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FROM MILLET TO NATION:
THE LIMITS OF CONSOCIATIONAL RESOLUTIONS FOR
MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

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*From Millet to Nation:
The Limits of Consociational Resolutions for Middle East Conflict*

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Abstract

This paper argues that Europeans worked to transform the bases for group affiliation in territories of the former Ottoman Empire, insisting on national and linguistic self-identification that created dissonance among the population. Focusing on the decades between the two World Wars, when the new Middle Eastern borders were being created and contested, the paper analyzes two episodes in which the League of Nations sought to document the identity of Middle Eastern populations in order to allocate contested territory: the Sanjak Question

(Alexandretta) and the Mosul Question. Each province was home to a population diverse in language and religion; in each, the League of Nations intervened to insist that one or another group must be predominant. Instead of creating a consociational or federal system, each episode resulted in one group satisfied and the other group becoming a “minority.” The sorts of identities which the League of Nations privileged had little meaning before mid-century, when the new governments they created began to adhere to ideologies that reified nation and exploited the new fault lines for their own political benefit.

Keywords

Syria, France, Minorities, Ottoman, Turkey, Antioch

Introduction*

The Call for Proposals for this session asks a fascinating set of questions. If former Ottoman territories are today rife with intercommunal violence, to what extent might this be a result of their Ottoman heritage which, through the millet system, institutionalized division and provided for communal autonomy? I will leave it to others to analyze the nature and implications of the millet system itself. It seems as though many scholars have urged us to problematize the millet system, as a political institution that changed over time and was only systematized with the new definitions of collective belonging that accompanied the Tanzimat reforms of the nineteenth century.¹

I want to focus instead on the historical moment after the fall of the Ottoman empire, when notions of belonging were challenged, in part, by the loss of the overarching notion of affiliation that had been provided by the Sultan. Moreover, at the very time that political sovereignty was being transformed in former Ottoman territories, new political ideologies gave enormous political weight to novel categories of belonging. I will argue that the League of Nations introduced new notions of identity into the Arab provinces of the Middle East, affiliations which were neither inevitable nor sensible, but which themselves introduced significant intercommunal violence into the region.

The League of Nations intervened to resolve conflicts over the contested former Ottoman provinces of Mosul and Alexandretta. In both cases, the collective identities of the population were supposed to be pivotal in deciding the allocation of disputed territory. Thus, the League of Nations, acting out of a set of assumptions that correlated collective identity with political desire, sought to find out who lived in each province. In both cases, neither their assumptions nor their categories were widely shared by residents. Intercommunal competition and violence were hardly the result of the millet system here, but instead the consequence of these new definitions brought by European political programs.

Mosul Question

When World War I ended, Turkey occupied the province of Mosul, evacuating under protest at the insistence of the British who were moving north from Bagdad. With Britain in occupation of the northern province, the nascent Republic of Turkey took her claim to Mosul to the new League of Nations. After a long diplomatic process during which the Turkish government and the British mandatory rulers reached an impasse, both agreed to turn the dispute over to the League of Nations for arbitration.

The League requested information from both governments, delivering extensive questionnaires on economy, demography, geology, transportation. Each government submitted maps showing different ethnic concentrations. By 1925, the League of Nations decided to send a Commission to Mosul to see the situation for itself. Three Commissioners and their staff traveled throughout the province, interviewing local leaders about Mosul's political and economic situations and canvassing the population throughout the countryside.

* An earlier version of this paper was presented in Workshop 5: 'Re-examining Federalism and Consociationalism as Constitutional and Political Arrangements for Community Conflicts in Post-Ottoman Lands' at the Eleventh Mediterranean Research Meeting, Florence & Montecatini Terme, 24–27 March 2010, organised by the Mediterranean Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute.

¹ B. Braude and B. Lewis (eds.) *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire, the Functioning of a Plural Society*: Volume I: The Central Lands; Volume II: The Arabic-Speaking Lands (New York/London: Holmes & Meier, 1982). Şuhnaz Yılmaz and İpek K. Yosmaoğlu, "Fighting the Spectres of the Past: Dilemmas of Ottoman Legacy in the Balkans and the Middle East," *Middle Eastern Studies* 44 (2007), 677-693.

By the time the Commission arrived, the British had occupied Mosul province for six years, despite the lack of any treaty allowing them control over the contested area. Although the League of Nations had assigned the mandate for Iraq to Britain, the Mosul province remained outside Iraq. Even the treaty at Lausanne that ended hostilities between the Allies and the new Republic of Turkey did not set the border. Instead, it called for the two parties to determine the boundaries through diplomatic discussions. Those negotiations took place from 19 May to 5 June 1924 in Istanbul. Great Britain insisted that the only remaining question was the location of the border. For the Ankara government, the entire Mosul province was in dispute. Turkey claimed that she had agreed to relinquish control over non-Turks of the former Ottoman empire, but insisted that the province of Mosul was inhabited mostly by Turks and Kurds, who, according to the Turkish nationalist regime, were the same. The British responded that Kurds were not Turks, and Turks did not account for the majority in Mosul. Both claimed that the mountains north of Mosul were essential to the security of the state. Moreover, the British argued, the population had become accustomed to being part of Iraq during those six years of participation in its affairs, even sending representatives to the new Iraqi parliament. Turkey countered that Mosul had representatives at the Grand National Assembly in Ankara as well.

