

Proto-political conceptions of 'Iraq' in late Ottoman times

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Abstract

This article criticizes the so-called 'artificiality paradigm' concerning the emergence of the modern state on Iraq, according to which the kingdom of Iraq that came into being in 1921 was nothing but a random collection of Ottoman provinces that had little in common. On the basis of documents from the late Ottoman period, the article shows that the opposite appears to be the case: In many ways, the modern state of Iraq had regional antecedents that predated the British invasion in 1914. The article shows that for long periods before 1914 there existed a pattern of administrative centralization of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul under Baghdad as a paramount regional capital, that this regional entity was often described as 'Iraq' in administrative and diplomatic correspondence, and that the local inhabitants often referred to Iraq in a patriotic sense.

Keywords

Iraq
nationalism
Ottoman Empire
Britain
imperialism

The myth of Iraq as an entirely artificial construction that was concocted by British imperialists during World War I is a hard-dying one, but it is clearly beginning to come on the defensive. For years, academics of Iraqi origins have made the case that the modern state of Iraq was something more than a haphazard amalgam of the three 'disparate' (or even 'ethnically distinct') Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul: The works of Thabit Abdullah,¹ Hala Fattah² and Nabil al-Tikriti³ clearly suggest that the Iraqi kingdom had pre-modern roots. Similarly, in a recent article, Fanar Haddad has emphasized the ease with which the concept of Iraqi nationalism won near-universal support during the World War I, again suggesting a degree of continuity to the late Ottoman period.⁴ And also, the relatively few Western researchers who have worked with late Ottoman materials related to Iraq have raised questions about the viability of the 'artificiality' thesis.⁵ For a long time, however, proponents of this alternative 'continuity' perspective were dismissed offhand as defenders of a 'Baathist' narrative on Iraq, however implausible that label was in the majority of cases.

The argument in this article, which focuses on the late Ottoman period, is that there is no longer any empirical justification to maintain the established thesis of the 'artificiality' and complete 'constructedness' of modern Iraq. Today, it is hard to see any scientific reason why this narrative should survive. True, it serves to uphold an image of a degree of virility among early twentieth century British imperialists. It also satisfies the natural appetite for deconstruction among first-year university graduates,

- 1 Abdullah, Thabit A.J. (2006), *Iraq since 1989: Dictatorship, Imperialism and Chaos*, pp. 6, 7.
- 2 Fattah, Hala (2003), 'The Question of the 'Artificiality' of Iraq as a Nation-State', in Shams C. Inati (ed.), *Iraq: Its History, People and Politics*.
- 3 al-Tikriti, Nabil (2007), 'Ottoman Iraq', *The Journal of the Historical Society*, 7: 2.
- 4 Haddad, Fanar (2008), 'The Terrorists of Today Are the Heroes of Tomorrow: The Anti-British and Anti-American Insurgencies in Iraqi History', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 4.
- 5 Anscombe, Frederick F. (2006), 'The Ottoman Empire in

- Recent International Politics: The Case of Kuwait', *The International History Review*, 28: 3, p. 546.
- 6 For the early political geography of Iraq, see Kennedy, Hugh (1986), *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Centuries*.
 - 7 On administrative arrangements in Mongol and Turkmen times, see al-Feel, Muhammad Rashid (1967), *The Historical Geography of Iraq between the Mongolian and Ottoman Conquests*, pp. 1258–1534.
 - 8 An instructive image of Basra's political orbit in the seventeenth century can be derived from Fathallah bin 'Alwan al-Kaabi's *Zad al-Musafir* (1924 edition).
 - 9 Longrigg, Stephen H. (1925), *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*, p. 126; Birken, Andreas (1976), *Die Provinzen des osmanischen Reiches*, p. 226.
 - 10 Din Rizk Khoury, *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540–1834* (1997), pp. 71, 96, 208–209, 215. The idea of a full *de jure* subordination of Mosul to Baghdad after 1780, as argued by Birken in *Die Provinzen* p. 203, is contradicted by other sources, such as Longrigg, *Four Centuries*, pp. 209, 210, and Khoury, *State and Provincial Society*, p. 114.

and makes for a compelling narrative among armchair generalists in search of an easily available yet sophisticated sounding narrative on Iraq. However, it has no roots in historical reality. Instead, it is clear that the modern state of Iraq was built on a set of antecedents from Ottoman times that were all of native origin. The principal elements in this legacy included patterns of administrative unity with Baghdad as a capital, the widespread use of the appellation 'Iraq' as a geographical reference for this emerging principality as well as a late-Ottoman administrative concept of Iraq that has been altogether overlooked in studies dealing with the late Hamidian and Young Turk periods, and finally the emergence of Iraq as an identity concept among local intellectuals belonging to different ethnicities and religions in the nineteenth century.

