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## Making borders from below: the emergence of the Turkish–Iraqi Frontier, 1918–1925

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Although the First World War formally ended in 1918, the Great War left behind several zones of post-war violence, as the disappearance of imperial borders – from Eastern Europe to the Caucasus and the Middle East – created spaces without order or a definite state authority.<sup>1</sup> Among these ‘shatter zones’,<sup>2</sup> the provisional frontier between Turkey and Iraq holds an important place in the interwar period, for the resolution of this border dispute was delayed several times as a result of unabated collusion involving a variety of state, transnational and local actors. In that sense, while high-level diplomatic negotiations and intense debates on the fate of this post-Ottoman territory took place in corridors, offices and assembly rooms in distant cities such as Paris, Lausanne, Geneva, Cairo, London and Ankara, this article will show how and to what extent local actors, particularly *borderlanders*, played a role in the resolution of the Turkish–Iraqi Frontier dispute.

After addressing very briefly the claims and counter-claims raised by Great Britain and Turkey with regard to the provisional frontier and the strongly related ‘Mosul Affair’, this article will turn its attention to the discourses, strategies and attitudes of local borderlanders between 1918 and 1925. Taking its cue from an invigorating scholarship on borderlands which pays attention to the agency of local players in the border-making processes,<sup>3</sup> the article posits that, as the region became a battleground for British and Turkish agents seeking to secure the loyalty of local community leaders, the latter played a relevant role in two fundamental and complementary ways.

First, by adopting an anti-imperialist rhetoric coloured by different influences – Muslim solidarity and Kurdish nationalism – local leaders, alongside transnational actors embedded within the League of Nations, forced Britain and Turkey to acknowledge the ‘just’ claims of the Kurds who were seeking the award of special rights. Indeed, the protection of ‘minorities’ was essential for justifying the British mandate over Iraq at the international level. In that sense, Britain vowed to fulfil the ‘unanimous’ aspirations among Kurdish populations for local autonomy based on respecting the right to self-determination. Turkey, on the other hand, rejected old imperialist policies and presented itself as the sole guarantor of local aspirations due to the historical bonds (political, religious and social) between the Mosul Vilayet and Anatolia. In doing so, Turkey hinted in a sense at its willingness to acknowledge Kurdish particularism under the umbrella of a Sunni Muslim government.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the Frontier dispute, borderland representatives advanced different claims and aspirations depending on the context and the targeted audience, thereby allowing

them to play off Turkish and British agents against each other, and ultimately, to gain brokerage. Crucially, borderlanders did not constitute a homogenous group but rather an assemblage of individuals with different and sometimes conflicting personalities, interests and ambitions. Whether they were opportunistic or full-hearted anti-imperialists or both, local actors, through their shifting alliances, obliged both Britain and Turkey to readjust their claims over Mosul in an equally strategic fashion.

Second, and related to the previous point, the article will argue that borderlanders pushed British and Turkish authorities to the conclusion that an international agreement on the border issue was the best solution for both parties. Neither the Turks nor the British were capable of coping with local revolts and changing strategies across a restless, moving frontier. Although the detailed boundary delimitation was the result of diplomatic negotiations,<sup>5</sup> the process through which Turkey and Great Britain came to abide by the Brussels line cannot be fully apprehended without taking into account the interactions between local players and a variety of both state and non-state actors.

While I do not dismiss the centrality of diplomacy and high-level geostrategic dynamics in the resolution of international conflicts, I argue for the necessity of linking different scales of analysis – namely, macro and micro – and histories – international, global, and local – to better apprehend the emergence of the modern Middle East in the interwar period.

## Challenging post-war settlements

The British occupied the former Ottoman Mosul vilayet in early November 1918, a couple of days after the armistice was signed between the Ottoman government and the Allied forces. Yet, much like elsewhere in Europe, the fighting did not stop altogether.<sup>6</sup> In the first half of 1919, British and French forces occupied Istanbul, while Greeks and Italian forces landed on the Aegean coast. Under such conditions, the sultan's government in Istanbul agreed to the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres on 10 August 1920.

The treaty adopted the Wilsonian programme – including the right of self-determination for non-Turkish 'nationalities' under Ottoman rule – to Allied forces' advantage, thereby projecting the formation of both an Armenian and a Kurdish state in Eastern Anatolia (art. 62). In addition, the Kurdish districts of Mosul vilayet were to be permitted to join this autonomous state, if they wished to do so upon a series of conditions (art. 64).<sup>7</sup> The mandate for Iraq was subsequently awarded to Great Britain in 1920, while the political status of Mosul province was left open for negotiations between the Turkish and British governments.

However, the resistance movement led by Mustafa Kemal rejected the treaty altogether, and carried out a successful struggle that mixed means of paramilitary and conventional warfare, coupled with an effective strategy of establishing alliances with tribes and employing the discourse of Muslim anti-imperialism. While these former Ottoman officers obtained a series of significant military victories in the Caucasus and South-eastern Anatolia, the resistance movement made its territorial ambitions clear through what was called the Misak-ı Milli (the National Pact) which laid claim over Mosul vilayet as well as the region of Aleppo and other parts of Syria.<sup>8</sup>

Thereafter, the 'Mosul Affair' gave rise to intense debates at the Turkish Grand National Assembly, which had proclaimed itself as the new legitimate government in the country.

Mustafa Kemal, for instance, stated that Turkey would never compromise over the issue of the Mosul vilayet<sup>9</sup> and diverse deputies highlighted that Mosul province was a part of the motherland, thereby encouraging the new Turkish authorities to accomplish the principles of the National Pact: 'Raise our flag on the frontier of Mosul, and put it like bayonets on the British flag and into their throat!'<sup>10</sup> Tension in the Grand National Assembly increased to the point where moderate deputies were sidelined after the resignation in June 1921 of Foreign Minister Bakir Sami, who was deemed to be favourable to the settlement of the 'Mosul Affair' through diplomatic negotiations.

