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Mosul, the Ottoman legacy and the League of Nations

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Abstract

This article looks into the workings of the special Commission on Mosul sent by the League of Nations after World War I. The Commission was assigned to determine whether the province of Mosul should be part of the new Republic of Turkey or of British mandatory Iraq. Its chief guiding principal was the new notion of national self-determination. Yet the people of Mosul, like other Ottoman communities, had belonged to multiple groups simultaneously, identifying by family, location, occupation and faith. Such plural notions of identity were inconsistent with the nation-state model that had recently been reified by the League of Nations. The effort to define affiliations based on a European taxonomy that emphasized ethnicity and nation clashed with Mosulis' older Ottoman-style affiliations, proved initially confusing and then quite frustrating to the Commissioners.

Keywords

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By the time the League of Nations was called in to decide the fate of the province of Mosul in 1925, British institutions had already begun to transform the province. Marching into Mosul days *after* the armistice ending World War I, the British held no legal claim to the area. Nonetheless, over the course of the next 7 years, the British government severed Mosul's relations with Anatolia and Syria and began redirecting Mosul's society and economy south toward Britain's official mandate that included Baghdad and Basra. The League of Nations' Commissioners, assigned to determine whether the province of Mosul should be part of the new Republic of Turkey or of British mandatory Iraq, had expected to make their decision based on the criteria of Europe's new gospel of self-determination. Mosul's Ottoman legacy, whose institutions had been largely swept away by 7 years of British imperial rule, continued nonetheless to resonate with the province's population.

Great Britain's presence in Mosul was quite evident from the League Commissioner's first appearance in the province. It was clear that the new European imperial power held sway in the contested area. Everywhere the Commissioners went, they encountered British police and British government agents. Although the British were only one of the two parties claiming the province, their presence on the ground gave them marked advantage over Turkey, the other claimant. British officials distributed Iraqi flags among Mosul's population, coached them on how to respond to the League Commissioners' questions, imprisoned those who supported Turkey's claims, and controlled the movements of the visitors. They had created

new conditions, economic and administrative structures that framed the way the Commissioners viewed the situation in the province. In the end, Great Britain's presence in the contested region had overwhelming influence first in the League of Nations Commissions' process and progress through the region, and, second, in the conditions they observed that would ultimately determine the outcome of their deliberations.

Regarding 'self-determination', the most important League criteria, however, British efforts proved ineffective. The British had not yet had time to transform the collective identities of Mosul's population. Until World War I, Mosul's population had ascribed to an earlier, Ottoman mode of affiliation. Linguistic and ethnic diversity had characterized Mosul for centuries; its people reflected Mosul's location as a geographic transition zone and an economic distribution centre. Mosul's population had long been connected by family and trade networks to Turkey and Syria, newly created and suddenly separate states. Ottoman Mosulis had belonged to multiple groups simultaneously, identifying by family, location, occupation and faith. However, such pragmatic and plural notions of identity prevalent among the Ottomans were inconsistent – perhaps a liability – under the nation-state model that had recently been reified by the League of Nations. Characterized by fluidity and mobility, this 'circulation mode' of affiliation was essential to allow Ottoman populations to circulate, to carry out trade, to create connections across the vast empire. As the multinational, multilingual Ottoman Empire was replaced by nation-states created according to European models, such circulation identities had to give way to a new politics based on exclusive, 'national', fixed identities, affiliations that would ensure that every member of the new territorial entity was connected primarily with all of the others within the new national space – and just as crucially, that each member remain alien from those of the neighbouring space. A new ecology of affiliation would, presumably, have to follow the shift from empire to nation-state.

By the time the League Commission arrived in Mosul in 1925, her people had not yet had time to revise their affiliation according to the European model that historians call nationalism. Moreover, since Mosul retained her ambiguous position, still positioned as a crossroads, now between the new states of Iraq and Turkey, Mosulis still did not have a national community to which they should imagine themselves as belonging. Thus, despite the identity-based emphasis of their project, the League of Nations Commissioners were ultimately unable to decide what the local people would prefer based on their own European understanding of self-determination of peoples. Their effort to define affiliations based on a European taxonomy that emphasized ethnicity and nation crashed into Mosulis' older Ottoman-style affiliations, which proved initially confusing and then quite frustrating to the Commissioners.

Whither Mosul?