Administrative patterns of centralization from Baghdad

In classical Islamic and medieval times, Iraq was sometimes subdivided, though mostly into two rather than three pieces, with the territory from Tikrit south to Basra forming the province of Iraq, and the area north and west of Tikrit constituting the province of al-Jazira, with its administrative capital in Mosul.⁶ Later, under Mongol and later Turkmen rule in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the territory that constitutes modern-day Iraq was sometimes reunified as a single charge ruled from Baghdad; while this was clearly a theoretical zone of influence rather than a clear-cut administrative entity, it did provide continuity to the idea of Baghdad as the centre of power for a greater territorial entity stretching from the Gulf and into the Kurdish mountains.⁷

It is true that when the Ottomans conquered these lands in the early sixteenth centuries, they did create sub-divisions that were to last for some time. However, this was not a tripartite division of the kind often conjured up in the accounts of the 'artificial' genesis of modern Iraq, and there was certainly no correlation to ethno-sectarian identities. The *eyalet* of Basra was in practice limited to the far south of Iraq, with Qurna at the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates often forming the real line of defence for the provincial capital city of Basra.⁸ Baghdad thus included several areas often associated with 'the south' in Western discourse on Iraq, whereas the territory to the north of Baghdad was mainly divided into Shahrizor (to the north-east) and Mosul (to the north-west). Bordering provinces that at times governed portions of modern-day Iraq included Raqqa in Syria (to which the *sanjak* of Ana at times belonged).

However, from the late seventeenth century onwards, the dominant trend was towards administrative unification with Baghdad serving as the undisputed anchor. After experiments with rule from Baghdad in the 1690s, several sources date a more lasting incorporation of Basra into Baghdad to around 1705.⁹ Later, as the rulers of Baghdad acquired semi-autonomy from Istanbul during the Georgian mamelukes in the second half of the eighteenth century, both Mosul and Shahrizor became effectively subordinated to Baghdad from around 1780, even if the steadily shrinking Mosul for a long time maintained a nomenclature of formal independence.¹⁰

After the Ottoman *reconquista* of Iraq in 1831, the second half of the nineteenth century was one of frequent administrative changes. Still, the pattern of subordination to Baghdad re-emerged frequently. Mosul remained

under Baghdad until around 1846 and after a short period of independent status once more fell to Baghdad's control before it became formally separated in 1879, now for the first time also comprising the territory of the Shahrizor *vilayet* (which in turn had re-emerged as independent in the 1850s until around 1865) as well as Sulaymaniyya (which was then separated from Baghdad, of which it, along with other Kurdish areas like Rawanduz, had been a part in the late 1860s and early 1870s). Similarly, Basra was sometimes independent and sometimes part of the Baghdad *vilayet*, with the periods of independence limited to 1850–1862, 1875–1880 and 1884 onwards. Thus only in 1884, 30 years before the end of a 400 years long era, was an administrative map approximating the cliché image of an Iraq subdivided into three *vilayets* – Basra, Baghdad and Mosul – established on the ground. Importantly, the line of division between Basra and Baghdad remained in the far south of Iraq, making Baghdad the biggest Shiite *vilayet*, with all the important shrine cities (Najaf, Karbala and Samarra). Mosul, in its new make-up, was a multi-ethnic, complex province of Kurds, Arabs, Turkmens, Shabak, Yazidis and Christians of various denominations.

Also, the movement of people and administrators in late Ottoman times underlined the image of a greater regional community transcending those individual administrative sub-divisions that would come and go. Data for the Ottoman navy in the late nineteenth century are especially ample, and show that in the naval base in Basra, Baghdadis in particular but to some extent also people from Mosul held leading positions, alongside the predictable elite segment of career officials from various Istanbul suburbs.¹¹ Turkmens from Kirkuk formed a particularly important element in the state administration from Basra in the south to the Kurdish areas in the north.¹²

In sum, then, a recognizable entity of a unified core Iraq from Basra to north of Baghdad existed for most of the eighteenth century and a good portion of the nineteenth century. Additionally, for most of the period between 1780 and 1880, also the northern areas looked to Baghdad as its regional capital. This left a legacy of centralization where Baghdad for long intervals during several centuries had been the capital for people from Basra in the south to Sulaymaniyya in the north.

Administrative nomenclature and the concept of 'Iraq'

Equally interesting is the formal nomenclature used in relation to this evolving administrative geography. Whilst it is correct that there was never a single province named Iraq (comparable, say, to the 'province of Syria' with its capital in Damascus in the nineteenth century), contrary to what many Western scholars have maintained, the Ottomans actually did use the term 'Iraq' for these territories frequently, also in a political-administrative sense.

From the sixteenth century onwards, 'Iraq' occurred frequently in Ottoman reports, to the extent that it is questionable whether there was really any complete rupture from medieval times, when the name had been used universally.¹³ Still, one could argue that during the first two centuries of Ottoman rule, the term had mainly general geographical connotations. Often 'Iraq' was used to give a general geographical reference, as in expressions like 'the environs of Iraq' (*Irak taraflarında*) or 'in the Iraq area' (*Irak cihatlerinda*). Both Basra and Baghdad were clearly included in

- 11 Ottoman calendar for Basra (*salname*) for the year 1309/1891, pp. 134–145.
- 12 Stephen H. Longrigg, *Iraq 1900 to 1950*, p. 9.
- 13 See Northedge, Alastair (2007), 'Al-Iraq al-Arabi', in Reidar Visser and Gareth Stansfield (eds.), *An Iraq of Its Regions: Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?*