A few months later in October 1921, Ankara gained the upper hand in the dispute when the Treaty of Ankara ended the hostilities between France and Turkey, thereby further isolating Great Britain.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Mustafa Kemal and his followers were actively seeking to destabilize the region by encouraging anti-British tribal unrest in Mesopotamia.<sup>12</sup> Such developments and manoeuvres, combined with increasing concern over the financial costs of the Mandate led British officials in London to progressively agree with the officials in Baghdad who argued that stability could be achieved only through the inclusion of Kurdish districts in Iraq.

This was in line with the British policy that was largely spelled out at the Cairo Conference in March 1921. The main object of the conference was 'to maintain firm British control as cheaply as possible'.<sup>13</sup> In that sense, the Royal Air Force was to play a central role in the maintenance of order in Iraq. Besides, Faysal's candidature to the kingdom of Iraq, together with the fate of the Kurdish-majority districts, was also widely discussed.<sup>14</sup> In the face of Turkish threat and in order to secure Iraq's frontier against Turkish claims, some concrete measures were necessary:

On the one hand, the British fostered Kurdish nationalism in northern Iraq in order to counter Turkey's pan-Islamic appeals to the Kurdish population. On the other hand, however, the British government attempted to reconcile the aspirations of Kurdish nationalists with the objectives of British policy in Iraq: the consolidation of King Faisal's government in Baghdad, and the maintenance of the territorial integrity of Iraq so that it would become a viable state.<sup>15</sup>

The second step was thus taken at the Lausanne Peace Conference, which began on 20 November 1922. Yet it was clear from the onset that Turkish and British positions were irreconcilable. The Turkish view on Mosul vilayet advanced several ethnic, economic and legal arguments: (1) Turks and Kurds – racially inseparable – were a majority in the province; (2) local populations had been economically oriented towards Anatolia for centuries; (3) the occupation of the vilayet after the armistice was illegal; (4) the province's inhabitants wanted to live with their peers in Anatolia. The British position claimed quite the contrary: (1) the Kurds were racially different from the Turks;<sup>16</sup> (2) most local trade was with the rest of Iraq; (3) legally, the British government had been entrusted with the mandate over Iraq by the League of Nations; (4) frequent Kurdish revolts first against the Sultan and then the Ankara government – in particular, the Koçgiri revolt in Dersim area – contradicted Turkish claims on Turkish–Kurdish brotherhood.<sup>17</sup>

Against this backdrop, on 4 February 1923, Turkey and the Allied representatives in Lausanne agreed to exclude temporarily the 'Mosul Affair' from the conference agenda. Notwithstanding the incompatible views on Mosul, different factors helped to unwind relations between Turkey and Britain. First, the electoral victory of the Conservative Prime

Minister Andrew Bonar Law in November 1922 opened the door to an appeasement of Turkey, particularly as Britain began to show signs of abandoning its previous pro-Greek policies and limiting its support to Assyrian and Kurdish claims in northern Iraq. In return for these concessions Turkey was asked to join the League of Nations and by doing so help Britain and France to further isolate Bolshevik Russia with whom Turkey had constructed a working relationship.

The second factor that eased the tensions between Turkey and Britain was the conviction of the Turkish delegate Ismet Pasha that the British would do everything in their hands to avoid an open war against Turkey because Britain's main concern in Iraq was oil, not the implementation of the Treaty of Sèvres.<sup>18</sup> As Peter Sluglett argues, although the British had advanced security concerns to justify the establishment of a strategic frontier in the mountainous areas between Turkey and Iraq, British and Iraqi policy over Mosul vilayet was best seen in terms first of 'the desire to ensure that the oilfields remained on the Iraqi side of the *de facto* frontier, and secondly to maintain the integrity of the Iraqi state as British and Iraqi politicians envisaged it in the 1920s'.<sup>19</sup>

Belligerent discourses were to prevail, though. Ankara renewed anti-British propaganda efforts in the Rawanduz area,<sup>20</sup> while Turkish deputies in the Grand National Assembly persisted in asking Mustafa Kemal to implement the National Pact, including the 'restoration' of Mosul vilayet within the Turkish borders, by all means possible. In that sense, Mustafa Durak, a deputy from Erzurum, stated that 'I can leave the oil of Mosul to them but not the Kurds'.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, to some deputies in Ankara, referring the Mosul issue to the League of Nations, where London was supposed to be in a strong position, would have been the same as giving Mosul to the British. Notwithstanding the dissatisfaction among the sceptics, Mustafa Kemal asked the Turkish Assembly to make a choice between war and the postponement of the Mosul question. Interestingly, he explained that 'the postponement of this issue did not necessarily mean abandoning the Mosul Vilayet, but perhaps only deferring it until Turkey was in a stronger position'.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the conciliatory moves made simultaneously by London and Ankara, by May 1924 negotiations proved to be unsuccessful. Subsequently, Turkey and Great Britain agreed to send the dispute to the League of Nations, thereby acknowledging that the unofficial war carried out by both sides since 1919 was at a deadlock. The issue started to be discussed in Geneva on 20 September 1924 where the debates just focused on the demarcation of the Turkish–Iraqi border, the so-called 'Brussels line'.

As expected by sceptical deputies in Ankara and the Turkish press,<sup>23</sup> the League eventually ceded Mosul vilayet to Mandate Iraq. While British membership of the League of Nations and its imperial position in the post-war context may help explain Britain's diplomatic victory in 1925, the following sections will demonstrate that the process through which Turkey and Great Britain came to abide by the Brussels line cannot be fully apprehended without taking into account the interactions between local players and a variety of both state and non-state actors between 1918 and 1925.