The disputed province had been part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries.[1] As the empire worked to strengthen the central government, the Sultan appointed his own governor for Mosul province to replace the long-running local rule of the Jalili family in 1834. The Tanzimat reforms were

1 Khoury, Dina Rizk (2002), *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540–1834*, Cambridge University Press; Kemp, Percy (1982), *Territories d'Islam: Le monde vu de Mossoul au XVIIIe*, Sindbad.

introduced into Mosul as they were throughout the empire, regularizing citizenship rights, reorganizing the military and changing land tenure systems. Mosul's strong ties to its own rural and tribal hinterland continued to provide both its greatest prosperity and its most compelling political challenges, while her connections to her broader region (Anatolia, Syria and Iran) offered unrivalled trading opportunities. Throughout the century before World War I, Mosul's economy and society had remained strongly tied to its broader region, a region that included eastern Anatolia, Syria and Iran. While grain exports followed the rivers downstream to Baghdad and Basra, most of Mosul's textiles, leather goods and animal products were traded north and west in an extensive exchange that both followed and reinforced family, commercial and tribal networks.[2]

When France and England met to allocate Ottoman territory in the midst of World War I, Mosul was included within the French sphere, reflecting the province's long-term connection with Syria and southern Anatolia. It was during the negotiations between the two Great Powers at the end of World War I that the French relinquished Mosul to Britain's responsibility in exchange for a share of Mosul's oil.[3] The League of Nations soon assigned France the mandate for Syria, while giving the Iraq mandate to Great Britain. It became clear that, with the division of the Middle East by the European victors, Mosul would have to be severed from at least two of its former partners. Syria was under French control, Turkey was a newly independent republic, and Baghdad was ruled by Britain.

The League of Nations had assigned Britain the mandate for Iraq at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, with Mosul's fate still undecided. Nonetheless, Britain remained the occupying force, and extended her administration throughout the province. As in Baghdad and the other areas, Political Officers were stationed in each provincial centre (and Assistant Political Officers in each district centre) to 'advise' the native administration. When in 1920 British officials formally consulted Iraqis over their future independence (a process they inaccurately called a plebiscite), they included Mosul in the proceedings.

Nonetheless, the Mosul province remained unassigned, claimed by both Britain and Turkey. The two countries remained locked in conflict even after the armistice. An insurrectionary group within the Ottoman Empire had refused to recognize the 1920 Sèvres treaty that would have dismantled the Ottoman Empire and apportioned its territories among the European powers, even after it was signed by the Ottoman Sultan. The alternative government they organized created a National Pact relinquishing areas of the Ottoman Empire deemed not to be Turkish, but including Mosul within the territories they insisted should be part of the Republic they hoped to create. Mosul's fate remained uncertain even after the Republic of Turkey was recognized with the Armistice of Mudanya in October 1922, and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne indicated that Turkey and Iraq would meet to try to agree on the future status of the disputed province. Each of the parties laid claim to the province based on history, geography, ethnography, and the law. By the time negotiations over Mosul ended unsuccessfully in May 1924, the parties were farther apart than they had been at the beginning. Turkey and Great Britain agreed to send the dispute to the League of Nations, and to be bound by its decision.

2 Shields, Sarah (2000), *Mosul before Iraq*, SUNY Press.

3 Sluglett, Peter (2007), *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, Columbia University Press, 251 note 61; Dockrill, Michael L. and Douglas Goold, J. (1981), *Peace without Promise : Britain and the Peace Conferences, 1919–1923*, Archon Books, p. 145.

Thus, by the time the talks promised in the Lausanne treaty collapsed in 1924, Great Britain had been in control of the Mosul province for 6 years. Britain (one of the founders of the League of Nations) and Turkey (one of its newest members) agreed that the League would decide the outcome of the conflict over Mosul.

League of Nations commission

The politically popular ideology of self-determination required that the League of Nations find out what political fate would be most desired by the local population. Although Turkey pushed for a plebiscite to determine Mosul's views, the British lobbied successfully against it. A Commission appointed by the League decided instead to travel to the province to evaluate the best resolution for the dispute.

Seeking to shore up support for the Anglo-Iraqi government, King Faysal travelled around the province, according to British official C.J. Edmonds. 'He was making a grand tour of the northern liwas with a view to rallying sentiment before the arrival of the League Commission'.[4] When the Commissioners arrived, they received a long note from the King, in which he articulated the role he claimed for Mosul in the life of his country. For Faysal, as for the British, Mosul had already become part of Iraq; a decision in favour of Turkey would be overturning what they considered an existing reality.

> The bringing into existence and consolidation of a permanent Government in Iraq is dependent on the preservation of the status quo, as I consider it is impossible, both strategically and economically, for a Government in Baghdad to live if Mosul is detached from it and held by another Government. Nor can a real life be hoped for the people of Iraq without Mosul. . . . Therefore I consider that Mosul is to Iraq as the head is to the rest of the body; and it my unshakeable conviction that, though the question is only one of fixing a boundary between Iraq and Turkey, it is nevertheless and in fact the question of the Iraq as a whole.