- 14 Ottoman archives, HAT 162/6748/C, 29/12-1209/18 August 1792.
- 15 YEE 9/3. Memo by Mehmed Ali Bey, 8/1-1304/20 January 1889.
- 16 MV 131/44. Decision by the cabinet dated 23/10-1325/29 November 1907.
- 17 MV 137/30. Decision by the cabinet dated 6/2-1328/16 February 1910.
- 18 Y.MTV 72/43. Letter from the governor of Mosul to the Ottoman cabinet dated 22/4-1310/12 November 1892.
- 19 BOA, İrade Dâhiliye, note by Umûm Erkân-ı Harbiyye Dâ'iresi (Üçüncü Şu'besi) dated 28 November 1906.
- 20 I/HUS/163/1326/M-41, 17/1-1326/20 February 1908.

this concept. Sometimes, though, the references would be more specifically related to Iraq as a political-geographical entity, as in reports concerning 'the conditions of Iraq' (*Irak havalisi*) or the objective of 'achieving political order in Iraq' (*Irak nizamının istihsali*). And the period of Iraqi semi-autonomy during the mameluke period from 1747 to 1831 (when Georgian pashas in Baghdad managed to wrestle effective control from the central Ottoman government) certainly seemed to have made an impact on the Ottomans themselves, who would sometimes allude to the special albeit unofficial status of these areas in expressions such as the 'lands of Iraq' (*Irak memleketi*).¹⁴

By the late nineteenth century, these patterns had developed much further towards a concept of Iraq as a separate administrative sphere. A pioneering role had been played by the Ottoman army, which was frequently organized as a separate unit covering Iraq and with its headquarters in Baghdad, irrespective of any temporary administrative sub-divisions that were put in place from time to time. In this way, the concept of an 'army for Iraq' (*Irak ordusu*) soon became established. Gradually, other functions and concerns added to the links between 'Iraq' as a geographical area and 'Iraq' as a political space. For example, in the 1880s, Ottoman administrators were concerned about the steady spread of Shiism in the easternmost part of their empire. In one report, this was framed as a worry about 'the day-to-day spread of Shiism in Iraq' (*Hitta-i Irak'de Siilik yevman fa yevman tavsi ettegi olup*).¹⁵ Later, in 1907, a cabinet decision dealt with measures to 'strengthen dogma and Sunnism in Iraq' (*Hitta-i Irak'de ittihad ve sunniligin takviyesi*), including increasing the pay and improving the circumstance for Sunni preachers in Basra and Baghdad.¹⁶ This very subject in fact remained on the agenda beyond the Young Turk Revolution in 1908: In February 1910, there was another cabinet discussion about the advantages that could be gained by sending more preachers and teachers to 'Iraq'.¹⁷ There was also a tendency of the Iraq concept creeping further and further northwards. In 1892, an Ottoman administrator referred to Mosul as part of Iraq (*hitta-i cesime-i irakiyye*);¹⁸ in 1906 Iraq was explicitly associated with the three *vilayets* for example in references to 'Basra, Baghdad and Mosul which constitute the Iraqi region' (*Hitta-i Irak teskil eden Bagdad ve Basra ve Musul vilayetler*).¹⁹

By the early twentieth century, there was in Istanbul a recurrent tendency of seeing Iraq both as a unified political entity (as attested to for example by the issuing of separate government maps for 'Iraq') and also as a target for coordinated reform. This trend reached its apex in 1908 in the appointment of a 'reform commissioner for Iraq', a much overlooked example of how Iraq – specifically defined as the three *vilayets* of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul – became instituted as a separate political domain in the late Ottoman period. The first mention of the new position came in February 1908, when the appointment of Nazim Pasha to the 'reform board' (*heyet-i islahiye*) was discussed.²⁰ He was later sometimes referred to as the 'inspector of Iraq' (*Hitta-i Irakiye müfettisi*), but more usually as the 'head of the reform commission of Iraq' (*Hitta-i Irakiye Heyet-i Islahiye Reisi*).

The position of 'reformer' was abolished again towards the end of the year (apparently in December 1908) and Nazim Pasha was appointed to Janina in modern-day northern Greece.

But the subject of 'reform of Iraq' remained on the agenda. Sometimes, the issue remained intertwined with the religious question (as in an initiative to 'hindering the spread of Shiism in Baghdad and all of Iraq', *Bagdat ve bütün Irak'ta Siiligin men-i intisari*).²¹ But in 1910, Nazim Pasha was once more given tasks that transcended the formal boundaries and focused on Iraq in a greater sense. While technically he was governor of Baghdad, he also had super-provincial tasks that put him in charge of decisions in Mosul and Basra, such as commanding the sixth army corps (which covered all of Iraq) and training 'the police of Iraq'.²² The centralization of power in Baghdad under Nazim Pasha, whose rule lasted until 1911, was such that it caused concern among British diplomatic staff, who lamented what they saw as an anomaly with three formally equal *vilayets* in principle being subordinated to Baghdad's control in many key areas of policy-making.²³ In the words of J. Lorimer, the British consul in Baghdad, 'the Walis of [Basra and Mosul] should be either independent of the Governor-General of Baghdad or entirely subject to his authority in the same manner as the heads of provinces in India are under the Viceroy'.²⁴

- 21 Y/EE 7/17, 6/4/1327/27 April 1909.
- 22 See also Longrigg, *400 Years*, pp. 320, 321, no. 2.
- 23 UK National Archives, FO 195/2340, Crow to Lowther, 20 September 1910.
- 24 FO 195/2340, Lorimer to Lowther, 3 October 1910.
- 25 Abd al-Jalil al-Tabataba'i, *Diwan* (1966 edition), p. 70.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 264.
- 27 DH.MKT 2623/81, 10/9-1326/6 October 1908.