The dispute was over territory—would the province of Mosul—with its population, its mountains, and its oil resources—go to Turkey or to Iraq? With many possible criteria available to make the decision, the ideology underpinning the League of Nations became the first consideration. The League was, after all, made up of nations, the new political unit that those in Western Europe had come to consider the most effective and desirable method of organization. Nations comprised people whose common language and history would necessarily, in the belief of the day, lead to common political demands and desires. It was frustrated nationalism, according to the League's members, that had occasioned the recent conflagration that had engulfed Europe and the world. Self-determination of peoples in the nationalist context presumed a common trajectory and common goals among all the people affiliated with a particular nation. The question, then, would focus on who actually lived in Mosul, people who “belonged” in the Turkish Republic or people who identified with the Kingdom of Iraq. According to the new political ideology, if Mosul were assigned to the proper state, the likelihood of conflict would diminish.

The negotiations over Mosul resolved nothing, and the timing could not have been worse. The recent Shaikh Said rebellion had implicated some of the residents of the contested province, which bordered (and included) the areas in which some of the rebels had lived. With Turkey continuing to engage in military operations at her still-undefined border with Iraq, the British interpreted Ankara's incursions as indicative of their willingness to take over the province militarily if needed. Animosity escalated between the two governments as the talks between them wound down, and when the League of Nations Commission arrived, those subrosa conflicts burst into full view.

While fretting about Turkish intentions to the north, British officials were trying to consolidate their control over the ministries of the newly independent Kingdom of Iraq. Their presence in Mosul province was legally *de facto*—they carried out government functions without internationally-recognized right to be the local government. Nonetheless, British officials worried that the League of Nations' presence, and their interviews with local people inquiring about popular views of the British/Iraqi regime, might lead to the loss of respect and power among the population of Mosul. British officials struggled to “maintain order” in the contested province even as the Commissioners toured the area trying to discover whether the population wanted to continue under British administration. To win long-term control for their Iraqi protégé government, they arranged for King Faysal to tour the Mosul provinces, urging the people to show the arriving Commissioners their loyalty to Iraq.

Although Turkey and Iraq had submitted a *territorial* dispute to the League of Nations, the Commissioners expected to make their recommendation based on the political identities of Mosul's population. The League's project was based on their essentialist understanding that Mosulis were *either* Turks or Arabs, and thus would belong with Turkey or Iraq. But the categories they offered

were quite different from those familiar to the local population less than a decade after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. These divisions were based on European assumptions that the primary division among populations was linguistic.

The Commissioners' presence led to immediate conflict as the British responded to events on the ground. Their dual roles, as contestant for the territory and as de facto occupiers, created an ambiguous situation. At the outset, they contested not only the official Turkish representative to the Commission, but also his two assistants, claiming that Nazim Bey and Fettah Bey were outlaws, Iraqi nationals wanted for criminal activity. The League Commissioners responded that these two men were citizens of the Mosul province, and as such, they "could not be regarded as Iraqi subjects until the question of the frontiers had been finally settled." The British sought to control access to the Commission, Commissioner Paulis angrily noted in his journal. At the beginning, he wrote, they were very heavy-handed, stationing police in Mosul, arresting people who showed sympathy with the Turkish delegates, and "imprisoning" the Turkish delegation in a camp behind barbed wire. At the same time, the British were actively encouraging pro-Iraq demonstrations, distributing Iraqi flags and pins which were to be worn even by those preferring Turkish rule.² When Turkish delegate Cevat Pasha, dressed in his military uniform, walked through Mosul's market with Commissioner Teleki, two crowds formed, one applauding the Turkish officer while the other cheered Iraq and her King.³

The division within Mosul was political: supporters of the Turkish regime versus Faysal's government. Nonetheless, the League of Nations Commissioners, with their European assumptions about nations, nationalism, territory, and self-determination, sought the preferences of the local population by interrogating their interviewees' linguistic identity. As they traveled the province, they met with men from all walks of life: town notables, tribal leaders, craftsmen, religious officials, peasants. The responses they received confused them. Mosulis described their political ideologies and their concern about their future quality of life, but few seemed to connect either of those with language or nation. Indeed, the Commissioners were repeatedly surprised even by men whose national affiliations they expected to be quite strong. For example, Colonel Paulis reflected in his private journal about the previous day's interviews in Kirkuk.

Won over the previous year to the Bagdad government of which he was minister, Izet Pasha had today become pro-Turk. Old Salib bey, considered a renegade by his own family for having agreed to serve as a deputy at Bagdad, was similarly pro-Turk. Even Nazim bey, acting as an assistant to the Turkish Assessor connected to the Commission, seemed to have rallied to the Arab government at the beginning of the British occupation.⁴

Moreover, both of the Turkish-speaking leaders of Kirkuk were now in favor of a continuing connection to Iraq. A Turk "by birth," Mutassarif Abdul Majud had been elected leader of the municipality at the end of the Ottoman period and continued in the position under the British. He now favored Kirkuk's attachment to Iraq. Kirkuk's municipality president Abdulkemal Geddikzade expressed similar sentiments. A Turk born at Kirkuk to a family already well-established there for centuries, possessor of many buildings in the city, he claimed to favor connection with Iraq. "It is