Faysal's argument rested heavily on his contention that the Republic of Turkey was, like its Ottoman predecessor, historically and intrinsically expansionist. Only a frontier north of the Mosul province would secure Iraq, he claimed, especially in the absence of a large military force–a force that would be impossible to sustain without Mosul in any case. Moreover, Faisal suggested that foreign capitalists would be unwilling to invest in the insecure country that would result if Mosul was detached from Iraq. 'If for any reason the Commission may consider that it should recommend to the League of Nations any alteration or modification of the present frontiers of Iraq', the King concluded, 'it should at the same time recommend to the League the choice of a new status for the Iraq in its entirety, and it shall be responsible for the destinies of this mass of human beings'.[5]

The British/Iraq government, which already controlled security and administration in the Mosul province despite its disputed status, assumed itself likewise to be responsible for the safety of the three League Commissioners and their staff. As Britain's goal was to maintain the status quo, they saw the very presence of the Commission as a potential threat to

4 Edmonds, C.J. (1957), *Kurds, Turks and Arabs: Politics, Travel and Research in North-Eastern Iraq 1919–1925*, Oxford University Press, (Hereafter, Edmonds), p. 392. Lyon described the visit, 141–145.

5 League of Nations, Question of the Frontier between Turkey and Iraq, Report submitted to the Council by the Commission instituted by the Council Resolution of 30 September 1924. (Hereafter, Report) Quoting Faysal letter, p. 7.

their continuing authority over Mosul. The League's decision to consult the local population, necessary if self-determination was to be the guiding philosophy, would encourage those consulted to consider (and even advocate) the end of British control in Mosul. Thus, on the one hand, the British administration felt compelled to provide support for the League project, while at the same time working to minimize the possible threats to its own rule that might result if all sectors of the population were permitted to express views of their own ideal future.

Indeed, British official fears of the League process got the whole project off to a very bad start. From the beginning, Iraqi/British officials insisted on restricting the movement of the representatives assigned by Ankara to accompany the Commission, claiming that the mandatory regime would be unable to provide them with adequate protection. Worse, the Anglo-Iraqi government challenged the men who had been appointed as Turkish representatives before the group even left Baghdad. Cevat Pasa, was the ranking army officer responsible for Mosul's neighbouring province across the Turkish border. According to the British, his assistants Nazim Bey and Fettah Bey were Iraqi nationals wanted for criminal activity. The League Commissioners responded that these two men were citizens of the Mosul province, and as such, they 'could not be regarded as Iraqi subjects until the question of the frontiers had been finally settled'. The disputed status of Mosul – not yet part of Iraq or Turkey – was obviously not recognized by the British administrators, who, insisting on the Iraqi citizenship of the two Turkish partisans living in Mosul, concluded that they were Iraqi nationals engaging in treasonous behaviour. The Commissioners demanded that the British stop surveilling the two men and desist from housing them in an 'entrenched camp'. From the beginning, then, the British treated the Turkish delegation with suspicion and the Commissioners felt compelled to intercede. As the British insisted on their own prerogatives for maintaining law and order, Commissioner Teleki pointed out 'that Iraq legislation could only be enforced in the disputed territory so far as it related to the administration of the country and the maintenance of order. In regard to all matters connected with the sovereignty over the country, it was not applicable'.[6]

The Commissioners refused to begin their work until the impasse was resolved. Instead, they began carrying out unofficial visits with Mosulis whom they described as 'certain persons in the town whose experience and knowledge of the country were well known'. The British were furious, claiming that these first visits were with miscreants and well-known trouble-makers. British officials claimed that these visits compromised the popular perception of the Commission, and, worse, they claimed, the Commissioners' refusal to return the visits of the city's notables made the situation even more difficult. 'Feeling in the city was already running high'.[7] On the very first day, the Mutassarif (governor) stormed into the room of CJ Edmonds, British Liason officer to the League Commission. He was furious and indignant as he described what he had just seen. Count Teleki, one of the three Commissioners, had gone out into the street with Turkish Delegate Cevat Pasa. According to the governor, his presence caused uproar in Mosul city. When Edmonds went out to find the Count, Cevat was in uniform, and the two men were surrounded by an

6 Report, 11.

7 Edmonds, 400.

applauding crowd; another crowd approaching them was cheering for Iraq and Faisal.[8]

The League Commissioners held Great Britain responsible not only for public outbursts, but also for the heavy police presence that accompanied the Commissioners wherever they went and kept them from sleeping.[9] The British sought to control access to the Commission, Commissioner Paulis angrily noted in his journal. At the beginning, he wrote, they were very heavy-handed, stationing police in Mosul, arresting people who showed sympathy with the Turkish delegates, and 'imprisoning' the Turkish delegation in a camp behind barbed wire. At the same time, the British were actively encouraging pro-Iraq demonstrations, distributing Iraqi flags and pins which were to be worn even by those preferring Turkish rule.[10]

Indeed, the Commissioners were so angry at their treatment in Mosul and at the pro-Iraq demonstrations clearly coordinated by local officials that they decided to leave the city and carry out their inquiries in secret, undisclosed locations throughout the province. It was at this point that British Inspector Jardine called in the High Commissioner, Sir Henry Dobbs. 'The time has come for your intervention and an effort to get the Commission to work on more sober and less theatrical lines'.[11] Sir Henry explained to the Commissioners the consequences their project might have in the area, suggesting that their inquiries could seriously threaten 'the authority of the British and Iraq Governments throughout the disputed area'. Sir Henry advised the Commission instead to consult local authorities in order to ascertain public opinion, an option that would have the Commissioners focusing their inquiries only on authorities who represented the British/ Iraq government.[12]