A burgeoning sense of patriotism?

To the Ottoman administrative mind, then, there clearly existed an Iraq by the late nineteenth century. But what about the population that lived in the area – did they share the concept of Iraq as a framework of identity?

A look at local literature from the nineteenth century strongly suggests that this question can be answered in the affirmative. Take a poet like Abd al-Jalil al-Tabataba'i, who lived in Basra and Qatar and other parts of the Ottoman Gulf in the early nineteenth century. In the 1830s, after the Ottoman re-conquest of Muhammara (a town on the opposite side of Basra in present-day Iran), he described these military developments as an 'Iraqi triumph': 'A conquest which makes the lands of the King shine; a conquest whereby all of Iraq (*arja' al-'iraq*) is in control of all its parts'.²⁵ Later, in the 1840s, some of his friends would extol the landscapes of the Euphrates in a poem in his honour called *Dhikrayat al-huqul* or Memories of the Fields: 'What urged me on was the goodness of Iraq and its people'.²⁶

In some cases, the strengthening of an Iraqi identity came with Ottoman sponsorship, directly or indirectly. That was the case for example in Basra, where in 1910 the pro-Ottoman municipality council (whose leaders were local notables) launched an initiative to erect a statue to commemorate Midhat Pasha, the nineteenth-century statesman and former governor of Baghdad, and in particular highlighted his 'services for Iraq' (*Midhat Pasha merhum Irak-a bir cok hidmet*) – for which 'Iraqis and in particular Basrawis' were thankful. Similarly, in Baghdad, as early as in October 1908, following the Young Turk revolution, and as a result of the greater freedom of speech, plans to issue a newspaper called *Iraq* were afoot.²⁷

Similarly, local reactions to the rule of Nazim Pasha as 'reformer of Iraq' after 1908 showed that with regard to the territorial scope of Iraq, the people of the area and the Ottomans spoke one language. In 1910, a pamphlet called 'Iraq, Iraq' featured criticism of the ways of Nazim Pasha (the 'Iraq reformer') while at the same time subscribing to both pan-Ottoman and a patriotic Iraqi agendas. The writers criticized Nazim Pasha for having lobbied for the discontinuation of the works of William Willcox,

- 28 Original in FO 195/2340, Lorimer to Lowther, 26 August 1910.
- 29 FO 195/2340, Lorimer to Lowther, 22 August 1910.
- 30 DH.MKT 2805/96, 17/4-1327/8 May 1909.
- 31 Original programme in FO 195/2451, Crow to Marling, 28 August 1913.
- 32 Retrospect in IO/LPS/10/732. Fortnightly report no. 20, 11 October 1918.
- 33 Kemp, Percy (1983), 'History and Historiography in Jalili Mosul', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 19: 3.

a British adviser to the Ottoman government who had specifically been charged with studying how the Iraqi economy could be revived (and had advocated that the plans for a railway to the Gulf be implemented). Also, the pamphleteers wondered, why had not Nazim Pasha asked the elders among the Iraqis (*kibar al-'iraqiyyin*) about the best way to reform the country? At one point, the writers described themselves as 'a group of Iraqis, the purest of the pure in terms of loyalty to the state and the caliphate' (*ma'ashir al-'iraqiyyin akhlas al-mukhlisin li-dawlatina wa-khila-fatina*); they signed the pamphlet in the name of the 'committee for the defence of the interests of Iraq' (*Lajnat al-difa' 'an masalih al-'Iraq*).²⁸

At the time, British observers speculated that the pamphlet originated with an Egyptian Christian journalist who had a grudge against Nazim Pasha.²⁹ The question of authorship is, however, less relevant in this context. More important is the writer's assumptions about the pamphlet's reception among the general public in Baghdad. The text circulated widely in Baghdad in 1910, and the main categories used in it were 'Ottoman' and 'Iraqi', alongside some more general references to a greater Arab community ('speakers of the *dad*' etc.). It is inconceivable that this could have come about if the terms 'Iraq' and 'Iraqi' in reality had been unintelligible to the Baghdad public. On the contrary, the writer seems to have used them in an attempt to gain sympathy for his cause: he criticized almost every single aspect of Nazim Pasha's work except the idea that Iraq should receive some sort of special treatment.