² Colonel A. Paulis, "Enquete en Irak: Journal Privé," League of Nations Archives, Geneva, S16, 2, 24. C.J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs: Politics, Travel and Research in North-Eastern Iraq 1919-1925* (Oxford University Press, 1957), 399. Paulis described communications while in Mosul in which people claimed that those who showed support for Turks on their arrival in Mosul were beaten and imprisoned, 18, 19. Those who spoke to the Commission also claimed to be questioned by the police. A petition from the Turkish Foreign Minister to the League of Nations Secretary General suggested even more serious consequences, claiming that villages in the Dohuk-Amadia regions had been destroyed by British bombardment in retaliation for their having indicated that they wanted to be attached to Turkey. 23 June, 1925, League of Nations Archives, S17, 175. See also Sarah Shields, "Mosul, the Ottoman Legacy, and the League of Nations," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 3 (2009): 217-230.

³ Edmonds, 400-01. Mosul Commission Jardine (Journal), Middle East Center Archive, St. Antony's College, Oxford, GB 165-0095, Edmonds Papers, 1-14 February, 1925, 1, 9, 21. Also League of Nations Archives S15/D26

⁴ Archives of the League of Nations, S16. Colonel A. Paulis, "Enquete en Irak: Journal Privé."

impossible that we would be separated from Iraq because we are tied to Bagdad by economic ties. It is toward Bagdad that we export our products, it is also from there that we received all that we need.” Interview after interview reinforced the remarkable conclusion that, around Kirkuk as in the rest of the province, linguistic identity did not determine political choice.⁵

For each of these men, primary place was not accorded to “identity” in the choice of political destiny. Many supported continuing ties to Iraq because of Britain’s presence, and the economic shifts that now tied them to the south.⁶ While most Mosulis had previously conducted their trade with places other than Bagdad, the new roads, railroads, and British policy had created integrated markets that many merchants were loathe to lose. This did not, however, mean that they supported Faysal’s government. Although British official Edmonds may have been self-serving when he remarked that outside Mosul, “even the most uncompromising anti-Turks had very little use for the Baghdad hierarchy...” British officials hoped that the local population would see the advantages of a continuing British presence. Edmonds must have been delighted to report that even those who opposed Mosul’s connection to Turkey dreaded inclusion in an Iraq dominated by the current Bagdad regime, fearing anarchy or stagnation under an independent Iraq.⁷ Edmonds hoped that this sentiment might sway the Commissioners, leading them to insist on continuing British control.

Many of those interviewed recognized Great Britain’s domination of the Iraqi regime. As a Kurdish chief pointed out, neither Arab nationalism nor Kurdish nationalism could be at play in the present choice. He responded to his interviewer, “Why do you give me a choice between the Arab Government and the Turkish Government, the matter is not that, the question is choosing between Turks and British.”⁸ Moreover, men cited ideology to support both possible outcomes. All linguistic groups whose primary consideration was opposition to European rule preferred connection with independent Turkey, while those opposing a secular state would support Iraq over Ataturk’s republic. For example, of the five *Muslim Arabs* at the beginning of Commissioner de Wirsén’s list, one preferred an autonomous Arab government, but if the British stayed he preferred to be ruled by Turkey; another responded that commerce in his sheep export business had been better before the war, and, though undecided, he would be content if the Turks returned; a third favored Turkey because commerce had been better and customs duties lower before the British occupation; one was in favor of Turkey because the government was Muslim and the Turks less oppressive than the Arab government; and the fifth, a local mukhtar, would be content with any government. Of the first four *Jews*, one claimed that former times were better than the present and the other three argued in favor of Iraq, claiming that the Turks had treated them badly.⁹

While the League of Nations had anticipated that identity would determine politics, it seems that Britain’s own presence was much more influential in determining people’s political choices. First, many who were in favor of an independent Arab government opposed being incorporated into Iraq, insisting that Iraq was not really an Arab (or Muslim) state. Conversely, some insisted that they would only want to be part of Iraq if Britain retained control, either because, as religious minorities, they feared life without a British buffer or because they were convinced that Iraq would only survive with a powerful patron. Second, many complained that British economic policies had injured their trade by permitting agricultural exports only through Bagdad and Basra while before most (especially livestock) exports had moved through Syria.¹⁰ Some Turks in Kirkuk preferred that the area become part of Iraq, while one of Kirkuk’s representatives to the Iraqi Assembly, unpredictably enough, was

⁵ Paulis, “Enquete en Irak: Journal Privé.”

⁶ Sarah Shields, *Mosul before Iraq* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

⁷ Edmonds, 415

⁸ Puech to Sarraïl, 9.8.25, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Cabinet Politique., Syrie-Liban 1020, Nantes.

⁹ Paulis, “Enquete en Irak: Journal Privé,” 45, 47, 29, 30, 41.

¹⁰ Report of Count Teleki, Arbil, League of Nations Archives, S14 D 18.

clearly in favor of connection to Turkey. Assyrians and some groups of Kurds within the province demanded independence from both Turkey and Iraq.¹¹ Politics and economics dictated the choice of connection, as the League explained in its final report:

The first result of the enquiry is to show that there is no national Iraqi feeling in the disputed territory, except among a section of the Arabs who have some degree of education; and in their case it is rather an Arab feeling, with chauvinistic and often anti-alien tendencies....

