‹‹We of the village…››: voices of the Iraqi borderland, 1925/2014

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In August 2014, VICE News released footage of Islamic State (IS) fighters cutting a road through a low dirt berm on the Iraq-Syria border[1]. Before military-style trucks began using the new road, an armed man strode through the gap, stamped his foot in the dust, and declared ‹‹We've broken Sykes-Picot››. The piece then showed interviews with civilians purportedly using the same route to cross back and forth between IS-controlled Iraq and Syria. One man identified himself as a Syrian from the Islamic State, and described how in the past, he was unable to even approach the border, let alone cross it. A second person credited the group for opening the border, uniting Iraqi and Syrian Muslims, and restoring a semblance of political order and amity to the borderland. ‹‹[Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri] Al-Maliki has achieved nothing for us››, he said. ‹‹I was unable to visit my family in Syria. My son, sister, uncle, and nephew; we could never see them››. The last interview was with a man who said that before IS took control in the Iraq-Syria borderland, ‹‹we were treated awfully… Now it's very good and we feel comfortable››.

IS's overt reference to the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the infamous 1916 plan to divide Ottoman Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula into separate spheres of French and British influence, nurtured a compelling narrative about IS's rapid expansion from northern Syria into Iraq in the summer of 2014. This narrative, replicated in dramatic images of digging through the berm and the nearby border-post covered with bullet-holes and IS graffiti, centered on the capacity of IS to erase the borders of imperially-imposed states, defeat their corrupt and impious rulers, and establish a caliphate styled on ‹‹hyper-Sunni›› Salafism.[2] However, from a historical perspective, I find the short interviews most interesting. These responses were undoubtedly

[1] ‹‹Bulldozing the Border Between Iraq and Syria: The Islamic State (Part 5)››, VICE News. 13 August, 2014. https://youtu.be/TxX_THjtXOw. Accessed 10 June 2018.
[2] Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2016, pp. 26-43.

influenced by the presence of IS personnel and the editing process at VICE News, but they still serve as important reminders that, as Donnan and Wilson have argued, ‹‹local border peoples should not be considered to be passive beneficiaries or victims›› of political forces beyond their control, but rather as active participants in the formation, legitimization, and even destruction of geo-political arrangements.[3]

In this essay, I focus on voices in the Iraqi borderland from an earlier period of state-building, as represented in interviews and petitions preserved by the 1925 League of Nations Mosul Boundary Commission. The Commission was tasked with settling the ‹‹Mosul Question››: should the northern-most province of Ottoman Iraq remain part of the new British-dominated state of Iraq (as it had been since the end of World War I) or should it be made part of the Republic of Turkey[4]? Specifically, I examine the Commission's documentation related to the three contiguous districts of Sinjar, Tel ʿAfar, and Zakho, that formed Iraq's north-western boundary with Syria and Turkey – the very region where VICE News shot the above-mentioned footage and interviews. I find that the question of being ‹‹for Iraq›› or ‹‹for Turkey›› was inextricably bound up in the question of whether or not respondents felt that Anglo-Iraqi rule in Mosul Province would lead to greater personal and communal security.

Persecution, precariousness, and political expectations: borderlander statements to the League of Nations Boundary Commission

In 1925, political and social elites who favored Anglo-Iraqi rule cited a history of Ottoman persecution against non-Turkish communities. Ismail Beg, a Yezidi leader of hundreds of families and dozens of villages in Sinjar district, recounted that his ancestors were prevented from identifying as Yezidis and were even forced to seek refuge in caves. He would be loyal to Iraq even in the event of a war with Turkey, and claimed that ‹‹all the Yezidis thought like him››[5]. Hamu Shiru, another leading Yezidi shaykh and proponent of British dominance in Iraq since 1917, explained that Anglo-Iraqi rule in Sinjar allowed his people to return to farming and

[3] Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson, *Ethnography, security and the ‹‹frontier effect››*, in Donnan and Wilson (eds.), *Borderlands: Ethnographic Approaches to Security, Power, and Identity*, Lanham, Maryland, University Press of America, 2010, p. 7.
[4] On the Mosul Question, see Sarah Shields, *Mosul, the Ottoman Legacy and the League of Nations,* ‹‹International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies››, 2009, and Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, pp. 75-76.
[5] ‹‹Le 16 février 1925. Sindjar.››, UNOG S 15/D28.

prosper once again, free from the threat of war and military conscription[6]. Anticipating arguments against the viability of a multi-confessional Iraqi state, he blamed the ‹‹Turks›› for stirring up religious tension between the Yezidis and the Christians of northern Iraq. One ʿAbdul ʿAziz Effendi echoed this sentiment and spoke for many Arabs interviewed in Tel ʿAfar when he connected British rule in northern Iraq to an increase in wealth and prosperity among the people there[7].