Other 'Iraq projects' were distinctly subversive. In May 1909, a society called 'al-Mushayyad' was suspected of working for 'the independence of Iraq'.³⁰ Later, in 1912, the Basra decentralization movement headed by Sayyid Talib (and at first limited to the *vilayet* of Basra proper) at times exhibited pan-Iraqi tendencies, for example, when in its programme it called for an 'Iraqi' governor for Basra.³¹ But throughout, this appeared to remain a dialectical process in which the Ottomans, too, contributed to developing some kind of symbolic identity superstructure to the emerging regional Iraqi proto-entity with its capital in Baghdad – such as when Nazim Pasha in 1910 tried to arrange a tribal conference for all of Iraq.³²

Iraq in nineteenth century regional histories

An interesting trend in Iraqi historiography are the series of works from the late-seventeenth century onwards that aim wider than city histories but are more narrow than empire histories: they are *regional* histories, often featuring heroes and protagonists that are distinctly local. To begin with, this development was gradual, and in Iraq the first specimens materialized when historians of Baghdad could not quite resist the temptation to write on the affairs of neighbouring provinces (in whose affairs Baghdad was frequently involved). Examples of this include *Gulshan-i Khulafa* by Murtada Nazmizadeh from the 1680s, which is a history of Baghdad that also includes ample information on the politics of Basra, as well the local histories of Mosul in this period, which not only frequently stray into the affairs of Baghdad, but also provide information on the intellectual elites of these neighbouring regions in a way that testifies to a belief in a greater regional whole.³³ Indeed, occasionally in these early works there are explicit references to this regional framework. For example, in

the introduction to *Gulshan-i Khulafa*, the author writes, 'the date groves of Baghdad are the greatest of the region of Iraq'.³⁴

This trend only grew stronger in the eighteenth century, as the region experienced political and administrative unification under the Georgian mamelukes from 1779 and until 1831. The new trend in historiography was that historians close to or working for the Baghdad rulers began writing histories on the emerging region between Basra and the Kurdish mountains. Key works from this period include titles that were written during the reign of Dawud Pasha in the 1820s such as *Duhat al-Wuzara* by Rasul Hawi al-Kirkukli and *Bağdat'ta kölemen hükümetinin teşkiliyle inkırazına dair risale* by the pseudonym 'Thabit' and thought to have been written by Sulayman bin Haji Talib Kahya. In these works, the association between the territory ruled by the mamelukes and the name 'Iraq' is often explicit, as when Kirkukli describes the Persian attack on Basra as an attack on 'Iraq'.³⁵

A third important regional historian of this period is Shaykh Uthman Ibn Sanad al-Basri, who also wrote during the late 1820s. Ibn Sanad is interesting in that he is among the first who made written contributions to the myth of heroism surrounding Sulayman the Great, the pasha of Baghdad in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, who would gradually emerge as a distinctly 'Iraqi' hero in nineteenth-century historiography. In his first mentions of Sulayman, the author describes him as the sub-governor of Basra in the 1770s.³⁶ There is mention of 'Iraq' too, though to begin with just as a geographical term.³⁷ Later, the author describes how Sulayman was freed from Persian captivity after the death of Karim Khan and how the Ottoman sultan entrusted him with the combined governorship of Baghdad, Basra and Shahrizor.³⁸ He then goes on to describe a triumphal journey from Basra to the capital Baghdad, via the Euphrates, calling on places like Karbala and Hilla en route.

Much of the subsequent story involves depictions of how Sulayman defended his territory against challengers on the peripheries, often employing Kurds as an important component of his force (and with the new Kurdish town of Sulaymaniyya being built in his honour). In his description of an exchange of letters between Sulayman's military officers and Saud bin Abd al-Aziz of Najd, he enumerates the conditions presented for a cease-fire – among them that the Wahhabis should no longer 'interrupt the pilgrims who come from Iraq', and should also 'stop their raids of Iraq'.³⁹ In the account of Sulayman's death and burial in the Abu Hanifa mosque in Baghdad in 1802, Ibn Sanad enumerates his deeds across Iraq. Obviously, there are many references to the capital itself, but Sulayman is also credited with having refurbished Kut al-Amara on the Tigris, improved the fortifications of Basra and Hilla and even Mardin, and having built a new fort close to Mosul. In the discussion of the subsequent succession crisis, the link between the mameluke territories and Iraq as a concept of identity is complete: one of the pretenders accused the 'people of Iraq' (*ahl al-'iraq*) for being hypocrites.⁴⁰

If Ibn Sanad was often somewhat indirect in terms of references to the nascent Iraqi regional entity, this soon changed in the writings of other local historians who also wrote on Sulayman the Great, as other examples from Basra show. In a work by Ibn Ghamlas of Zubayr from the 1830s, the period of Sulayman the Great again begins with a reference to Basra: 'In

- 34 Murtada Nazmizade, *Gulshan-i Khulafa* (1730) p. 14.
- 35 Rasul al-Kirkukli, *Duhat al-Wuzara* (1963 edition), p. 64.
- 36 Ibn Sanad al-Basri, *Matali al-saud fi tarikh dawud* (1991 edition), p. 81.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- 40 *Ibid.* p. 245.

- 41 Ibn al-Ghamlas, *Wilat al-basra*, p. 69.
- 42 Ibn al-Ghamlas, *Wilat al-basra*, p. 73.
- 43 Muhammad al-Nabhani, *Al-basra: al-tuhfa al-nabhaniyya fi tarikh al-jazira al-arabiyya* (1923), p. 286.
- 44 Ibid, pp. 293, 294.
- 45 Ibid, p. 287 no. 1
- 46 Muhammad Hasan Khan Badi, *Tarikh-i basra* (1914), p. 33.
- 47 Ali Zarif al-Azami, *Mukhtasar tarikh al-basra*, pp. 144–46.
- 48 Anastas al-Karmali, *Khulasat tarikh al-iraq* (1919), pp. 205–206.
- 49 Muhammad Muhsin Aga Buzurg al-Tihrani, *Al-dhari'a ila tasanif al-shi'a* (1937), vol. 17, entry no. 654.