Although the regime in London had agreed to turn to the League of Nations for arbitration, they insisted that the issue was simply demarcating Iraq's northern border. Mosul province was under their control, and they intended to keep it that way. In order to do that, however, the ideology undergirding the League of Nations required that the populace be consulted about their own political future. That very consulation might endanger continued British control, which encouraged local officials to take whatever steps might be possible to limit potential damage.

Ambiguous identities

Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points suggested that the collective identities of previously dominated populations be used to determine their independent futures. Wilson's speech was to provide some of the ideological underpinning not only for the League's system of mandates, but even for its very legitimacy. The twelfth point reads 'The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development . . .'. Arabs seeking independence from the Ottoman Empire should therefore have the opportunity to create their own governments. The legitimacy of this project was based on their being 'other nationalities', non-Turks. At its base, the League of Nations sought to determine the fate of Mosul based on whether it was populated by Turks or by 'other nationalities'.

8 Edmonds, 400, 401. Mosul Commission Jardine (Journal), Middle East Centre Archive, St. Antony's College, Oxford, GB 165-0095, Edmonds Papers (Hereafter, Jardine) 1–14 February 1925, pp. 1, 9, 21. Also United Nations Archives, League of Nations Archives (Hereafter, SDN) S15/D26.

9 Commissioners complained that the police remained late into the night talking loudly outside their hotel windows. Jardine, 1–14 February 1925, p. 6.

10 Colonel A. Paulis, Enquete en Irak: Journal Privé, SDN S16, 2, 24. Edmonds 399. Paulis described communications while in Mosul in which people claimed that those who showed support for Turks on their arrival in Mosul were beaten and imprisoned, 18, 19. Those who spoke to the Commission also claimed to be questioned by the police. A petition from the Turkish Foreign Minister to the League of Nations Secretary General suggested even more serious consequences, claiming that villages in the Dohuk-Amadia regions had been destroyed by British bombardment in retaliation for their having indicated that they wanted to be attached to Turkey. 23 June 1925, SDN S17 175. The British claim that such bombings were in retaliation for the incursion of Turkish troops across the border into these areas.

This League project was inherently problematic in the Mosul province. For centuries, Mosul had not only been part of the multicultural, polylingual and religiously diverse empire; but also its location far from the centre of power and its mountainous terrain had provided hospitality for more than the usual assortment of religious and ethnic groups. While the League's ideology defined identity in Mosul as being either Turk or Arab, belonging over the centuries had become much more complex. Indeed, the final report submitted by the League Commission included an extensive and meticulous ethnography section with elaborate explanations of the supposed origins of various ethnic groups in the province, scientific deliberations on their linguistic and biologic structures, efforts to categorize and classify in minute detail. Yet, following all these scientific explanations of ethnic groups, the report suggests that they hardly mattered. For example, the Commission described the situation in Mosul,

> Even had we been able to eliminate all political influence [the report claims a 'rather strong active political agitation'] and dispel all misgivings, it would have been impossible to determine the percentage of the various nationalities in the town, and it would have been still more difficult to estimate the percentage of the origins of the population. In the town, mixed marriages are more frequent, opportunistic tendencies are stronger, and the intermingling is greater than in any other part of the country'.[13]

Even within the same tribe, the Commissioners found that ethnicity was hardly pure. The Bayat tribe, they wrote, was

> of mixed Turkish and Arab race. They themselves estimate the proportion to be 65 per cent Turkish to 35 per cent Arabic. Generally they speak both languages and live intermingled in their villages. They intermarry without distinction of race, so that the difference is tending to disappear. Among them, however, are still to be found persons who speak only one language; we have even met a chief who only understands Turkish.[14]

The League, Europeans whose thinking had been influenced by decades of fascination with taxonomy, had become convinced that human groups could be scientifically separated, tagged, described and predicted. Here, in Mosul, members of the League Commission were frustrated by the group mixing that had been intrinsic in Ottoman society.

Moreover, it proved difficult even to define the characteristics of a 'pure' group when introduced to one. For example, both sides seem to have agreed that Mosul included a Turcoman population. While at Tal Afar, however, there was significant dispute about the nature of 'Turcoman'. According to the British Assessor, Turcoman was defined by language exclusively, but did not indicate a pro-Turkish affiliation.