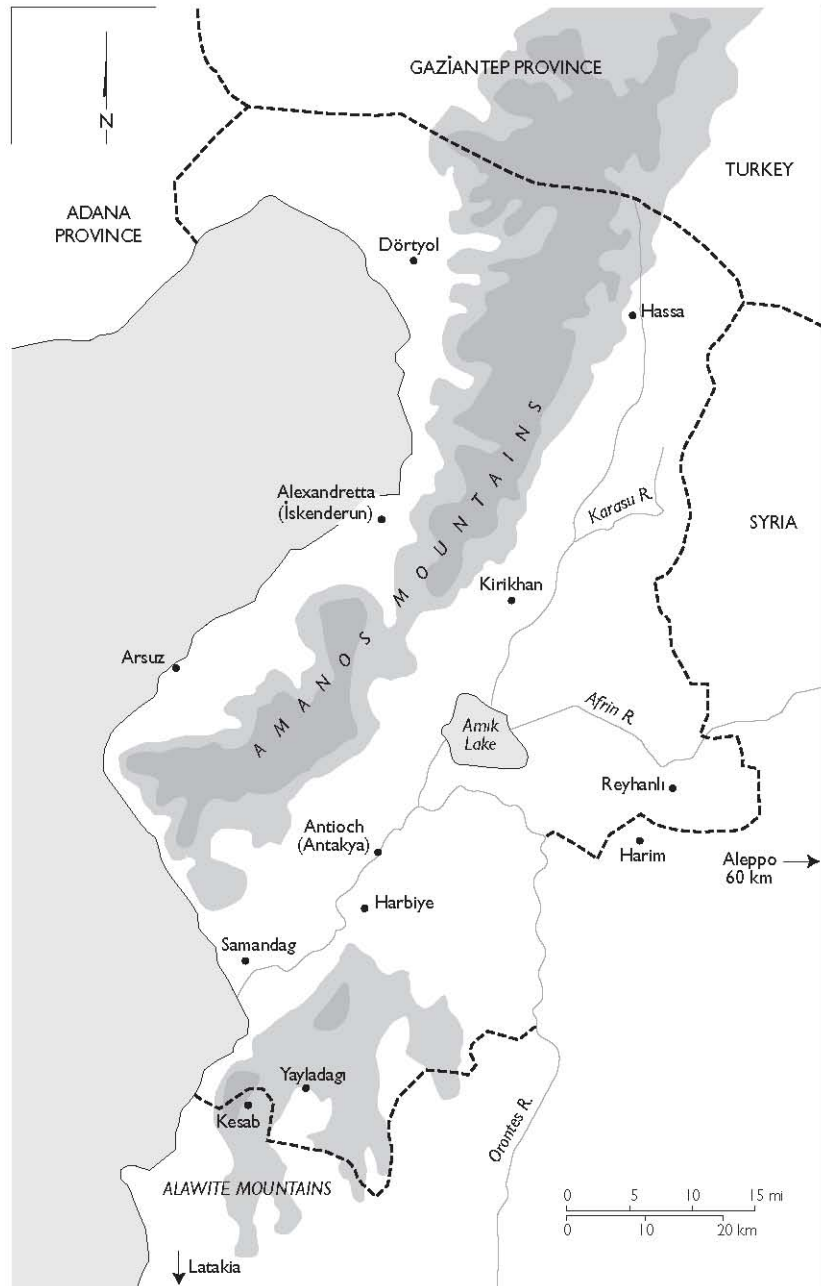
The absence of any Iraq national feeling explains the large number of conditional preferences which we have already mentioned. The most strongly nationalist Arabs say that they would prefer Turkey to an Iraq under foreign control. On the other hand, a large number of Christian chiefs say that they would feel less suspicious of a Turkish government than of an Iraq government without European control. The same views are to be found among the Yezidi. The Kurds of Sulaimaniya ask for a wide measure of local autonomy with the assistance of British advisors. Taken as a whole, the opinions expressed in favour of Iraq were in most cases based on considerations of private or community interest rather than on common patriotism.

*Thus, notwithstanding an assertion made by the British Government, nationalism and language are not always reliable evidence of political views. Many Arabs, particularly those of the poorer classes, are pro-Turkish, and sometimes give touching expression to their sympathies.*¹²

The final report comprehended the reality of the Mosul population's political desires: they were plural, and influenced by a variety of important factors that were scarcely determined by linguistic identity. In the end, it was those other factors that induced the League of Nations to assign the province to Iraq: economics, power, and protection.

¹¹ Paulis, "Enquete en Irak: Journal Privé," 45, 47, 29, 30, 41.

¹² League of Nations, Question of the Frontier between Turkey and Iraq, Report submitted to the Council by the Commission instituted by the Council Resolution of September 30th, 1924, 78 (emphasis mine).