1188 [h.] the mutesallim of Basra was Sulayman Beg (also known as Sulayman Pasha the Great [*al-kabir*]) when Karim Zand attacked Basra . . . ' The author then goes on to describe the Persian occupation of Basra in the late 1770s, before reverting to Sulayman once more: 'Then Sulayman Beg was released from prison and went to Huwayza and he entered into correspondence with the authorities at Baghdad and Istanbul and received orders to take up his post at Basra again. And in the month of Shawwal 1194 he was also given the governorships of Shahrizor and Baghdad and he thus became governor of all of Iraq (*al-'iraq qatibatan*)'.⁴¹ Ibn Ghamlas commented on the Ottoman return to the Iraqi lands in 1831 from Basra to Mosul in the following way: 'Such was the way in which mameluke rule (*hukumat al-köleman*, from Ottoman Turkish) was terminated in Iraq'.⁴²

By the close of the Ottoman period, the view of Sulayman the Great as a key figure in the regional history of Iraq had been firmly established in local historiography, and the references to Iraq as his principality were now frequent and entirely casual. In a manuscript by Muhammad al-Nabhani thought to have been written mainly during the First World War, Sulayman is once more spoken of as 'the great'.⁴³ The writer states, 'Sulayman Beg sent to the Supreme Porte a request to be appointed wazir of Baghdad in order that he could bring an end to corruption and misrule in Iraq . . . After some days Sulayman received an order from the sultan to proceed to Baghdad and he was promoted to a pasha and given the provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Shahrizor on 15 Shawwal of 1194'.⁴⁴ There is, however, a hint to the effect that Sulayman had been superseded in local memory by one of his descendants and another great ruler of Iraq, Dawud Pasha. In a footnote at the first mention of Sulayman the Great, the author writes, 'Sulayman Beg is the one who was [later] given the rulership [wizara] of Baghdad. And he would become the grandfather of Dawud Pasha, the famous ruler [wazir] of Baghdad',⁴⁵ suggesting that his grandson by now had achieved even greater fame. However, Sulayman's greatness was attested to even in the writings of foreign diplomats of the late Ottoman period, such as the Persian consul in Basra, who referred to the local habit of calling him Sulayman the Great.⁴⁶

By the time Iraq formally became a kingdom in 1921, references to Sulayman as 'the great' pasha of Iraq were standard. For example, in the 1920s, Ali Zarif al-Azami first referred to Sulayman Beg as 'one of the Turkish mamelukes' (*ahad al-mamalik al-atrak*) but later went on to refer to him as 'the great' and the fact that he was given governorship of Iraq.⁴⁷ In general, the mameluke period with its autonomy for Iraq within the Ottoman state was now celebrated as some kind of precursor to modern Iraq by writers of this transitional period, although, again, the memory of Dawud Pasha is sometimes emphasized at the expense of that of Sulayman the Great.⁴⁸

Iraq as a cross-sectarian concept of identity

Finally, it should be stressed that the Iraq concept was not seen as belonging to any particular religious community more than others. For example, Tabataba'i, the poet who hailed the Ottoman re-conquest of Muhammara, is reckoned as a Shiite by many compilers of Shiite literature.⁴⁹ Similarly, one of the pamphlets of the reformist movement close to Sayyid Talib

referred to an alleged conspiracy by the Young Turks to sell the holy shrine at Karbala – an apparent attempt to reach out to Shiite sentiment.⁵⁰ And the Christian writer Anastas al-Karmali was a leading figure behind the publication of the *Lughat al-Arab* journal in Baghdad in the Young Turk era, perhaps the best example of a pan-Iraqi intellectual forum in the pre-war period. It featured a regular column titled ‘Events of the month in Iraq and its neighbouring areas’ (*ta’rikh waqa’i’ al-shahr fi al-‘iraq wa ma jawaraha*), with frequent excerpts from local newspapers such as this one from Basra: ‘. . . enmity between [Sa’dun Pasha and the Dhafir tribe] developed to a point where the vilayet of Basra [authorities] were compelled to expel Sa’dun from the lands of Iraq (*diyar al-‘iraq*) . . . and forcibly remove him to Aleppo where he died. But his son . . . travelled to Ha’il, the seat of the Rashidi emirate, where the emir was awaiting an opportunity to strike against Iraq’.⁵¹ Another article, from 1911, covered ancient Chaldeans: ‘In the past, the Chaldeans were a great nation . . . which inhabited Iraq from its southernmost to its northernmost point (*al-‘iraq min janubihī ila shimalihī*) . . . we are ignorant about the remains of this civilization which have been unearthed in our country (*biladna*) . . . therefore we see it as our duty to undertake this extensive study so that the people of the fatherland (*ahl al-watan*) will come across it, and learn about the affairs of those who lived in these lands (*diyar*) in the past’.⁵²