> It cannot be denied that all the memoranda of the British Government and the statements made at Lausanne admitted a Turkoman population in Tall Afar town and in surrounding villages. These admissions were made because most of the inhabitants of Tall Afar, whether their origin is Turkish, Arab or Kurd, do in fact use a form of Turkish as their own language, and

11 Edmonds 408. Jardine, 1–14 February 1925, pp. 11, 15

12 Report, 11.

13 Report, 40.

14 Report, 38.

> because these inhabitants do in fact own and cultivate several villages round Tall Afar town. That is to say the original round figure given in the British memoranda for Turcomans in the Tall Afar Qadha may be taken to represent the numbers of Turcomans, Arabs and Kurds who now use a form of Turkish in their homes in and near Tall Afar, though they may be able to speak Arabic and Kurdish just as well.

If the first language, or even one of the first languages, was Turkish, the British claimed the individual was Turcoman, despite the likelihood that he spoke other languages in addition. The local Anglo-Iraqi governor (kaymmakam) claimed that the Turcoman, though Turkish-speakers, were actually really Iraqi nationalists (and thus not Turks) since they had participated in 'the first revolt of partisans of King Faisal and the cause of Arab independence, against the British administration'.[15] For this official, opposition to the British during the 1920's uprisings illustrated the Turcomans' Arab identity. In a remarkable inversion of the League of Nations formula that identity should determine political destiny (self-determination of peoples), this officer was claiming that political action defined ethnic identity.

Commissioner Count Teleki's report suggested, however, that Mosulis' ambiguous identities, even if they could be ascertained, did not in any case determine their political preferences. Erbil city, he wrote, is 'Turkish in large percentage', but he added that Turkish, Kurdish and Arab elements were not represented collectively, but instead were represented only by individual people who were clearly Turks, Kurds or Arabs. He claimed that the great Turkish notables who still spoke Turkish at home had intermarried with the families of Kurdish chiefs. The city, he wrote, had 'largely Kurdicized itself'. ('La ville se kurdise en grandissant'.) This trend had been encouraged by the large migration of the Kurdish rural people into the city, making most of the lower village quite mixed while the citadel area remained primarily Turkish. By the mid-1920s, four of the seven mukhtars spoke of themselves as Turks, one claimed 'je suis tout aussi turque que kurde', one claimed himself to be a Kurd, and the seventh was a Jew. He observed,

> If one wants to know the opinion of the population on the great question: Iraq or Turkey–it is not sufficient only to consult ethnographic distribution. It is true that almost all the Turks that I questioned at Erbil gave a pro-Turkish response, but even among them there were one or two exceptions. On the other hand, the chiefs of the Arab Tai did not give their own opinion. They clearly declared that they were attached to the great Kurdish Dizdai tribe . . . and they subordinated themselves to their will, in the same way that those of some of the great notables of Erbil, to the same notoriously pro-Turkish people. The opinion of the Christians is always anti-Turk.[16]

In interviewing eighteen sheikhs, Teleki found seven categorically pro-Turkish, three in favour of a Kurdish state, four Arab leaders who subordinated themselves to the opinion of their superior sheikhs (who had been pro-Turkish), one who dared not express an opinion, one chief of 'the smallest Kurdish tribe' of the area was in favour of Iraq, and two declared themselves willing to serve whichever government. Teleki came to recognize

15 SDN S 15 D 27.

16 SDN S14 D 18, Arbil, Report of Count Teleki.

that long-term affiliations, political connections and economic interests were more compelling to the people of Erbil than simply which language they spoke or to which ethnicity they could be considered to belong.

Identity politics

Even if it had been possible to distinguish non-Turks from Turks, however, the Mosul population would have been hard-pressed to comply with the League's essentialist insistence that collective identity determined political preference. The people of Mosul had a variety of interests that cut across linguistic lines. Under centuries of Ottoman rule, ethnic origin had taken a back seat to other criteria of group cohesion. Mosulis had long defined themselves as members of tribes, guilds, religious groups and neighbourhoods. It was as part of these groups that they took to the streets, rose against their rulers, made their demands, and lobbied their governments. Political action was hardly connected to a Turkish or Arab identity, and their responses to the League Commissioners reflected this Ottoman past.

Thus, when the Commissioners rejected Dobbs' suggestion that they focus on Mosul's officials, and instead embarked for the countryside, they were surprised by the minimal role that 'nationality' played in the responses of the people they interviewed. The three commissioners divided up the province among themselves. President of the Commission de Wirsen stayed in Mosul to interview people in Sinjar, Tal Afar, Qaraqosh and Akra; in the villages around Mosul city; and among members of the major tribal confederations along the Tigris. Hungarian Count Teleki travelled the area around Erbil, talking with neighbouring townspeople and members of the surrounding tribes. Belgian Colonel Paulis was based in Kirkuk and travelled to outlying tribes and villages. Each of the three Commissioners was accompanied by an assistant, a Turkish delegate and a British (or Iraqi) delegate. The four men would meet at each location with a small group of people, gathering information in long collective interviews with notables, physicians, government officials, merchants, religious leaders, nomads and peasants. During the interviews, the Commissioner explained why they had come and what they wanted to know, and asked questions about trade and the economy, about the way things were going, about their lives and their work. Then everyone left the room and one by one were brought into the presence of the Commissioner, *tete-a-tete*. Then the Commission would ask what became known as the 'little question'.