### First colonial encounters in the border area

The Mosul vilayet, covering the districts of Mosul, Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk, had a heterogeneous population with Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Jews and Armenians. Yet, the Northern section of the province – running between Zakhō, Amadiyah, Akra and

Rawanduz – was essentially inhabited by Assyrians and Kurds. Following the British occupation of different sections of the Mosul vilayet, the consolidation of the armistice frontier between the Ottoman and British forces became a pressing issue. However, the scarcity of British soldiers combined with the rugged nature of the region made the military occupation of the area unlikely. Instead, the British opted for some form of buffer Kurdish state under a semi-independent ruler.

Accordingly, Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji (1882–1956) was appointed Governor or *hukumdar* of ‘Southern Kurdistan’, the term defining the area between the Great Zab and the Diyala rivers. For each of the minor sub-divisions, Kurdish officials were appointed to work under the guidance of the British political officers. The remaining districts of the Mosul Vilayet were placed under nominal British control.

British colonial policy also applied to other local communities, particularly the displaced Assyrian populations (i.e. Nestorians) that originally hailed from Hakkari region but sought refuge in Iran during the First World War as a result of Ottoman and Kurdish massacres.<sup>24</sup> As the Great War entered its final phase, a group of Assyrians fought back against the Ottomans around Urmia along with the British army and a local Armenian force. Yet following their defeat, these regiments together with their families were evacuated under British protection first to Hamadan and then to the Baquba refugee camp, north of Baghdad.<sup>25</sup>

The British interest in Assyrians as a potential supplementary force with military aims did not diminish by the end of the war, however.<sup>26</sup> Although some refugee leaders asked the British to allow them to return to Hakkari, the irresolution of the border dispute as well as British pressures convinced most of the refugee communities to stay in Iraq waiting for a final settlement of the frontier line. While diaspora Assyrian representatives petitioned in Paris and Geneva in favour of an autonomous Assyrian homeland,<sup>27</sup> male Assyrians were organized in police mobile units to oversee the Turkish–Iraqi provisional frontier border and curb any Kurdish tribal insurgencies.<sup>28</sup>

Yet the British presence in the region was far from being unchallenged. By March 1919, several letters originating from Jazira Ibn Umar were funnelled to the border area urging the expulsion of ‘foreigners’ (British) and asked for local tribes to support the Ottoman government. The actual instruments of Turkish propaganda were the Goyan, a Kurdish tribe situated for the most part just outside the British administrative area, to the north of Zakho. In return, the British established an intelligence centre around Zakho to collect information about the ‘enemy’ and send pro-British agents to spread propaganda within the Turkish territory.<sup>29</sup> An unofficial war at the frontier gradually got underway.<sup>30</sup>

Between 1919 and 1921 British authorities reported anti-Christian massacres in the Goyan country because the local Nestorians and Assyrian Levies came to be seen as the allies of ‘foreign-infidels’.<sup>31</sup> Encouraged by Turkish agents in the area, the Christian villages of the Amadiyah district were systematically raided by Kurdish groups. Even though the loss of life was small, crops and sheep were subject to theft and destruction. In return, British aeroplanes bombed the rebellious tribes, including unarmed inhabitants of the villages and towns.<sup>32</sup> Despite the end of anti-Christian attacks by early 1922, British authorities considered that frequent air raids against transborder tribes were a necessary policy to obtain a ‘marked effect’<sup>33</sup> amid Kurds – that is, to hamper ‘any attempt on the part of the Turks to open direct communication’ between Rawanduz and Jazirah bin Umar, the latter being considered by the British as a hub for Turkish propaganda in Eastern Anatolia.<sup>34</sup>

## Discourses on Muslim solidarity and self-determination

As in other parts of the former Ottoman Empire, several activists and local chiefs who embodied a greater ideological heterogeneity 'were engaged in similar forms of rebellious activities that had a common anti-imperialist motivation'.<sup>35</sup> The similarities between diverse anticolonial insurgencies were hardly surprising. Although these movements have been studied separately, as a reflection of the nation-centred historiographies of the Ottoman successor states – the Turkish War of Independence, the Iraqi revolt of 1920, the Great Syrian revolt and so forth – one should not forget that many insurgents had been Ottoman subjects, and that many of them were mobilized into the Ottoman army between 1914 and 1918. As Michael Provence has observed 'abundant evidence [...] suggests that rebel participants – collective veterans of wars to save the Ottoman State – did not view the post-Ottoman revolts as separate movements of national liberation but rather as locally conditioned elements of a single, undifferentiated struggle'.<sup>36</sup>

While the influence of a 'Young Turk' intellectual heritage was evident after the First World War (especially among officers trained in military schools) as the Ottoman Empire entered into a phase of disintegration, local players framed anti-imperialist activities in different and sometimes contradicting ways, borrowing ideas and discourses from diverse sources and cultural idioms.

The first source of local unrest was Turkish propaganda. The leaders of the Turkish War of Independence led by Mustafa Kemal rallied several Kurdish chiefs and urban notables to the battle against the English 'foreign-infidels', using intense propaganda based on the idea of 'Ottoman-Muslim solidarity'.<sup>37</sup> According to British records, by early 1919 a network of 'Young Turk' activists established local groups under the title of 'Committees for Turco-Kurdish Independence' in towns such as Urfa, Mardin, Diyarbakir and Jazira bin Umar.<sup>38</sup> The objective of these activities was to keep the sources of rebellion alive hoping to regain the ancient Ottoman Vilayet of Mosul, considered a territory historically linked to Anatolia.<sup>39</sup> The invocation of Islam and a shared Ottoman past presented not only a system of powerful political and cultural symbols, but also constituted a legitimate discourse that could be readily recognized and understood by all.