Nowhere is this cross-sectarian nature of the Iraq concept more evident than in nineteenth and early twentieth-century historiography, a field where Iraqi historians of different sects and ethnicities explicitly communicated across sectarian borders. In fact, the evolving tendencies of regional identity can be seen even in writings covering episodes where sectarian biases perhaps could have been expected to dominate. For example, among the subjects tackled by the Sunni Basra historian Ibn Sanad in the 1820s was the attack by Wahhabi raiders on the Shiite holy city of Karbala in 1802. But in Ibn Sanad’s account there is no sympathy for his ‘fellow’ Sunni attackers. Rather the victim is portrayed as Iraq, including its Shiites: ‘And in the year 1216 [h.] Saud bin Abd al-Aziz raided Iraq. One morning he attacked Karbala and inflicted upon it every agony and sorrow. He scaled the walls of the city where Hussein, peace be upon him, is buried . . . and killed a great number of people and collected much booty and made the blood of those killed float in the streets . . . Then he returned to Najd’.⁵³

Iraqi historians of other backgrounds and sectarian affiliation built on the work of Ibn Sanad al-Basri. An example of this is the Shiite intellectual Kazim al-Dujayli – originally from Dujayl north of Baghdad – who in 1911 wrote enthusiastically about the Sunni Ibn Sanad as an exponent of Iraqi historiography.⁵⁴ In the opening paragraph, Dujayli explains why he is interested in writing about Shaykh Uthman Ibn Sanad from the distant coastal city of Basra: He wants to describe the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (hijri) because ‘they are among the most beautiful centuries that Iraq has experienced, with an intellectual blossoming that included such prominent families as Haydari, Suwaydi, Alusi, Azri, Shawi, Umari, Qazwini, Bahr al-Ulum, Taliqani, Tabatabai, Bahrani, Asfur, Jazairi, Hilli, Shahrastani, Yasin and Kawwaz’. Among the individuals singled out for praise are Muhammad Faydi al-Zahhawi, Haydar al-Hilli, Humadi Nuh, Jabir al-Kazimi, Husayn al-Ashari, Jaafar al-Hilli, Salih al-Tamimi, Mulla

50 Undated pamphlet addressed to soldiers in the Ottoman army; enclosure in FO 602/52, Crow to Lowther, 30 August 1913.

51 *Lughat al-Arab*, 2: 8, 1913.

52 *Lughat al-Arab*, 1: 1, 1911.

53 Ibn Sanad al-Basri, as quoted in al-Azzawi, Abbas (1935), *Tarikh al-iraq bayna ihtilalayn*, vol. VI, pp. 144, 145.

54 al-Dujayli, Kazim (1911), ‘Al-shaykh uthman bin sanad al-basri’, *Lughat al-Arab*, pp. 180–186.

- 55 *Basra vilayeti salnamesi*, 1308/1890, p. 164. This anonymous account is widely attributed to Basha'yan; see for instance Longrigg, *Four Centuries*, pp. 329, 330.
- 56 Bonomi, J. (1857), *Nineveh and Its Palaces*, p. 46.
- 57 Lorimer, J. (1908), *Geographical and Statistical Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*, p. 760.
- 58 *Ibid.*, p. 807.
- 59 Meyer, Karl E. and Brysac, Shareen Blair (2008), *Kingmakers: The Invention of the Modern Middle East*.
- 60 CAB 27/35, Wilson to India Office, 16 October 1918. For pre-war references to 'Iraq' by another personality considered an architect of the modern Iraq, see the Gertrude Bell diaries, entry for 9 March 1911.

'Umar Ramadan al-Hiti, Khalid al-Naqshbandi and Ulu al-Din al-Mosuli. In other words, Dujayli sees an intellectual heritage connected to the area he calls 'Iraq' that incorporates Sunni and Shiite writers from Basra to Mosul.

Dujayli is fully aware of these sectarian categories. Al-Basri, he explains, was a Sunni, more specifically belonging to the Maliki school of jurisprudence, and with a rather strong attachment to that school: he had, in Dujayli's own words, a sectarian leaning (*maliki al-madhaba mutaasaban jiddan*). But Dujayli, the Shiite, is far more interested in the historical writings of his Sunni colleague, including *Matali al-saud fi tarikh dawud*, where Ibn Sanad had covered both Sulayman the Great and the 1802 Karbala attack by the Wahhabis. This book, Dujayli tells his readers, is important because it sheds lights on 'the lives of Iraqis, both the Bedouins and the settled ones (*hadar*)' from the 1770s to the 1820s.

Again, this should not be taken to indicate that the Iraq concept by now had been hijacked by Shiite writers as their exclusive preserve. Quite the contrary, late nineteenth-century historians of Sunni backgrounds would also focus on Iraq and how it had been threatened by outside aggression. For example, writing in the 1890s, the Basra historian Abdallah Bashayan – who came from a Sunni family background – wrote about the 'attacks by the Iranian Shahs on Iraq' during the eighteenth century.⁵⁵ The same account also lauded the Ottomans for having united Basra and Baghdad as a single administrative entity.

Conclusion

Even a brief look at some Western sources could easily have falsified the myth of Iraq as a modern invention.