Sanjak Question

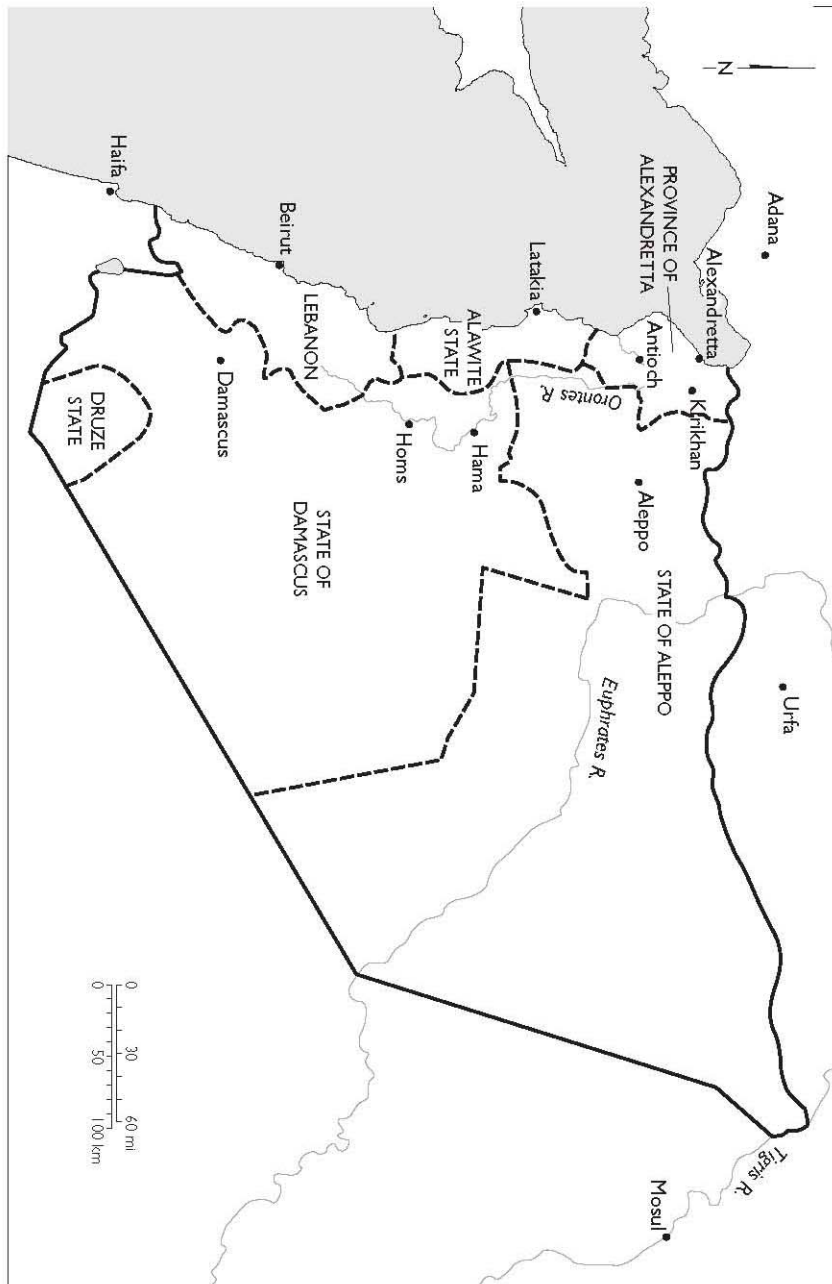
Nonetheless, when called in to assign contested territory a decade later, the League of Nations again reverted to assumptions about the correlation between identity and political desire. To some extent, the origins of the dispute presumed an identity-related solution. The result was the appearance of a new kind of intercommunal violence that can be attributed directly to the decisions of European mediators implementing the new ideologies that shaped the League of Nations during the decades after World War I.

Paris concluded a separate peace with the new government of Turkey in 1921 while Turkish nationalist forces continued their military struggle against the division of Anatolia that had been stipulated in the 1920 Sèvres Treaty. As the forces of the new Turkey battled Greece and Great Britain, France agreed to evacuate Cilicia and withdraw to those parts of Syria that the League of Nations would be assigning her as a mandate. One article of this 1921 Ankara Treaty is particularly salient for the struggle over the province of Alexandretta. Article 7 states, “A special administrative regime shall be established for the district of Alexandretta. The Turkish inhabitants of this district shall enjoy facility for their cultural development. The Turkish language shall have official recognition.”¹³ Read in context, Article 7 clearly echoes the new system of Minorities Treaties that were promulgated by the League of Nations as they established new nation-states in Europe. The treaties guaranteeing cultural rights to those not sharing the language of the new states’ majority population were intended to prevent the sort of grievances to which the League of Nations attributed the origins of World War I.¹⁴

The extent to which the “special administrative regime” for Alexandretta provided cultural development for its Turkish inhabitants remains in dispute. There was, without question, a special administrative regime in place that seems to have been quite in line with French policies toward her Syria mandate. French mandatory officials had, after all, divided her territory into seven political entities, of which Alexandretta was only one: Lebanon, the State of Aleppo, the State of Damascus, the Druze State, the Alawi State, and Alexandretta. During the 1920s, the new government in Ankara protested intermittently about the lack of facilities available for Turks in the Sanjak, but their demands grew exponentially in the fall of 1936, when the French government signed a treaty promising Syria her independence.

¹³ Majid Khadduri, “The Alexandretta Dispute,” *The American Journal of International Law* 39 (1945): 407.