Among Turkish propagandists in the region, Commander Özdemiş Pasha (Ali Şafiq, born in Cairo in 1885)<sup>40</sup> had a significant success in Rawanduz area following his arrival in March 1922.<sup>41</sup> Although his chief weapon was propaganda, the war of words was backed up by concentrations of troops in the frontier area, trade embargoes and frontier blockades. In addition, arms were also distributed among the tribes, whilst on the north-eastern frontier pro-Turkish *çetes* (armed irregulars) occupied the disaffected area and used it as a base for further incitement to revolt.

Propaganda around Muslim solidarity was welcomed not only by unruly mountainous tribes, but also by the notables further south. According to a number of Turkish letters found in Sulaimaniya, the *vali* of Van, Qadri Effendi was in constant contact with the chiefs of the Hamawand, Hawraman, Mariwan and Jaf, as well as notables in Arbil and Kirkuk.<sup>42</sup> In the memoirs written by Rafiq Hilmi, Sheikh Mahmud's secretary in 1919, it appears that after the revolt led by the Goyan tribe, Sheikh Mahmud sealed an agreement with Özdemiş and expelled all British collaborators from Sulaimaniya in the name of the 'Kurdish-Turkish friendship' on the grounds of a shared Muslim bond, a collusion that lasted several years thereby allowing the Turks to press the British until the resolution of the Mosul Affair.<sup>43</sup>

The Muslim tone was also present in documents and letters exchanged between local actors. Tribal chiefs such as Mahmud Khan Dizli (Hawraman) wrote a series of letters to Kurdish leaders intermingling religious and patriotic terms. In one instance Mahmud Khan Dizli refers to Sheikh Mahmud as 'Jihad Sheikh Mahmud' who 'for the honour of our religion turned the English out of Sulaimaniya and Halabja and from among the Kurds'.<sup>44</sup> More tellingly, Sheikh Mahmud himself sent a despatch to the Arab commander of the 'National Movements in Al Jazirah and Iraq' in which he stated that he had exposed himself to suffering and danger in order to 'frustrate the evil intentions of the British against the Islamic world and to upset the effects of their policy which is to sever the people of South Kurdistan (either by threats or persuasion) from the Great Government of Turkey'.<sup>45</sup>

However, Turkish propaganda based on 'Muslim solidarity' was not the only discourse that mattered among local leaders and tribes. The right to self-determination, as coined by Thomas Woodrow Wilson prior to the Paris Peace Conference, and thus the prospect of a Kurdish state as per British projects in the region, was also appealing to many. In that regard, Rafiq Hilmi's memoirs are again essential to grasp the complexities of attitudes and perceptions of local players in the Mosul vilayet. Hilmi explains, for instance, that Sheikh Mahmud asked him to write a petition and a special letter which were sent to Sharef Pasha, the representative of the Kurdish delegation at the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919. However, the group entrusted with conveying the petition failed to reach Paris so Sharef Pasha never received it.<sup>46</sup> Despite this failure and his collusion with the Turks, Sheikh Mahmud encouraged the spread of Kurdish nationalism in Southern Kurdistan in different ways.

Indeed, since 1918 Kurdish nationalism had become the new source of Sheikh Mahmud's legitimacy, particularly as he engaged with the British authorities. He surrounded himself with the local intelligentsia, which included civil servants, teachers, journalists and ex-officers of the Ottoman army.<sup>47</sup> The first government of Sheikh Mahmud equipped itself with a Kurdish 'national' flag<sup>48</sup> and, although British reports insist on the importance of tribal elements, the representatives of the urban intelligentsia played an unquestionable part in the autonomous Kurdish administration.

Such manoeuvres by the Sheikh prompted a British response. By 1919, Major Edward W.C. Noel – the Acting Civil Commissioner – decided to put an end to Mahmud's government because the Kurdish chief was trying to extend his control over Kirkuk and Kifri – actions which threatened to break the balance of power in the north of Iraq and bring the other Kurdish chiefs with him to take part in a widespread rebellion against the British.

Sulaimaniya did not, however, experience the stability that the British military authorities had hoped for. Fearing the advance of rebellious Kurdish tribes and Turkish *çetes*, the British decided to evacuate the town in a hurry on 1 September 1922. The High Commissioner then decided to bring Sheikh Mahmud back and to appoint him the governor of Kurdistan on 10 October 1922. A month later, Sheikh Mahmud proclaimed himself the 'King of Kurdistan' and initiated the publication of the newspaper *Rojî Kurdistan* (Kurdistan Sun) with the collaboration of Sulaimaniya's leading intellectuals and poets. He again encouraged nationalist symbolism: the reinstatement of the Kurdish flag, the printing of 'Kurdish' postal stamps and the organization of military parades which contributed to the diffusion of nationalism as the *lingua franca* of Sulaimaniya residents. In July 1922, a group of Sulaimaniya intellectuals and notables led by Mustafa Pasha (1866–1936) followed the footsteps of Sheikh Mahmud, and founded *Jamiyeti Kurdistan* (The Kurdistan Association),



and two months later they published the first issue of *Bangî Kurdistan* (The Call of Kurdistan), the Association's official journal. These journals were key instruments in disseminating Kurdish nationalism supported by 'universal' aspirations. Thus, for instance, in January 1923 *Rojî Kurdistan* published diverse articles where the public was reminded of the Wilsonian principles:

No one in this country or among the Kurds desires to be under foreign rule, no one has any desire other than to live as a free and independent nation. This is the era of nationalism and every people is looking for its independence and liberty.<sup>49</sup>

