

LESSONS FROM THE LATE OTTOMAN PERIOD FOR A FEDERAL IRAQ

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Discussions about how a federal Iraq might be organized have moved to the forefront of discussion about the future of that nation. Masoud Barzani was quoted in the May 25<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Economist* that he would not support any governmental plan for his people "that fails to guarantee their security and their rights as equal citizens in a federal, democratic Iraq."<sup>1</sup> Modern Iraq has witnessed continuous struggles over how to bring together the country's disparate elements. Federalism has recently been championed as a way to preserve regional autonomy and national unity given the severe challenges that both confront.

Examining the history of Ottoman rule in Iraq may help us think about issues connected with establishing a federal system there today, because the changes that began in the nineteenth century set the stage for recent events more than previous historical periods. Developments in this period profoundly affected the identities of members of the three broad groups among the many constituencies in Iraq that would now be principal components of a federal state: Kurds, Arab Shi'is, and Arab Sunnis.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire commenced a vast modernization project whose effects continue to be felt in modern Iraq, itself the combination of several Ottoman provinces. Modernization's immediate impact on Kurds and Arab Shi'is was greater than on Arab Sunnis. The Sunni Arab population did live through total political and social upheaval, too, but this was postponed for them until after the end of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rferl.org/iraq-report/> (accessed on 6 June 2002)

Ottoman rule with the establishment of the British mandate and the Hashemite monarchy after World War I. Kurds and Arab Shi`i tribesmen had, by contrast, already experienced by 1900 more profound changes in their ways of life that were directly precipitated by Ottoman measures designed to promote what the Ottoman government saw as a more “modern” society. The period of reform that began in 1839 known as the Tanzimat upset a fairly stable Kurdish social structure that had flourished for centuries. Because of changes in Ottoman land tenure laws as well as major military and social reorganizations in Kurdish areas, traditional Kurdish tribal leaders lost influence to spiritual leaders who became more and more important as social mediators. Farther south, when Arab nomads began to take up sedentary farming in the late eighteenth century, they simultaneously developed spiritual ties to the urban Shi`i centers. In both cases, these changes paradoxically took place due to Ottoman attempts to make Kurds and Arab nomads into productive “modern” citizens as the Ottomans defined this. Tanzimat-era changes came to include the transformation of Kurdish irregular troops into Cossack-inspired “Hamidiye” regiments in the 1880s and 1890s as well as the metamorphosis of Arab Bedouin into farmers to make the potentially fertile area between the lower Tigris and Euphrates green again.

Ottoman reforms had the effect of unintentionally causing these groups to turn to different sources of social support in a changed world for which traditional supports no longer sufficed. Both groups in particular adapted to enormous dislocations by connecting in new ways to spiritual leaders. Kurds and Shi`i Arab tribesmen were ultimately able to take advantage of the fact that despite the

severe political, economic, and social oppression that the Ottoman Empire occasionally visited upon its subjects, it remained tolerant enough of religious diversity that both these groups successfully established new bases of personal and social support as they confronted the challenges of an independent Iraq.

In the pre-modern era, life had been much simpler. From the early sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, Kurdish leaders had enjoyed relative autonomy within the Ottoman state. Ottoman governors alternately pacified, chastised, and paid Arab Bedouin chiefs in the zone between Baghdad and Basra to maintain a steady peaceful flow of trade between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. The Ottoman Empire was secure enough to allow Kurdish and Bedouin societies to retain their existing political, social, and economic structures for centuries alongside the sophisticated Ottoman land-tenure system that had become established as the common denominator by the eighteenth century in places as diverse as Egypt, Bosnia, and Syria.

The upheavals of Europe's entry into the region en masse following Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 forced a crisis of change on the Ottomans, who suddenly felt their military forces inadequate to counter European plans. As the nineteenth century developed, the Ottomans began to incorporate Kurdish forces into the general army and Kurdish lands into a regularized land tenure system in ways that had never been seen since Kurdish emirs pledged loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan in the early 1500s. Kurdish villagers began to sense that the old order had suddenly disappeared, prosperity had gone, and their traditional tribal military leaders could no longer protect them anymore. This led to the

resurgence of spiritual leaders whom villagers had always sought out in times of trouble. The Ottoman intention in dismantling independent Kurdish emirates seems to have been mostly to bring Kurdish military resources more directly under the control of the modernizing central army and thus, to make Kurdish social structures become part of larger Ottoman social structures. In ways that escaped Ottoman attention, though, these spiritual leaders with their negotiating and mediating skills actually prospered under the new legal and land tenure systems. The prosperity of the spiritual leaders validated them as leaders in an era perceived by their followers as the chaotic dissolution of traditional social parameters. The personal nature of this connection is revealed in the way that spiritual leaders and their families have persisted being important in politics through the subsequent phases of Kurdish history.

For the Shi`i tribesmen of southern Iraq, an equal unforeseen transition took place during the Ottoman modernization. Starting in the late 1700s, many tribesmen began to convert to Shi`ism just as they settled down to farm with substantial official Ottoman encouragement for agricultural development. Whatever the reason for this, many more Shi`is had emerged among the rural areas of southern Iraq by the middle of the nineteenth century. While the Ottomans certainly never encouraged this trend of conversion, were officially doctrinally hostile to Shi`is, and tried to promote Sunnism while suppressing Shi`ism, Ottoman officials found ways to mitigate the actual impact of anti-Shi`i policies. This led to the paradox that in fact, the Ottomans permitted Shi`ism to flourish in Iraq in ways that worried some Ottoman central-government officials

from time to time but resulted in the development of a large and flourishing Shi'i group there by 1900.

The Ottomans implemented many changes in local areas in the nineteenth century, but at least in Iraq, they allowed, even if unconsciously, local populations to secure new sources of social and religious support. The Ottoman state may have tried to dismantle Kurdish social and military structures, but it avoided interfering with how the Kurds chose to seek refuge with their spiritual guides, permitting them to find new ways to maintain continuity and stability in their lives. In another area of Iraq, Arab tribes were a constant disturbance that the Ottomans worked to sedentarize through active economic and organizational measures, but they did not take many concrete measures to block their spiritual path towards Shi'ism, even given an official Ottoman anti-Shi'i stance.

This Ottoman pragmatism was finally overwhelmed by the cataclysmic impact of the rise of the modern world, particularly after the Young Turk revolution of 1908 and the explosion of nationalisms in the region. However, it would be wise to keep the Ottomans' longer record of pragmatism in mind as we think about how to build a future Iraq that can function and will be politically and socially stable. The Ottoman period of Iraqi history provides an example of how a state can function well **enough** through a de facto policy of tolerance. Skeptics, of course, are free to dismiss the Ottomans' de facto tolerance of diversity in Iraq through the nineteenth century as merely another sign of decrepitude: the "sick man of Europe" reduced to impotence. An alternate vision, though, might be to focus on the fact that despite enormous changes, the Ottomans' traditional

tolerance lasted long enough to allow Shi'is and Kurds in Iraq to construct their own modern sources of social and personal support that have sustained them through the upheavals of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.