¹⁴ The first of the Minorities Treaties was the Polish Treaty of 1919. Patrick Thornberry, *International Law and the Rights of Minorities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Thomas D. Musgrave, *Self-Determination and National Minorities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Carole Fink, “Minority Rights as an International Question,” *Contemporary European History* 9 (2000): 385-400. Laura Garces, “The League of Nations’ Predicament in Southeastern Europe,” *World Affairs* 158 (1995): 3-17.



* Both maps were produced by Bill Nelson, reproduced here by permission of Oxford University Press.

The Turkish government insisted that the province of Alexandretta was not to be included in the new independent Syria, claiming that it had never been part of the Syria mandate. Ankara's timeline claimed that France had signed the 1921 Ankara Treaty and agreed to administer the Sanjak before taking on the League of Nations Syria mandate, and that the two were disconnected. Paris scoffed at the notion that she administered Alexandretta in any other way, claiming to have no legitimate rights over the territory except as part of the mandate. The central issue remained Turkey's objection to Syria taking control over the Sanjak of Alexandretta. For the new Ankara regime, Article 7 showed that the province had a Turkish majority, a claim reinforced by stories of Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk)'s own commitment to the province arising when he was stationed there years earlier and heard people speaking Turkish. If Syria were to become independent, the Turkish government insisted, the Sanjak must get its separate independence. Paris countered that the League of Nations mandate prohibited the alienation of territory, forbidding the separation of Alexandretta from the rest of the mandate. By the end of 1936, France and Turkey agreed to refer the question to the League of Nations.

While the League was analyzing the situation, the governments of Turkey and France agreed to make the Sanjak a separate independent state that would become federated with the new, independent Syria. With war likely in Europe, French priorities lay more in neutralizing Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean than in standing by promises made to the new Syrian nationalist leaders. In the circumstances, an independent Sanjak seemed a small price to pay. The League of Nations appointed a Committee of Experts to compose a Statute and Fundamental Law for the new Alexandretta state.

The Committee of Experts decided that Alexandretta's Assembly should represent the population of the Sanjak *by community*. Instead of a certain number of representatives from each of its geographic divisions, the League wrote a constitution that promised a certain number of representatives from each demographic community. They defined seven communities to be represented in the new Assembly: Turk, Arab, Kurd, Armenian, Greek Orthodox, Alawi, and Other. To register for the elections, each man in the province over the age of 21 would declare his affiliation, and the relative numbers would be used to apportion the forty seats among the various communities.

As my first-semester students immediately noted, the categories specified were not mutually exclusive: many of the province's people could identify with more than one of these groups. Indeed, Greek Orthodox and Alawi people usually spoke Arabic, leaving them in a situation of actually having to choose which of the categories in which to register. For the League of Nations, identities were singular and fixed; as the students pointed out, however, the categories chosen led to many individuals having multiple "political" identities. From the start, then, registration in the named categories would be ambiguous.

Nonetheless, the number of registrants was crucial, because it would determine the proportion of each of the seven groups to be seated in the new legislature. Some of the Experts saw this as, essentially, a census, in which registration would function also as a way to get an accurate count of the proportions of population in each community. The Turkish representative was furious when he heard this, insisting that a census was neither desirable nor possible. The Ankara regime insisted that people must have freedom to choose their own communities, that community affiliation was neither timeless nor essential, and that only the Turkish and Armenian communities were demarcated by a fine line. The old Ottoman categories were no longer applicable, they claimed, and language would not be admissible as evidence in distinguishing among the other communities because so many of the Sanjak's residents were bilingual. So the Turkish regime argued simultaneously that the majority of the people of the Sanjak of Alexandretta were Turks, and that identities were fluid, not fixed.

Recognizing the validity of the Turkish representatives' comments, and unwilling to risk Turkey's alienation from the League of Nations, a special ad hoc committee was appointed to change the electoral rules to allow each person to declare *any* affiliation. Turkey and the Committee both seemed to recognize that identities were fluid. At the same time, ironically, they continued to insist that people had to be represented by those of their "own" identity. The combination, inherently contradictory, led

to horrific coercion as Kemalist advocates of Turkish nationalism squared off against Syrian Arab nationalists, each trying to achieve a greater number of seats in the new assembly. The incentive was clear: whoever got more people to register “as” a member of its community would have a continuing preponderance in the newly independent Alexandretta.

The fluidity of identities was clear in the archives of the Special Tribunal that the League of Nations set up to hear cases related to the Alexandretta elections. Two examples among many suggest that the Turkish government was correct when it argued that local identities were not fixed. Yusuf, a fisherman in the coastal city of Alexandretta (today’s Isekenderun), was intercepted by Nedim Ward and two other Arab nationalists sitting at Ali’s café on the morning of May 4, 1938. They demanded to know why Yusuf, an Arabic-speaking Alawi, was wearing a hat with a brim, symbol of Kemal Ataturk’s revolutionary Turkish nationalism. A poor man, Yusuf responded that he had no other head covering to wear. Nedim ward handed Yusuf twenty francs, telling him to go buy himself a fez. In response, Yusuf ripped off his own brimmed hat, threw it on the ground, and immediately purchased a fez from a nearby shop. As he was leaving the store, he encountered two Turkish nationalists, who crushed his new fez and demanded, “Come, show us who destroyed the hat.” The confrontation that began when the Turkish nationalists encountered Nedim Ward and his friends was described in Alexandretta’s police records.¹⁵ While his headgear was making important statements to nationalists on both sides, for Yusuf the headcoverings were interchangeable. He needed a hat, and it mattered little to him whether he sported the one symbolizing Turkishness or the one indicating an Arab identity.