In the same journal, it is stated that because patriotism among Kurds was widespread and the latter were key actors in the unlocking of the 'Mosul Affair', the Kurds should be allowed to send their own representatives to the Peace Conference in Lausanne.<sup>50</sup> Notwithstanding this demand, the potential establishment of a Kurdistan state did not rule out other political alternatives such as the confederal framework; that is, reuniting the autonomous Kurdish entity again with 'the Islamic Government [Turkey]'.<sup>51</sup>

Sheikh Mahmud and the publications he sponsored in Sulaimaniya were not the only local voices that harboured different discourses and engaged in contradicting alliances. Ismail Simko Agha, the Chief of the Shikak (a Kurdish tribe living in the borderlands of the former Ottoman-Iranian frontier) sought to establish solid relations with the Turks to push 'foreigners' out of the region.<sup>52</sup> His willingness to work with Turkey did not mean that he shunned the British, particularly if the latter supported the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish entity.<sup>53</sup> Like Sheikh Mahmud, Simko encouraged the spread of Kurdish nationalism in north-western Persia by backing cultural activities such as establishing the first Kurdish school in addition to the publication of the first Kurdish-Persian language newspaper. Yet, while the prospect of establishing an independent Kurdistan was cherished by Agha Simko at different times, the survival of his fiefdom surrounded by new and old 'enemies' seemed to be his only roadmap.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, in the post-Ottoman Vilayet of Mosul, the nationalist field included a collection of activists, organizations and constituencies that expressed their political aspirations through discourses that were as disparate as they were themselves. It was especially confusing that different nationalist discourses, coloured with different ideological tones – Muslim solidarity, Wilsonian principles, Kurdish-Muslim nationalism – were displayed by the same actors. As Erez Manela puts it, the 'Wilsonian moment' (1919–1920) allowed anti-colonial movements to search for new allies, languages and methods to help their quest to challenge imperialism. In addition, Wilson's rhetoric of self-determination in the colonial world was not defined by the intention of its author, but by the perceptions, goals and contexts of its often-unintended audiences.<sup>55</sup> As new 'national identities' – Turkish, Kurdish, Arab – were not yet fixed, the 'cultural system' of nationalism could be the vehicle for different and shifting aspirations, open to disparate influences. The shifting context along with the fluid character of 'national identities' in the early 1920s was thus reflected in the diversity of political discourses advanced by borderlanders.

However, borderlanders' discourses did not merely play into Turkish and British strategies. Actually, as local actors interplayed with the latter, it appeared that Turkish and British discourses were neither completely independent from others' – enemies and borderlanders – categories and strategies nor unchangeable. On the one hand, pro-Turkish Muslim rhetoric among tribal areas was not simply a top-down strategy. According to

intercepted messages, Kurdish tribal chieftains asked the Kemalist resistance for a decree issued by the Caliph himself in order to join the rebel forces.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, while ‘Ottoman solidarity’ and the ‘defence of Islam’ became the main expressions of resistance against the ‘foreign occupiers’ from 1919 to 1921, this language shifted to that of nationalism and minority rights during the Lausanne Peace Conference.

Consequently, Britain and Turkey were obliged to adapt their claims over Mosul by taking into account this new reality. From the Turkish point of view, Turkish–Kurdish unity was emphasized both at the Grand National assembly and in Lausanne. In the border area, Özdemiş Pasha acknowledged Sheikh Mahmud’s position as the ‘President of the Committee of Representatives of Kurdistan’, and by 1922 Turkish propaganda tended to encourage the belief that the Kemalists, unlike the British, were ready to give full autonomy to the Kurds under the protection of a ‘Muslim Government’.<sup>57</sup>

As a response, Britain issued a joint Anglo-Iraqi statement of intent in the same year in which the mandatory power and the government of Iraq recognized the right of the Kurds living within the boundaries of Iraq to set up a Kurdish government. In addition, by late 1922, C.J. Edmonds, a political officer, elaborated a memorandum in which concrete measures – including fiscal arrangements – were advanced to satisfy Kurdish aspirations for autonomy ‘under British protection’. Although the plan was not fully implemented, local unrest at the provisional Turkish–Iraqi frontier obliged the British to hint at political moves to meet Kurdish claims.<sup>58</sup>

Such half-promises did not preclude a mistrustful relationship between all the players concerned. British records abound in reports and letters in which the mandatory powers clearly state that Sheikh Mahmud was not trustworthy because of his ‘treachery’. The same is true on the Turkish side. A series of letters intercepted by the Persian authorities reveal that Özdemiş Pasha suspected Sheikh Mahmud of being a tool of the British and depicted him as a ‘cunning man’. Likewise, Ismail Agha Simko, who had been cooperating with Sheikh Mahmud and the Turks against the British, described him as a ‘scoundrel’.<sup>59</sup>

Interestingly, as Fuat Dündar shows, while the British and the Turks had been cynically exploiting both the statistical data and the principle of self-determination between 1922 and 1924 to support their discrepant claims over Mosul vilayet and obtain an advantageous settlement of the Turkish–Iraqi border, the February 1925 Kurdish rebellion in Turkey led by Sheikh Said<sup>60</sup> had an impact on their discourse as well.<sup>61</sup> The repression of the rebel movement – notably the execution of a number of Kurdish personalities, the forced displacement of thousands of Kurds<sup>62</sup> – seemed to cast doubt upon ‘Kurdish–Turkish brotherhood’ in the eyes of the Commission. Accordingly, the Turkish government shifted its strategy before the League of Nations emphasizing the predominantly ‘Sunni’ character of the Mosul population, which better related the latter to Turkey. Critically, the significant Shia constituency in southern Iraq made the attachment of Mosul vilayet to Turkey all the more urgent.<sup>63</sup>

### Silencing borderlanders’ voices

The internationalization of the ‘Mosul affair’ provided borderlanders with a new opportunity to jump forward and attempt to voice their concerns. Although their views were not explicitly included in the final decision taken by the League in December 1925, their actions and statements had an indirect effect in the definitive resolution of the dispute.

