detailed reading on the subject, see: Gertrude L. Bell, *Mezopotamya’da 1915-1920 Sivil Yönetimi*, Trans. Vedii İlmen, Yaba Publishing, İstanbul, 2004.

¹⁶Percy Cox, Gilbert Clayton, Hugh Bell and William Goodenough, “Gertrude Bell’s Journey to Hayil: Discussion”, *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 70, No. 1, July, 1927, pp. 17-25, p. 18.

¹⁷Cox et. al., *ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁸Cox et. al., *ibid.*, p. 17-19.

¹⁹D. G. Hogarth, “Gertrude Bell’s Journey to Hayil”, *The Geographical Journal*, Vol.70, No.1, July 1927, p. 16.

to her as “Umm al-Mu’minun,” or “Mother of the Faithful”²⁰. Janet Wallach observed on this topic, “There was no one who could build relationships with sheikhs and influential figures as effectively as Gertrude. She not only knew many of them by name but was also acquainted with their sons and brothers. She had sat in their tents and salons, shared their coffee, and broken bread with them”²¹. Indeed, she possesses a profound knowledge of the regional tribes, sufficient to inform Emir Faisal, who ascended the throne of the newly established Kingdom of Iraq as its first king after the war. In a letter to her father dated August 8, 1921, she wrote, “to give a lesson on tribal geography, I went to Faisal’s house at 4 o’clock, bringing along the tribal maps with me”²². As can be observed, over time Gertrude Bell acquired an undeniable influence and control over the Arab tribes and clans.

Based on her past observations, Gertrude Bell included the following insights in her compilation of information: the tribes were dissatisfied with the administration, and their rebellion was inevitable. She attributes this to Turkish oppression and misrule, further noting that she has no doubt this attitude will ultimately serve their own interests²³. Gertrude Bell, as an outspoken Liberal and supporter of Gladstone²⁴ held the belief that the British could successfully govern this region, where the Ottoman Empire struggled to maintain control. Despite her hatred for Islam²⁵, the desire that compelled her to work in the desert, according to Wallach, was the significance she attached to the British Empire. Wallach further wrote, “her doctrine centered on the belief that the British were chosen to rule the World.”²⁶

At the core of her work, the connections she established, and all her future-oriented calculations were Britain’s regional interests. In this context, it can be argued that, as reflected in Gertrude Bell’s correspondence, Britain had two objectives in the region. The first was to terminate Turkish dominance in the Middle East. The second was to prevent Germany from extending its influence into this area. In a letter to her father dated August 11, 1916, she wrote, “I don’t think the Turks have much time left in Mesopotamia. The Ottoman Government appears to have vanished everywhere except for a few towns and Baghdad”²⁷. Similarly, in a letter of the same nature from March 1917, she remarked, “The German dream over the Near East-Berlin-Baghdad and others has come to an end”²⁸. These statements underscore her perspective on the situation. Emphasizing that the Germans had faced setbacks in the Middle East, Gertrude Bell consistently asserted that Britain would transform the region into a center of Arab civilization and prosperity, further expressing her intention to play a leading role in this historic mission. Her greatest dream was the establishment of an independent Arab state or states in the Arab region, but under British control.

The fundamental element that would enable her to realize this idea was based on the strategy of exploiting the sociological fragmentation of the region. In other words, she thought that the religious, ethnic, and political divisions of the Arab geography could offer her the opportunity she was seeking. A letter she wrote to her father during the unrest in Iraq, which occurred against the British mandate granted at the San Remo Conference in April 1920 and later turned into a rebellion, contained important information in this regard. “The extremists here”, said Gertrude Bell, “have captured a position that is very difficult to combat:

²⁰Koloğlu, *Lawrence Efsanesi*, p.104.

²¹Wallach, *Çöl Kraliçesi*, p. 249.

²²“Letter from Gertrude Bell to Her Father, Sir Hugh Bell”, Bağdat, 8 July 1921, *Newcastle University Gertrude Bell Archive*.

²³“Letter from Gertrude Bell to Her Stepmother, Dame Florence Bell”, 12 February 1905, *Newcastle University Gertrude Bell Archive*.

²⁴R. Bodley, L. Hearst, *Gertrude Bell*, Macmillan, First Printing, New York, 1940, p. 13.

²⁵“Letter from Gertrude Bell to Her Father, Sir Hugh Bell”, Bağdat, 7 February 1921, *Newcastle University Gertrude Bell Archive*.

²⁶Wallach, *Çöl Kraliçesi*, p. 85.

²⁷“Letter from Gertrude Bell to Her Father, Sir Hugh Bell”, Basra, 11 August 1916, *Newcastle University Gertrude Bell Archive*.

²⁸“Letter from Gertrude Bell to Her Father, Sir Hugh Bell”, Basra, 10 March 1917, *Newcastle University Gertrude Bell Archive*.

the unity of Shiites and Sunnis, the unity of Islam. And they are pursuing these with all their might"²⁹. This was the real danger for Britain and Gertrude Bell.