Six days later, a chauffeur named Saydo sat chatting in front of a café in the town of Reyhanlı, in the province of Alexandretta. Haydar Hassan Musto and a group of friends saw Saydo, approached his table, and began screaming at him. Witnesses described the scene that followed: Harsh words, blows, and revolvers brandished in the air. When prosecutors questioned the witnesses, however, most were unable to summarize the crescendo of words as Haydar insulted Saydo’s mother, demanded that Saydo declare himself to be an Arab, threatened to kill him if he claimed to be a Turk, and taunted him about the brimmed hat he was wearing. The witnesses were unable to recount the argument about whether Saydo should declare himself an Arab or a Turk because the shouting took place in Kurdish.¹⁶

Saydo and Yusuf suggest that people were not convinced that they had single, fixed identities, let alone that those identities must determine their political outlook. Nonetheless, the League of Nations Experts had decided that each “community” must not only be defined as exclusive, but also that the various communities must necessarily have different interests. In this context, what would proportional representation by community mean? The Fundamental Law of the newly independent Sanjak insisted that Turks must be represented by a Turk and Alawis by an Alawi, suggesting that political preferences and economic interests were somehow tied to each person’s essential being, defined as either language or religion. The equivalent would be if California’s large Armenian population had to be represented by an Armenian, if white people’s interests could only be represented by white people, if Spanish-speaking Congressional Representatives had, first and foremost, to represent Spanish-speakers. Instead of being democrats or republicans, conservatives or liberals, this communal representation model suggests that ideology, class, and economic status were less important than essential identity. It seems in retrospect that this episode became the forerunner of what would later evolve into the constitutional form that has become known as consociational democracy, and the (related) confessional system that has proved devastating to Lebanon and.

Coercion was the result, manifested in humorous ways through the hat wars, and in deadly ways, like arson and murder. Sometimes the coercion was cynical—activists simply paid people to register as

¹⁵ Information 2468, Beirut Director of General Security, 9 May 1938, based on Alexandretta Security Services, 5 May 1938, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Cabinet Politique., Syrie-Liban, Nantes.

¹⁶ League of Nations Archives, C1041, Audience of 9 June 1938.

Turks or Arabs, reminding them they could remain whatever they wished after registration. Turkey's effort to convince Arabic-speaking Alawis that they were misguided Turks—actually, the original Turks in the original homeland—had longer-term consequences, and Alawi-on-Alawi violence was particularly devastating. On the other hand, many in the Sanjak attempted to resist the polarization of identities. During the first two weeks of registration, many people claimed to be in the “other” category, explaining that their affiliation as Sunni Muslims was not one of the available options. Citing Turkey's insistence that anyone could declare any affiliation he chose, League staff at the electoral bureaus dutifully recorded these registrations in the “other” category. On learning of their declarations, the Turkish government was furious, claiming that “other” could only mean recognized minorities who could claim no other affiliation, like Jews or Catholics. By definition, Sunni Muslims must declare themselves to be either Turks or Arabs. After a drawn-out contest over the meaning of the categories, Turkey won its case and “Sunni Muslims” could no longer declare themselves to be “other.”¹⁷

In the end, the results of the registration hardly mattered for the eventual assignment of seats in the new legislature. But the process of registration by community had a tremendous impact on the way the population of the Sanjak came to be defined—and to define itself. The new categories rejected a language of political ideology and economic interests that could have bridged the varied linguistic and religious groups, substituting instead an essentialist and presumably unchanging set of categories that were *inherently divisive*.

The system designed to allocate seats in Alexandretta's new legislature was a logical outgrowth of the new kind of identity politics which the League of Nations had brought to the Middle East. Despite the inapplicability of their categories in deciding the allocation of Mosul, and despite the devastating consequences of the Statute and Fundamental Law, the reification of linguistic and ethnic categories in Middle Eastern political systems grew. The 1943 Lebanese constitution emulated the basic premise of the Fundamental Law of the independent Alexandretta. The results were privilege and patronage distributed along identity networks. The category of minority was applied to Muslims and non-Maronite Christians instead of, for example, the top 4% of wage-earners. The assumption of the system seems to be that apportioned power-sharing would encourage the elites of all the communities to work together, and that seems to have taken place to a degree. But while the top 4% of earners represented all communities and distributed all patronage and development funds, the rest of the society remained divided into exclusionary silos.¹⁸

Europe and Identity Politics

People helping new democracies in writing constitutions have worked to find ways to require parties to bridge the divides that define “deeply divided societies.” My research suggests that the divisions themselves must be interrogated. In the Sanjak of Alexandretta, the “outsiders” before the League of Nations intervention were religious minorities; after that intervention, the Arabic-speakers joined the “minority” groups. Reslicing the population led to redefining the sovereign citizenry and creating new collectives that would become the new minorities. Efforts to construct new constitutions that provide rights to minorities and endeavor to incorporate them into the state are, ironically, made necessary by the consequences of identifiable historical interventions that worked to define a modern, western-style homogenous citizenry. That process, necessitated by European scientific impulses to taxonomy and an abhorrence of “mixing,” privileged one chosen element of citizens' multiple identities: the nation.