The Council of the League of Nations discussed the matter on 30 August 1924. Contrary to British expectations, however, it decided to send a commission made up of three delegates to the Mosul Vilayet to determine whether the locals wanted to be part of the new Republic of Turkey or preferred British mandatory Iraq. At a meeting in Brussels, Swedish prime minister and rapporteur of the Commission, Hjalmar Branting, suggested that a temporary demarcation line be drawn somewhere between the British and Turkish lines, taking into consideration natural formations, such as mountain crests and rivers. Two months later, the Council accepted Branting's demarcation line paving the way for the initial works of the Commission.<sup>64</sup>

As Sarah Shields points out, from the very beginning Britain perceived the presence of the Commission as a potential threat to their continuing authority over Mosul. In that sense, British 'support' for the League project was not a proof of self-confidence, but rather a strategy to 'minimize the possible threats to its own rule'.<sup>65</sup> The mandate authorities even went so far as to try to restrict the movement of the representatives assigned by Ankara to accompany the Commission.<sup>66</sup> As a result, the Commissioners refused to begin their work until the British and Iraqi authorities allowed all representatives, including the Turkish delegation, to accomplish their mission. The autonomy of the Commission from British interests became even more explicit as the Swedish delegate carried out 'an active foreign policy based on solidarity with and support of the League of Nations' thereby creating additional worries amid the mandate's officials.<sup>67</sup>

The League's initiative and its potential destabilizing effect in the northern districts of Iraq had an immediate indirect impact on the mandatory power. Thus, before the arrival of the Commission in February 1925, 'the Iraqi Minister of Interior Affairs toured Mosul vilayet and promised that the Kurds' national rights would be respected if they decided to stay within Iraq'.<sup>68</sup> A British-sponsored meeting in Arbil along the same lines followed suit, while pro-Iraqi 'spies and propagandists' were sent into Turkey to fuel unrest.<sup>69</sup>

Despite these moves, the mandate authorities were unable to completely silence opposing voices. Pro-Turkey secret societies, made up of mainly Turkmen, in the cities of Arbil and Kirkuk proved to be especially active.<sup>70</sup> Likewise some Kurdish notables such as Haji Abdul Latif from Amadiyah met the Commission to whom he declared his pro-Turkish sentiment, claiming that 'all the Kurds wanted the Turks'.<sup>71</sup>

However, borderlanders' agency unleashed state reaction on both sides of the provisional frontier. On the one hand, border leaders who had manifested their loyalty to Turkey were either killed, imprisoned or banished, and even some villages located in the border area were bombed and burned by the Assyrian Levies.<sup>72</sup> Significantly, the coercive campaign reached such intense levels that some border tribes situated on the Iraqi side threatened to migrate to Turkey if the reprisal campaign did not stop immediately.<sup>73</sup>

On the other hand, the Turkish authorities threatened Kurdish chieftains whose lands were in the border region in a similar manner: 'Tell the Commission we are Muslims and we live together with the Muslim Turks [...] If you support the Iraqi government you will become an ally with the Arabs and the unbelievers. Regret will be no use'.<sup>74</sup> Turkish threats were also geared towards the Iraqi elites at large as placards appeared throughout the region in which Ankara conveyed the idea that the Turkish army would not attack the British but the Iraqi state representatives, should Mosul remain in Iraq.<sup>75</sup>

Further, in June a regiment of Turkish soldiers took vengeance on the Assyrians and Kurds in the Goyan district because they had testified to the Frontier Commission their

desire to be included in Iraq. According to different accounts, over 2000 Assyrian refugees fled to Zakho and Mosul. All their flocks and stocks of grain were confiscated by the Turkish troops, who stated that they were preparing for war and that the Christians could return after the conclusion of hostilities.<sup>76</sup>

The massacres against Assyrians had certain repercussions in Western public opinion and the secretariat of the League of Nations, as the events were revealed to the press by an American journalist working for the *Chicago Tribune*, who happened to be in the region reporting on the works of the League's commission in Mosul vilayet.<sup>77</sup> Yet local actors such as Mgr. Thimothee Magdaci, the Bishop of Zakho and Dohuk, also played a role in drawing the attention of the League towards the fate of this community. While the news of the massacres were already circulating by June 1925, it was only when the League's commission intended to tour the border areas that the Iraqi government and the Mandate authorities gave some resonance to Magdaci's claims.

Subsequently, the British government made a formal complaint and requested the Council of the League of Nations to send representatives to the locality of the frontier. The commission arrived at Mosul on 30 October 1925, and proceeded to take evidence regarding the complaint of the Turkish government that British aircraft had crossed the Brussels Line, and the deportation of Christians. The final report found the British charges substantiated, and stated that Turkish soldiers occupied all the villages and carried out deportation *en masse*, during which Assyrians fell ill and were abandoned, while others died of starvation and cold.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, local tribes also tried to voice their uneasy position when asked about their 'national' preference. Confidential British reports reveal that borderlanders pledged before the Commission for an 'open border solution' which would guarantee them free mobility across the Turkish–Iraqi frontier in order to access their summer grazing lands situated in Turkish territory.<sup>79</sup> Against this background, British authorities encouraged Kurdish notables to write petitions supporting British claims, whereby they argued that Mosul vilayet was economically connected to Baghdad rather than to Anatolia and that only a 'natural' boundary delimited by the mountainous region running from Zakho to Rawanduz would secure Iraqi safety and progress.<sup>80</sup>