Each of the Commissioners kept notes in a different way, but the results were strikingly similar. While the Europeans anticipated that ethnicity would determine political preference, Mosul's population chose their preferred political future based on varied considerations. Despite the Europeans' assumption that self-determination would prove to be ethnic determinism, the people of Mosul repeatedly insisted that neither ethnicity nor language was the predominant source for their political desires. Their complex responses seem to have initially confused the Commissioners. As local residents explained the reasons they preferred one government over another, or one government contingently over another, for example, de Wirsen repeatedly crossed out T (for Turkey) or A (for Arab government) and wrote the opposite. Sometimes the second letter was crossed out and the first written again beside it.

17 Paulis, pp. 45, 47, 29, 30, 41.

18 Edmonds 415.

It seems that political self-determination was complex, depending less on taxonomy than on economics, ideology, interpersonal connection or memory. For example, of the five *Muslim Arabs* at the beginning of de Wirsen's list, one preferred an autonomous Arab government, but if the British stayed he preferred to be ruled by Turkey; another responded that commerce in his sheep export business had been better before the war, and, though undecided, he would be content if the Turks returned; another was in favour of Turkey because commerce had been better and customs duties lower before the British; one was in favour of Turkey because the government was Muslim and the Turks less oppressive than the Arab government; and the fifth, a local mukhtar, would be content with any government. Of the first four *Jews*, one claimed that former times were better than the present while the other three argued in favour of Iraq, claiming that the Turks had treated them badly.

While the League of Nations had anticipated that identity would determine politics, it seems that Britain's own presence was much more influential in determining people's political choices. First, many who were in favour of an independent Arab government opposed being incorporated into Iraq, insisting that Iraq was not really an Arab (or Muslim) state. Conversely, some insisted that they would only want to be part of Iraq if Britain retained control, either because, as religious minorities, they feared life without a British buffer or because they were convinced that Iraq would only survive with a powerful patron. Second, many complained that British economic policies had injured their trade by permitting agricultural exports only through Baghdad and Basra while before most (especially livestock) exports had moved through Syria. Some Turks in Kirkuk preferred that the area become part of Iraq, while one of Kirkuk's representatives to the Iraqi Assembly, unpredictably enough, was clearly in favour of connection to Turkey. Assyrians and some groups of Kurds within the province demanded independence from both Turkey and Iraq.[17]

For many residents of the Mosul province, Britain's presence was central to the way they saw their political future, either as a positive or as a negative force. While minority Christian communities insisted on a continuing British presence, they were not the only ones. Many in the province, Arabs as well as others, were unconvinced that the new state of Iraq could survive on its own. Edmonds reported to British authorities that Commissioner Paulis himself began to wonder whether Mosul should actually be connected with an independent Iraq devoid of British influence: 'Once away from Mosul it did not take him long to find that even the most uncompromising anti-Turks had very little use for the Baghdad hierarchy . . .'. Even those who opposed Mosul's connection to Turkey, Edmonds claimed, dreaded inclusion in an Iraq dominated by the current regime in Baghdad. They so feared anarchy or stagnation under an independent Iraq that they insisted on remaining connected with the United Kingdom. Edmonds continued, 'The extreme nationalistic views expressed by the [Iraqi] Prime Minister, Yasin Pasha, and other Baghdad personalities, so far from helping the Iraqi case had increased his [Paulis'] doubts about the wisdom of detaching the Mosul vilayat unconditionally from Turkey'.[18]

On the other hand, some Mosulis insisted that they would support an Iraqi government only if it were truly independent, and refused to live

under British rule. Despite Edmonds' characterization of them as extreme nationalists, these men included Muslims unwilling to live under Christian rule and old time Ottoman patriots refusing foreign control. One of the Kurdish chiefs, asked about the Turkey/Iraq choice, is said to have responded, 'Why do you give me a choice between the Arab Government and the Turkish Government, the matter is not that, the question is choosing between Turks and British'.[19] In addition to those Turks, Kurds, Jews and Christians who wanted a continued connection with Iraq, of course, there were Arabs, Jews, Kurds and Turks who demanded to become part of Turkey.

The common characteristic of many, many of the responses, however, was their complexity. People 'voted', as the British described the process, based not on some essential identity but on their political ideology and their economic interests. The League of Nations Commission agreed in the end that their decision could not be based on ethnic determinism. Their words are worth quoting at length.