Past persecution was not the only measure of the Anglo-Iraqi status quo. Since the end of WWI, Britain, France, Turkey, and Iraq were in ongoing conflict over their respective frontiers, all the way from Albu Kamal on the Euphrates River in the west to the Iranian frontier in the east. The purpose was to use military power, administrative functions, and local proxy forces to create inalterable demographic and strategic realities on the ground that would strengthen each states' negotiating positions over the final location of the borders. In these circumstances, local disputes could quickly escalate into broader political conflicts. In the Goyan region north of Zakho, a man wrote in a petition to the Commission that after complaining to Turkish authorities about a rival's seizure of his village, he was beaten, imprisoned, and charged with hoarding water from a shared spring.[8] Christian villagers from the same region described how Turkish soldiers coordinated invasions of villages, with the latter taking up residence in the abandoned homes and seizing livestock, gold, rifles, and other property.[9] The widespread execution of men, and the kidnapping and rape of women and girls was also reported.[10]

In this atmosphere of capricious local politics, borderlanders were quick to recognize and utilize the power of the League of Nations to solve problems at the local level.[11] They also held the League of Nations and the Iraqi state responsible for the consequences of testifying before

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[6] *Ibidem*. For background on Yezidi-Christian relations in the Sinjar region, the leadership of Hamu Shiru, and the issue of conscription, see also Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq*, London and New York, I.B. Taurus, 1999, pp. 48-50, 33-35, 88-89; Ead., *Ethnicity, State Formation, and Conscription in Postcolonial Iraq: The Case of the Yazidi Kurds of Jabal Sinjar*, ‹‹International Journal of Middle East Studies››, Vol. 29, No. 4, 1997, 559-580.

[7] ‹‹Tel Afar. Le 17 février 1925.››, UNOG S 15/D28.

[8] Petition no. 14, UNOG R 608/No. 46529.

[9] Petition no. 9 and petition no. 15, United Nations Archives at Geneva (UNOG) R 608/No. 46529; British Foreign Office to Ahmed Ferid Bey, 5 September 1925, UNOG R 608/No. E 5148/2/65.

[10] Petition no. 4 and petition no. 12, UNOG R 608/No. 46529.

[11] More established refugee populations in Iraq tried to use the Committee's visit to have their cases heard, too, such as ‹‹the last remnants›› of dozens of villages near the town of Jazirah who fled to Iraq in 1915. ‹‹*ila hudur al-lajnat al-mafuda min ʿusbat al-ʾumam al-ʿadila*›› [To the members of the committee delegated by the just League of Nations], 30 January, 1925, UNOG S 15/‹‹Chaldéens››.

the Commission. The authors of one petition reported being told by Turkish authorities that they were ‹‹disloyal›› because

> we…, not to lose a precious chance, sent six persons to Zakho to represent the Christians villagers. We told the commission openly and truthfully how we were oppressed by the Turks and said that we were tied to the Christians of Iraq by religion. … We have nothing left in our hands and we call on you and the Government of Iraq to save us as we are ruined. Will the Commission leave us in this fire after we have told them all that we have suffered[12]?

The head of the Chaldean Christian diocese in Zakho also telegrammed the League of Nations in Geneva directly to say that priests were being detained and removed from villages along the frontier. Without quick intervention, he warned, all the Christians there would soon be massacred as punishment for sending delegates to meet the Commission[13]. The Iraqi government was not immune from such expectations, either. A group of Muslim and Christian refugees who had fled from Turkey to Zakho petitioned the local governor to inform the Boundary Commission of their plight. Before fleeing to Iraq, they wrote, they had asked Iraqi military forces stationed at a nearby border post to protect their village from attack, but when no help came, they and their families fled first to the border post, and then across the border into Iraq. ‹‹[I]f you send with us a small body of troops all the population will join you to save themselves from the Turks››[14].