The impact of borderlanders' views on the border regime as envisioned by the Frontier Commission and the League of Nations cannot be over-stated. Yet, it is interesting to highlight that while Turkey and Britain stated that Mosul vilayet was economically oriented to Anatolia and Baghdad, respectively, the way of life of local tribes fitted better with the liberal approach the League was eager to develop in the interwar period. In 1924, for instance, the League had already acknowledged that:

if the disputed territory is assigned to Iraq, its inhabitants should be given full freedom of trade with Turkey and Syria, and moreover, facilities should be afforded to the Turkish frontier towns to use the Mosul route for exporting their produce and importing manufactured articles.<sup>81</sup>

Although both Britain and Turkey insisted on the disruptive impact of drawing the new Turkish–Iraqi border in the wrong place, the League seemed to agree with borderlanders in that whoever got Mosul and wherever the borders were drawn, 'the resulting interruptions as in other border areas of the world were more than manageable'.<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusion

Within the context characterized by extreme fluidity and indeterminacy on the frontier areas of the Mosul province, borderlanders heralded different, and sometimes contradictory, political discourses that ranged from Ottoman-Muslim solidarity to Kurdish nationalism. The same actors also contributed to transborder networks of violence and exchange throughout the Mosul dispute. Like other Ottoman communities, Mosul's populations simultaneously had multiple group identities, and could be classified according to location, faith, clan or occupation. Unsurprisingly, as the League of Nations delegates arrived in the province of Mosul in 1925, local populations once more provided a complex and nuanced response to the Commission's survey.

Arguably, the political preference of the people of Mosul could only be conditional upon a variety of criteria, such as the identity of the ruler, the potential economic impact or the survival of previous social networks. Far from being a signal of their incapacity to adapt to the new world order, this article has sought to prove that such attitudes and positions were a striking example of the capacity of local agency; that is, the capacity of local populations to develop strategies to pursue or safeguard their own interests.

Local agency does not mean complete empowerment, or guaranteed success. Ironically, while local revolts, transborder mobility and shifting alliances with Turkish and British representatives had allowed local players between 1918 and 1924 to gain autonomy from all state actors and extend their spheres of influence, it was at least partly borderlanders' agency that led Turkey and Great Britain as well as the League of Nations to search for a permanent solution based on the principle of territorial sovereignty within a modern international system of 'nation-states'.

In 1926 a standing Frontier Commission was set up. While at first Turkey seemed to be reluctant to participate in the work of the Commission, frequent frontier infringements and constant border transgressions of borderlanders and trespassers forced the Turkish authorities to monitor the Turco-Iraqi border more intensively once the Mosul dispute was settled. In doing so, local actors inadvertently contributed to the emergence of the Turkish-Iraqi border as a social institution and helped to slowly transform these borderlands into bordered lands.

Epistemologically, a history of the Frontier dispute that pays attention to how borderlanders played off state powers and developed transborder networks of violence and exchange allows us both to combine diplomatic, local and transnational approaches, and to highlight the contradictory aspects of borderlanders' behaviour. Likewise, such an approach invites historians to elaborate 'less linear stories that leave room for the surprising and the puzzling'.<sup>83</sup>

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## Notes

1. See R. Gerwarth and E. Manela (eds.), *Empires at War, 1911–23* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
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4. S. Eskander, 'Southern Kurdistan under Britain's Mesopotamian Mandate: From Separation to Incorporation, 1920–23', *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol.37, No.2 (2001), pp.153–80.
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7. 'Treaty of Peace with Turkey'. Signed at Sèvres, 10 August 1920. Presented to Parliament by Command of His Majesty.
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9. *Atatürk'ün Söylev ve Demeçleri [Atatürk's Speeches and Declarations]*, Cilt 5 (Ankara: Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü, 1972), p.74.
10. Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (T.B.M.M.), Gizli Celse Zabıtalari [The Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Secret Hearings], İkinci Celse, 21 December 1921. Quoted in O. Ali, 'The Career of Ozdemir: A Turkish Bid for Northern Iraq, 1921–23', *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol.53, No.6 (2017), p.968.
11. The unofficial border ran from the northern part of the Gulf of Alexandretta to the Tigris River just south of Jazira Ibn Umar.
12. A. L. Macfie, 'British intelligence and the causes of unrest in Mesopotamia, 1919–21', *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol.35, No.1 (1999), pp.165–77.
13. P. Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, p.40.
14. For an account on the opposing British views expressed in Cairo, see S. Eskander, 'Southern Kurdistan under Britain's Mesopotamian Mandate', pp.153–6.
15. O. Ali, 'The career of Ozdemir', p.966.
16. Although Turkey and Britain exploited statistical data relating to Mosul's population in the absence of a plebiscite to determine the wishes of the vilayet's population, Great Britain's mandate in Iraq allowed the British representatives a pervasive use of updated statistical data on Mosul population – ethnicity, distribution and religion – to support 'scientifically' its political and military interests throughout the negotiations between 1922 and 1925. F. Dündar, "'Statistiquo': British Use of Statistics in the Iraqi Question, 1919–32', *Crown Paper (Brandeis University)* No.7 (2012), pp.1–63.
17. *Lausanne Conference on Near Eastern Affairs, 1922–3: Records of Proceedings and Draft Terms of Peace* (London: HMSO, 1923), pp. 262–4, 366–7, 369–70.
18. B. Şimşir, *Lozan Telgrafları I [The Lausanne Telegrams]* (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, 1990). No.25, 40, 59, 25–30 November 1922. İsmet Paşa to Rauf Bey.
19. Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, p.76.
20. M. Güztoklusu, *Elcezire ve Özdemiş Harekatı [Al Jazira and Özdemiş Campaign]*, (İstanbul: Ümit Yayınları, 2006), p.148–9.