As described above, despite her unwavering belief that Britain would make the Middle East a center of Arab civilization and prosperity, Gertrude Bell did not shy away from criticizing mistakes made in the region when necessary. Indeed, on the day the British military unit was captured in Kut al-Amara, April 29, 1916, expressed the following criticisms in a letter she sent home: *"...We had to proceed without considering a traditional, comprehensive political framework. To date, we have viewed Mesopotamia as an isolated part rather than a section of Arabia. However, the politics of this region are inseparably connected to the broader and more comprehensive Arab issue... Perhaps if thought had been given in London to guiding Arab policy and developing an Arab strategy, the situation would have been completely different; this could have been achieved successfully only within the country itself..."*³⁰

The events that erupted in Iraq in the summer of 1920 forced Britain to seek a solution. In light of these developments, it was decided to hold a conference on Iraq, which convened on March 12, 1921, in Cairo. Organized under the auspices of Colonial Secretary Churchill, the conference was attended by forty participants, including Gertrude Bell, T.E. Lawrence, and Percy Cox, figures widely regarded as authorities on the Middle East. The Cairo Conference played a pivotal role in shaping modern Iraq, as it was during this meeting that Emir Faisal was appointed King of Iraq, an outcome strongly influenced by Gertrude Bell's recommendations. However, it was decided that Faisal would assume his power through an election, rather than by British imposition, with the belief that this would positively resonate with the Iraqi public as a manifestation of their own free will³¹. Regarding this matter, Gertrude Bell wrote to her father on June 23, 1921, stating, *"We have cast our dice. We will see in a few days whether we have won. According to his supporters, Faisal's arrival will signal the start of great celebrations. I hope this is the case, as it would make our work incredibly easier"*³². Gertrude Bell also took on the task of managing the plebiscite process. With great enthusiasm, she established all the necessary groundwork to ensure that no issues would arise during the election. While designing a provisional flag for the new state, she also addressed potential opposition figures who might oppose Faisal³³. As a result of the plebiscite held on August 23, 1921, in which Faisal received ninety-six percent of the votes, he was crowned as Iraq's first king in Baghdad, commencing his reign to the tune of "God Save the King" played by the British military band³⁴. Gertrude Bell played a significant role in Faisal's ascent to the Iraqi throne³⁵. A noteworthy record in this regard is the statement made by Fahad and Ali Suleiman, two of western Iraq's most powerful sheikhs, during a meeting in which Gertrude Bell was present: *"We pledge allegiance to you because the British accept you"*³⁶. Here, the respect for British power among the tribes and clans was once again evident.

²⁹Ali A. Allawi, *Irak Kralı I. Faysal*, Trans. Hakan Abacı, Türkiye İş Bankası Publishing, İstanbul, 2016, p. 432.

³⁰"Letter from Gertrude Bell to Her Stepmother, Dame Florence Bell", 29 April 1916, *Newcastle University Gertrude Bell Archive*.

³¹For detail: Peter Mansfield, *Ortadoğu Tarihi*, Trans. Ümit Hüsrev Yolsal, Sal Publishing, İstanbul, 2012, p. 268.

³²Allawi, *Irak Kralı I. Faysal*, p. 437-438.

³³İsmail Şahin, Cemile Şahin, Samet Yüce, "Birinci Dünya Savaşı Sonrası İngiltere'nin Irak'ta Devlet Kurma Çabaları", *Gazi Akademik Bakış*, Vol. 8, Issue 15, Winter 2014, p. 126.

³⁴Şahin et al., *ibid.*, p. 126; Karl E. Meyer-Shareen B. Brysac, *Ortadoğu Tarihi*, p. 298-299.

³⁵Arthur Goldschmidt, Jr. Lawrence Davidson, *A Concise History of The Middle East*, Westview Publishing, Colorado, 2006, p. 213-214.

³⁶Allawi, *Irak Kralı I. Faysal*, p. 542.

2. Conclusion

Gertrude Bell played a critical role in shaping Britain’s Middle East policy during and after World War I, particularly through her efforts to safeguard British interests in Mesopotamia. She undertook significant diplomatic and intelligence missions on behalf of Britain in Mesopotamia, actively contributing to the political structuring of the region, managing relations with the local population, and reinforcing British dominance in the area.

Gertrude Bell has secured her place in history as an important figure who did not hesitate to use her knowledge and expertise for the sake of Britain’s interests. Her research and the documents she prepared on Arabia, Iraq, and Syria (Palestine) were utilized by British intelligence services throughout the war. She played a significant role in causing Arab tribes and clans to take a stand against the Turks. In addition, she constantly reminded that Britain was under an “inescapable responsibility” necessitated by its regional interests in Iraq. In this context, she persistently asserted that Britain could prevent Germany from infiltrating and settling in the region.

Gertrude Bell argued that certain conditions were essential for Britain to maintain a lasting presence in Iraq. In this context, she strongly advocated for the continuation of hereditary privileges, the ongoing assurance of protection against the Turks, and the establishment of religious freedoms. She also vehemently opposed any developments that might foster renewed cooperation between Turks and Arabs. According to Bell, who recommended a strong propaganda campaign against the Ottoman Empire in Iraq, the essence of this propaganda should focus on portraying the Ottoman Empire as a crumbling and irreversible power, continually reminding the people of Turkish oppression and decay. At the same time, it was essential to emphasize a vision of Britain as modern, liberal, wealthy, and powerful. Additionally, existing sectarianism and ethnic divisions should be strategically considered.

Gertrude Bell emphasized the inevitability of cooperating with local powers for success in the Middle East, while firmly believing that British civilization needed to be conveyed to them. With this belief, she endeavored to disseminate British culture within the Kingdom of Iraq. She played an active role in the establishment of the Baghdad Museum and served as its director for many years. As can be understood, Gertrude Bell’s mission in Mesopotamia played a vital role in shaping Britain’s policies in the region and in establishing Iraq’s modern political structure. As both a diplomat and a cultural leader, she was influential in the decision-making processes that determined the future of the region. Gertrude Bell was found dead in Baghdad on July 12, 1926.

As demonstrated, Gertrude Bell stands as one of the most significant examples of how Britain was able to institutionalize its imperial vision through individuals via its established educational model.



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