Although the Commission announced in July 1925 that Mosul was part of the new Iraqi state, records of their investigation show that this sentiment was highly variable throughout the province[15]. Indeed, the Commission investigators concluded that a majority of the population in the border districts of Tel ʿAfar and Sinjar was ‹‹pro-Turcs››[16]. The Commission reasoned that those who protested the Anglo-Iraqi status quo simply sought to capitalize on the inevitable insecurity that Turkish rule would bring, as in the case of Shayk Khalaf, an ‹‹old brigand›› from Sinjar who missed his life of larceny[17]. When no explicit profit motive could be detected among

[12] Petition no. 13, UNOG R 608/No. 46529.
[13] Bishop Toma Thaeus to League of Nations, Geneva, Switzerland, 1-2 June 1925, UNOG S 15/No. 11/44326/25888.
[14] Petition no. 10, UNOG R 608/No. 46529.
[15] On the Commission's decision, see Shields, *Mosul, the Ottoman Legacy and the League of Nations*, and Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq,* pp. 84-85.
[16] ‹‹Le Khaza de Sindjar›› and ‹‹Le Khaza de Tellafar››, UNOG S 15/D28.
[17] ‹‹Le 16 février 1925. Sindjar.››, UNOG S 15/D28.

Turkmen, though, the Commission assumed a lingering ethno-political loyalty to the Ottoman Empire and the fear of ascendant Arab, Kurdish, and Yezidi population in Mosul.[18]

Local security, state territoriality, and the (de)construction of the Iraq-Syria boundary

This brief textual analysis of Commission interviews and petitions received by the League of Nations demonstrates that in 1925, members of the borderland population who supported Anglo-Iraqi claims in northern Iraq stressed personal and communal security, not nationalist politics. Sarah Shields observed similar inclinations towards the ‹‹local›› in her 2009 study of the Commission's activities. Finding that European-style ethnic nationalism was less salient than affiliations according to family, location, occupation, and faith, she wrote, the League abandoned ‹‹identity politics›› in favor of recognizing the preeminence of British and Iraqi security forces and administrators in Mosul Province and its integration into the economy and governance of Mandate Iraq[19]. Thereafter, the ‹‹Mosul Question›› became a matter of normalizing the status quo, and nowhere was this more evident than in Iraq's contested borderlands with Turkey and Syria. One year after the League endorsed Britain and Iraq's claim to Mosul Province, the Anglo-Turkish-Iraqi Treaty pegged the Iraq-Turkey boundary to Britain's preference, the Brussels Line.[20] British (and Iraqi) promises to guarantee the safety of Christian and Yezidi minorities (as well as that of Kurds in eastern Mosul Province) were part of this successful territorial claim. Meanwhile, Britain and Iraq continued to exercise control over the entirety of Jebel Sinjar and portions of Tel ʿAfar district that lay between the official, albeit provisional, 1920 boundary that crossed through the middle of Jebel Sinjar, and the candidly-named De Facto Line well to the west. This effort to preserve the unity of the Yezidi population (and attempts to settle ongoing conflicts between transnational Bedouin tribes) was an important aspect of this successful territorial claim, as well. In 1932 another League of Nations commission suggested an Iraq-Syria border comparable to the De Facto Line.[21] This is essentially the same

[18] This led Iraqi officials in Tel ʿAfar district and elsewhere to allege that existing census records inflated the Turkmen population. ‹‹Rapport de Voyage 16 & 17 février 1925››, UNOG S 15/D28.
[19] Shields, *Mosul, the Ottoman Legacy and the League of Nations,* pp. 218, 227-30.
[20] Article I and annex, *Treaty Between the United Kingdom and Iraq and Turkey Regarding the Settlement of the Frontier Between Turkey and Iraq, Together with Notes Exchanged*, ‹‹The American Journal of International Law››, Volume 21, Number 4, Supplement: Official Documents, 1927.
[21] Chapter IV and annex no. 1, *Report of the Commission entrusted by the Council with the Study of the Frontier Between Syria and Iraq,* Geneva, 1932.

boundary that exists today between the two countries, the one ceremoniously cut in two by Islamic State in 2014.

In regard to the importance of personal or local security in the Iraq-Syria borderland, the year 2014 may in some ways be analogous to 1925. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, subsequent civil conflicts between 2006 and 2013, and the uprisings in Syria since 2011, reduced the ability of each state to govern their shared borderland, and often meant one's government was now one's enemy. Personal security, therefore, appears to be fundamental to understanding the appeal and salience of new geo-political arrangements, from the bounded, sovereign states of Iraq and Syria established after WWI, to non-national states like IS's so-called caliphate in 2014. In both situations, those living in the borderland weighed memories of the past and their imaginings of the future against their present circumstances.