21. T. B. M. M. Zabit Ceridesi, Cilt 3 [Minutes of the sessions at the Turkish Parliament, Volume 3], 23 March 1923, p.163.
22. S. Demirci, 'Turco-British Diplomatic Manoeuvres on the Mosul Question in the Lausanne Conference, 1922–23', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* Vol.3, No.1 (2010), p.64.
23. 'After the judgement', *Yeni Adana*, 21 December 1925.
24. The Nestorian tribes of Hakkari region had enjoyed a semi-independent way of life until the second half of the nineteenth century. However, the centralization policies launched by the Ottoman state and the subsequent elimination of hereditary Kurdish dynasts paved the way for a long period of chaos and unrest, including attacks and counter-attacks between Kurdish and Nestorian tribes. See S. Y. Baraç, 'Nestorians, Kurds, and the State: The Struggle to Survive in the Frontier in the Late Ottoman Period, 1839–1908' (MA dissertation, Bogaziçi University, 2015).
25. See L. Robson, 'Refugee camps and the spatialization of Assyrian nationalism in Iraq', in S. R. Goldstein-Sabbah and H. L. Murre-van den Berg (eds.), *Modernity, Minority, and the Public Sphere: Jews and Christians in the Middle East* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp.237–56.
26. As Laura Robson argues, British endeavours to recruit Assyrians into the Levies fit into a much longer and broader history of coercing marginal ethno-national groups to serve the colonial state, often under the justification that such groups constituted martial 'races' prone to display their 'natural' capacities. L. Robson, 'Peripheries of Belonging: Military Recruitment and the Making of a Minority in Wartime Iraq', *First World War Studies* Vol.7, No.1 (2016), p.27.
27. NA, FO/608/274. Memo presented by the Assyrian National Associations of America, 29 March 1919; CADN, Fonds Ankara, 36 PO/1/128. Memo presented by the Assyrian representatives in Paris, 1920.
28. Sir Percy Cox (Baghdad) to Winston Churchill, Colonial Secretary, 9 December 1921, FO 371/7780.
29. E. Demir, *Yeni Belgeler Işığında. Vazgeçilmeyen Topraklar Misak-ı Milli [In the Light of New Documents: Unforsaken Territories, the National Pact]* (Istanbul: Post, 2017), pp.344–60.
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31. NA, FO 608/95. Telegram, Political Officer, Baghdad, to Foreign Office, 7 April 1919.
32. NA, AIR 5/202. Appendix III to Major General Fraser's Report on British Forces in Iraq, 8 April–30 September 1922.
33. See J. L. Cox, 'A Splendid Training Ground: The importance of the Royal Air Force in its Role in Iraq, 1919–32', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* Vol.13 (1985), pp.157–84; D. E. Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919–39* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990); P. Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.239–62.
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39. The centrality of Diyarbakir and Jazira bin Umar as Al Jazira Front Commands is confirmed by Turkish sources. A. H. Saral, *Türk İstiklal Harbi cilt IV*, p.265–78.
40. For a comprehensive account on Özdemir's role in the area, see O. Ali, 'The career of Ozdemir', p.968.
41. According to Turkish sources, Özdemir received a directive from Mustafa Kemal in which the latter asserted that 'the proposition to secure, through united action, the independence of Syria, Iraq and Turkey and form a confederation or some other form of union later to be decided upon, had been accepted'. S. Aksin, 'Turkish-Syrian Relations in the Time of Faysal (1918–20)', *Turkish Yearbook of International Relations* Vol.20 (1980–1981), p.11.
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43. R. Hilmi, *Yaddaşt [Memoirs]* (London: New Hope, 2007), pp.163–67. Hilmi's account is corroborated by a series of letters that fell into British hands by 1923 as well as by Turkish records. NA, CO 730/40. Intelligence Report. Secretariat of the High Commissioner for Iraq. Baghdad, 1 June 1923; NA, AIR 23/317. Special Service Officer (Sulaimaniya) to the Administrative Inspector (Kirkuk), 27 February 1925. For a letter exchanged with Ankara asking for money, doctors and ammunition, see BCA.030.18.1.1, 15.54.8, Intelligence Report, 24 August 1925, p.15.
44. NA, CO 730/19. Sir Percy Cox (Baghdad) to Winston Churchill, Colonial Secretary, 20 January 1922.
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46. R. Hilmi, *Yaddaşt*, p.107.
47. NA; AIR 23/324. Special Service Office (SSO) (Sulaimaniya) to Air Staff Intelligence (Baghdad), 30 June 1927.
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49. *Rojî Kurdistan*, 'A Claim for our Just Rights', No.8, 10 January 1923.
50. *Rojî Kurdistan*, No.5, 27 November 1922; No.6, 5 December 1922.
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53. NA, CO 730/19. Intelligence report. Baghdad, 15 February 1922.
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62. See U. Ü. Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–50* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.55–170.
63. F. Dündar, 'Statisquo', p.23.
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67. J. Rogers, 'The Foreign Policy of Small States', pp.349–69.



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69. BCA.030.10, 112.756.20. Intelligence Report sent to Ankara, 9 May 1925.
70. See G. B. Büyüksaraç, 'Trans-Border Minority Activism and Kin-State Politics: The Case of Iraqi Turkmen and Turkish Interventionism', *Anthropological Quarterly* Vol.90, No.1 (2017), pp.17–54.
71. MEC, Edmonds Collection, GB165–0095/1/2B. Administrative Inspector Mosul to Baghdad. Mosul, 10 February 1925.
72. According to Turkish reports, Sefer Agha, chief of the Doski, together with his son were assassinated in May 1925. After their killing, the police authorities in Zakho informed the population that all pro-Turkish proxy elements would follow the same fate. BCA.030.10, 258.737.10. Intelligence Report sent to Ankara, 30 May 1925, p.2.
73. NA, FO 371/10837. Telegram No.305, Lindsay to Chamberlain, 15 April 1925.
74. NA, AIR 23/308. Translated leaflet, undated.
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77. Idem.
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