> The first result of the enquiry is to show that there is no national Iraqi feeling in the disputed territory, except among a section of the Arabs who have some degree of education; and in their case it is rather an Arab feeling, with chauvinistic and often anti-alien tendencies . . .
>
> The absence of any Iraq national feeling explains the large number of conditional preferences which we have already mentioned. The most strongly nationalist Arabs say that they would prefer Turkey to an Iraq under foreign control. On the other hand, a large number of Christian chiefs say that they would feel less suspicious of a Turkish government than of an Iraq government without European control. The same views are to be found among the Yezidi. The Kurds of Sulaimaniya ask for a wide measure of local autonomy with the assistance of British advisors. Taken as a whole, the opinions expressed in favour of Iraq were in most cases based on considerations of private or community interest rather than on common patriotism.

Thus, notwithstanding an assertion made by the British Government, nationalism and language are not always reliable evidence of political views. Many Arabs, particularly those of the poorer classes, are pro-Turkish, and sometimes give touching expression to their sympathies.[20]

Clearly, people in the Mosul province had many and complex notions of their own political needs, ideas that well beyond simply equating language or identity with political destiny. On what basis, then, was the Commission to allocate Mosul province?

Economy and destiny

British official C.J. Edmonds had early recognized that emphasizing ethnic self-determination might not be convincing to the Commissioners and he recommended instead that British and Iraqi officials emphasize Mosul's economic ties with Bagdad. According to Edmonds, the men running the three north-eastern districts of the province

> were all local men, non-Arabs; they realized quite as well as we, the British element, that it would be fatal to try to base our defence on any attempt to

19 Puech to Sarrail, 9.8.25, MAE Syrie-Liban 1020.

20 Report, 78 (emphasis mine).

> work up an artificial enthusiasm among populations which, after an original refusal to come into the kingdom at all, had only recently been coaxed into flying the flag and participating in the elections. We had therefore decided that our best hope was to work the economic argument, which was really unanswerable . . .'.[21]

From the beginning of the process, the Anglo-Iraqi regime contended that Mosul was crucial for Baghdad's prosperity. Faysal's letter, received by the Commission shortly after their arrival in the country, had emphasized that without Mosul, insecurity would preclude investment. British notes repeatedly pointed to the economic connections between Mosul and Iraq, arguing that roads, rail, production and trade all demanded that Mosul stay under their control.

On their arrival in Baghdad, British officials introduced the Commission to a number of important merchants. Paulis described meetings with a total of fifteen people, interviewed in small groups. The conversations, he wrote, were uncomfortable. For each of the Commissioners' questions, all responded at the same time, which resulted in 'unspeakable confusion'. The Commissioners settled on one Jewish merchant who knew both Arabic and French to translate for them with the others, but another Jewish merchant, whom they later learned was connected with the government, insisted on answering for everyone else. Despite Britain's heavy-handed approach, the Commissioners did learn the basics of Mosul's trade. The province exported grain to Baghdad and Basra in good years; most of Baghdad's tobacco came from Erbil and Sulaimaniye; wood for construction and heat also arrived via Mosul by Tigris or Zab river routes; the gall nuts used in Baghdad for tanning, as well as her wool and hides, also originated in Mosul province. European and Indian manufactured goods arrived at Baghdad from Basra. Those interviewed claimed that there was no longer much commerce between Syria and Mosul, and there never had been much between Anatolia and the disputed province. Colonel Paulis suspected that the respondents were purposely providing answers to these trade questions 'in a sense favourable to the British thesis'.[22]

A one-on-one interview with a Turcophile while walking among the bazaars in Mosul introduced Paulis to a completely different perspective. Known only as p. 18 in his notes, this 'notable merchant' claimed that the commercial situation was now worse than before the war. Before, he claimed, there had been an important trade with Aleppo and Damascus. The railroad did not yet exist, and transport had taken place by camel. There were now two railroads, one terminating at Aleppo in the French Syrian mandate territory, the other at Baghdad. But none of these lines went through Mosul; inconveniences of French and Turkish customs duties led all transport exclusively by way of Baghdad. But, he pointed out the Baghdad line was in the hands of the government, who preferred to transport British and Indian products. Although the railroad did not refuse non-British goods, he said, they delayed their transport so long that goods became damaged. Despite the high costs of the railroad, it still provided a competitive advantage over the costs of camel transport, putting those wanting to conduct trade in non-British products at a disadvantage.[23] According to this merchant, then, British control had resulted in the

21 Edmonds, 410. Puech to Sarrail, 9.8.25, MAE Syrie-Liban 1020. Indeed, the French Consul in Mosul claimed that the British had tried to instruct people on the economic advantages of Mosul's connection with Iraq, while Turkish groups had taught Kurdish leaders 'the facts'.