¹⁷ Sarah Shields, *Fezzes in the River: Identity Politics and European Diplomacy in the Middle East on the Eve of World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 6.

¹⁸ Joseph G. Jabbara and Nancy W. Jabbara, “Consociational Democracy in Lebanon: A Flawed System of Governance,” in Jamil E. Jreisat, *Governance and Developing Countries* (Brill, 2002), 85.

The Proposal for this Workshop asked whether the Ottoman Empire's division of population into millets can be part of an explanation for continuing intercommunal conflict in formerly Ottoman territories. My research suggesting that it was, instead, new categories of belonging that elicited widespread violence made me curious about the League of Nations' insistence on those new kinds of divisions. Why might the Committee of Experts have decided that the population of the newly independent state of Alexandretta needed proportional representation by community, and to define community in such an inconsistent way?

European elites seem to have brought an intellectual fascination with taxonomy to their fears about the effects of frustrated minorities, combining them to form a heady political ideology advocating homogeneity. The natural order of things was classification; understanding the natural world required categories into which things having the same nature were grouped in the same place. Nationalism took taxonomy a step further: when sovereignty derived from the consent of the governed, it would be necessary to limit the governed to those who might have reason to group together. Yasmaoglu and Yilmaz describe Europeans' disapproval of the "Ottoman anomaly," the mixing together of different groups within the same space. They quote London-based journalist H.N. Brailsford, who led a relief mission to Macedonia in 1903: "Macedonia lies confounded within three vilayets (provinces), which correspond to no natural division either racial or geographical . . . The natural arrangement would have been to place Greeks, Servians, and Albanians in compartments of their own, leaving the Bulgarians to occupy the center and the East."¹⁹ The European passion for taxonomy intersected the growth of nationalism to create a sense that somehow homogenous groups of people were the proper, modern, and civilized way to organize society. They seemed perplexed when encountering Ottoman and Hapsburg territories, with their disordered intermingling. In a universe where western European systems marked the furthest forward location on a linear trajectory toward civilization, regions that hardly resembled Europe should be encouraged to get into line, to adopt European assumptions about the nature of the correct ordering of society.²⁰

That natural ordering required the relocation of different kinds of people into different places or, failing that, the provision of special collective privileges to "minorities" who were forced to remain among people in other collectives, aliens who could not be expected to look after their—necessarily different—political goals. It is unclear the extent to which the colonial powers were motivated in addition by the fact that such division furthered their own interests by keeping their colonial subjects divided. Indeed, it seems clear that the French feared above all the possibility that Sunni Muslims would combine to make Syria independent.²¹

The new civilizational imperative of dividing the people into homogenous sectors seems, at least in the case of the Sanjak Question, to have introduced new criteria for violence. No longer needing the kind of social or economic incentives that had previously led to attacks on internal "others," the League of Nations suggested that simply their "otherness" was cause for division and competition. Looking to the millet system of autonomy, however old or institutionalized, as the cause of conflict seems here to be misplaced. Conflict under the new European regime was occasioned simply by difference, by the need for the domination of one group over others.

¹⁹ Yılmaz and Yosmaoğlu, 684. They also describe an apparently similar episode, when Macedonian members of the Greek Orthodox church were obliged to "declare themselves as Exarchist or Patriarchist" as part of a project of identifying "demographic supremacy," which here, too, would be used to make territorial claims.

²⁰ Francine Hirsch emphasizes the project of the new Soviet Union to identify discrete nations in *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

²¹ Sarah Shields, *Fezzes in the River*, chapter 1. For the French division of the Syrian mandate, see Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, and Itamar Rabinovich, "The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State, 1918-45," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 14: 1979, 693-712.

Conclusions

The project of this workshop is analyzing the extent to which today's intercommunal conflict arose from the millet system. I'm suggesting here that the kind of violence seen in the region during the interwar period was instead the result of new forms of identity politics. In a religiously-defined polity like the Ottoman Empire, the non-believers become outsiders. In a linguistically-defined polity, the non-native-speakers are marginalized. In both cases, consociationalism institutionalizes the divisions between groups, however defined, providing privilege and patronage based on identity and discouraging efforts to bridge the boundaries on which the power and livelihood of so many depend.

Moreover, it can be argued that most conflicts in the Middle East reflected precisely the sorts of things that the people of Mosul articulated in the 1920s: political ideology and economic viability. Political organizing in Iraq after 1958 elicited significant interparty conflict based not on identity but on ideology. Street violence in Egypt in the 1980s seems to have as much to do with poverty and demands for social justice as with any consideration of identity. Turkey's civil wars reflected ideological divides, hardly attributable to the kind of autonomy promised or provided by the millet system.

The new categories of identity led to significant conflict in Alexandretta partly because they hardly correlated with recognized collectives, because the new definitions made little sense in local context, and, most important, because the imposed essentialist categories were recognized as hardly essential at all. Instead, the new identities were recognized as socially constructed and mutable, and it was for that reason that they could be fought over. Since a person was not, by definition, only one thing, it would be necessary to struggle over which of the new categories would attain political dominance.

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