In Amsterdam, around 1733, Isaak Tirion and Jacob Keyser published the map *Nieuwe Kaart van Irak Arabi, Kurdistan, Diarbek, Turkomania, Syrie en het Heilige Land*. In Leipzig, in 1799, Johann Adam Bergk published the book *Natolien, Georgien, Armenien, Kurdistan, Irak und Al Dschesira in historischer, geographischer, physikalischer, wissenschaftlicher, artistischer, naturgeschichtlicher, merkantilischer, religioöser, sittlicher, statistischer und politischer Hinsicht*, reflecting the traditional understanding of 'lesser Iraq' as a country extending from Basra at least to some point north of Baghdad. In 1857, in *Nineveh and Its Palaces*, Joseph Bonomi referred to 'the Irak of the modern Arabs'.⁵⁶

Indeed, the very British colonialists often described as 'the inventors of the modern Iraq' referred extensively to the concept of Iraq themselves before 1914. J. Lorimer compiled his *Gazetteer* some years before 1908, and in an article called 'Iraq (Turkish)' stated that in Ottoman administrative terminology, this concept normally referred to Basra plus Baghdad only.⁵⁷ However, he also spoke of Baghdad as 'the commercial capital of Iraq'.⁵⁸ As for Arnold Wilson, referred to as 'the territorial creator of Iraq' in one recent book,⁵⁹ he actually used the Iraq concept before 1914 very much in the same sense as the Ottomans, and would later refer to Ottoman antecedents when he in the autumn of 1918 became a forceful advocate of keeping administrative unity from Basra to Baghdad, stressing that 'those conversant with the last 20 years of Iraqi history' would immediately see the organic connection between Ottoman Iraq and British Iraq.⁶⁰ It is one of the big ironies of the twentieth century historiography of Iraq that the Ottoman antecedents of the modern state in fact were well

accepted in one of the first British histories of Iraq, that of Stephen Longrigg from 1925: *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*.⁶¹ But while Longrigg's work was dissected and frequently referred to by subsequent historians, his overall (if perhaps somewhat implicit) perspective of organic Iraqi development soon gave way to a different model, which despite its numerous empirical problems proved rather more seductive among a Western audience: the artificiality thesis, according to which Iraq is no more than a random collection of disparate Ottoman provinces, orchestrated entirely by external forces and the statesmanship of Western leaders – and hence surviving only at their mercy.

In fact, the great upheavals of twentieth century Iraqi history make a lot more sense when viewed against the background of considerable continuity at the level of identity. For example, despite the traumatic nature of the collapse of Ottoman rule in Iraq during the First World War – when an administrative system that had lasted in one form or another for almost four hundred years was abruptly removed – no serious secessionist threat to the 'new' Iraqi state emerged anywhere south of Kurdistan during the critical years of transition in the 1920s and the 1930s. The only separatist movement of note was an attempt to isolate Basra as a British-protected enclave, but this scheme failed to create popular enthusiasm, and, importantly, found it difficult to come up with alternate frameworks of regional identity that could effectively challenge that of Iraq.⁶² Similarly, in the chaos following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, attempts by returned exiles to create federal entities in Iraq based on sectarian identities failed spectacularly. Perhaps, the best example was the attempt to create a Shiite federal entity comprising the nine Shiite-majority governorates south of Baghdad. This scheme was launched with considerable bravado by Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, a Shiite politician, in August 2005. But 2 years later, it appeared to have been abandoned: Neither of the two different names proposed for the project, the 'Region of the Centre and the South' and the 'South of Baghdad Region' appeared to have captured the public imagination.⁶³ The onus should now be on the constructivists who will find it difficult to explain why Iraqi nationalism prospered with such ease in the twentieth century.⁶⁴

In sum, then, in what can only be described as an exceptionally myopic reading of history, Western scholars and generalists have taken refuge in the situation in Ottoman Iraq in 1914 to invent an account of the entire period between the 1500s and 1914 that has no possible empirical justification. First, the particular three-way separation between Basra, Baghdad and Mosul seen in 1914 had lasted for exactly 30 years out of a combined period of Ottoman rule of more than 400 years. Second, important tendencies of super-provincial centralization with Baghdad as a node between 1884 and 1914 have been entirely overlooked. Third, the idea that the concept of Iraq was somehow 'invented' or rediscovered during the World War I does not stand up to scrutiny: 'Iraq' is everywhere in contemporary books, reports and letters from the pre-1914 period.

There was at the time of the US invasion in Iraq in 2003 a conspiracy theory to the effect that US, Israeli or Kuwaiti intelligence services were behind a deliberate destruction of Iraqi archival materials. But while the remarkable failure of the US military to protect this historical heritage will

61 Published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford.

62 Visser, Reidar (2005), *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq*.

63 Visser, Reidar (2007), 'The Two Regions of Southern Iraq', in R. Visser and Gareth Stansfield (eds.), *An Iraq of Its Regions: Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?*

64 For accounts of the cross-sectarian nature of Iraqi nationalism, see Bashkin, Orit (2008), *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq*, and Davis, Eric (2005), *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*.

forever form one of the many critical mistakes of the Bush administration, the sheer amount of documents referring to the historical continuity of Iraq that survive across the world – including in archives in Istanbul, Delhi and London – is such that no one, whether foreign conspirators or constructivist scholars, can hope to fully erase it.

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