22 Paulis, 3. Britain's argument is summarized in a letter from the British Government to the Secretary-General dated August 14, 1924. 'The customs statistics of the Government of Iraq show that Lord Curzon at Lausanne was correct in maintaining that the outlet of the export trade of the Mosul Vilayet was to and through Iraq, and to a lesser extent Syria. Trade between Mosul and Turkey is insignificant. The imports from Turkey to Mosul are chiefly timber, which can find no outlet save by Tigris, on which it is floated down cheaply, and a small quantity of pulse, cordage, dried fruits, and tanning materials. The exports from Mosul to Turkey are chiefly piece-goods and groceries previously imported into Iraq through the port at Basra, and in lesser quantities via Aleppo. Central and Southern Iraq are vitally dependent on the products of the northern area. After the British occupation of Bagdad, when for eighteen months Turkish forces denied access to the Mosul Vilayet, great

transformation of Mosul's trade in ways that compromised the prosperity of those who were not working on behalf of British interests.

Paulis was clearly fascinated by the prospect of the railroad and its impact, especially on the Kirkuk area. In an interview with Sayyid Ibrahim, mufti of Kirkuk and brother-in-law of the governor, Paulis asked about the railroad being built between Kirkuk and Bagdad. When Sayyid Ibrahim pointed out that train transport was very expensive, Paulis responded, 'Still, it seems certain to me that if a railroad line connects this city to the sea, provisions could eventually be brought from outside; years of abundance, by contrast, in place of seeing grain spoil in place, you could export it, thus money would enter the country and improve the living standard of the people'. Although Sayyid Ibrahim responded simply that he did not know about railroads, the same optimistic projection was disputed three days later by Nazim Bey. 'I sincerely believe that the railroad will not improve anything; to transport wheat to Bagdad we will not use the railroad, but we will continue to use the keleks [rafts] of the river'. As for imports, he predicted that the British, who were building the railroad, would arrange only for British merchandise to enter the local market, eliminating competition and making Mosulis pay much more for purchases.[24]

Nonetheless, the League Commissioners found Britain's economic argument most convincing. They decided that the Mosul province should not be divided, and that most of its trade was with Baghdad. It may simply be that British propaganda had won out with the Commissioners, but it appears more likely that over the course of the years since 1918, Great Britain had managed to redirect much of Mosul's trade away from its pre-war connections in Syria and Anatolia and towards Baghdad and Basra. Continuing border conflicts and intermittent military skirmishes would certainly have hurt trade between Mosul and Turkey in this interwar period. British bombing of the area around Sulaymania, Turkish and British successive occupations of that city as late as 1924, and Turkey's military suppression of Kurdish uprisings in border areas must have restricted trade between Mosul province and Turkey.[25]

The new facts and allegiances that the British had worked to create would lead to a compelling argument for Mosul's inclusion in the province. As a result, the Commission deemed Britain's role in Mosul so crucial that they made their recommendation contingent on Britain's continuing the Iraq mandate for 25 years. Ironically then, instead of 'self-determination of peoples' liberating the people of Mosul from their former Ottoman rulers, the League of Nations instead transferred them to the control of an overseas empire. In the end, the altruistic ideology of self-determination took a back seat to the reality of a refitted economy in the service of the new Iraq and its British patron.

Mosul's Ottoman economic structures had been refashioned, but her Ottoman demographic legacy was still intact. Home to a remarkable array of religious groups (Sunni, Shi'i, Chaldeans, Nestorians, Jews, Yezidis, Protestants, Catholics, Armenians, Jacobites, Armenians, Assyrians and Greek Orthodox), five languages (Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, Armenian, Assyrian), numerous tribes, and extensive commercial and trade networks, the people of Mosul were much too varied to fit into the League of Nations' ideas about the way people should be divided. Among groups so

difficulty was experienced in feeding a population which was thus cut off from the northern wheat-producing lands – the granary of the country. Only by wholesale and very costly importation from India, coupled with careful rationing, were famine conditions avoided'. SDN C.396, 7. See also, Report, 67. I found in my previous research on late Ottoman Mosul that, on the contrary, there was significant trade between Mosul and other parts of what was then the Ottoman Empire, including those which became Syria and Turkey. Shields, *Mosul before Iraq* (SUNY Press, 2000).

23 Paulis, p. 24.

24 Paulis, pp. 59, 65.

25 Air Staff Notes on the Occupation of Sulaimania on 19 July 1924. 16.9.24. Great Britain, National Archives, AIR 5/269. Summer of 1925 saw continuing incursions and attacks across the border, Great Britain, National Archives CO 537/817. Paraphrase Telegram from the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 6.6.25, CO 537/817. 'Note by Air Staff on Military Situation in Iraq', 20.5.25, CO 537/817. On the other hand, the report suggested that political instability, evident throughout their travels, could mitigate that economic connection, and that if it were not resolved, the Mosul

province might better be connected with Turkey.

diverse, so long intermarried, and so extensively interconnected, it is difficult to imagine how identity could have determined politics, as the League had anticipated. Wilsonian imaginings of mutually exclusive ethnic groups that shared identical political aspirations were simply too far off the mark. In the presence of a politically sophisticated and remarkably diverse population (legacy of centuries of Ottoman rule), the League turned away from identity politics, choosing instead to focus on the results of Great Britain's heavy-handed administration of the disputed territory.

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