A Broken Promise:
The Situation of the Kurds in Mosul, 1917-1925

Aliza Sir
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Abstract:

For many years, historians have accepted the League of Nations, an intergovernmental organization drawn together in the wake of the First World War, as a complete failure, an international fiasco that dissolved in 1946. Yet significant knowledge gaps exist regarding the impact of the League of Nations' mandate system on the ex-Ottoman Empire, a cradle of diverse ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East. The mandate system was meant to be a transitional form of control and guidance, but what happened to the "stateless" peoples in the region who fell between the cracks?

This paper will address how the League of Nations dealt with the Kurdish people, the largest ethnic group without a state in the world, situated among the foothills of the Turkish-Iraqi border. Drawing from various primary sources, including transcripts from the Treaty of Sevres (1920), the Cairo Conference (1921), and the Lausanne Peace Conference (1922), as well as publications in London's *Times*, I examine the impact of British and League of Nations intervention on Kurdish movements for independence. In less than a decade, the League of Nations had abandoned their promise of self-determination to the Kurdish people. *What went wrong?* My research suggests that social Darwinist principles coupled with the fear of Turkish invasion pervaded British intervention at the time, thereby justifying their ultimate conclusion, and presentation to the League of Nations, that a Kurdish leader could not be found to unite the Kurdish cause.

Introduction

Today, the Kurds are accepted as the largest ethnic group in the world without a state. There are over 4 million Kurds in the state of Iraq alone, which is more than double the population of Chicago, Illinois (Yildiz 9). Yet their placement in Mosul, among the foothills and oil fields of the Turkish-Iraqi border, has been a source of contention since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (Amery 3). This paper will explore how, in a few short years, Great Britain, under the watchful eye of an international body so committed to the principle of self-determination, could break their promise of liberation to "the peoples so long oppressed by the Turks" in favor of their own territorial interests (United Nations 17).

The League of Nations' replacement of the Ottoman Empire with an unstable collection of nation states at the end of World War I is pivotal to understanding the Middle East today. On September 25, 1919, President Woodrow Wilson gave an impassioned speech to a crowd in Pueblo, Colorado concerning the covenant of the League of Nations. "Article ten is the heart of the whole matter," he argued. The article "provides that every member of the league covenants to respect and preserve the territorial integrity and existing political independence of every other member of the league as against external aggression... There was not a man at that table who did not admit the sacredness of the right of self determination, the sacredness of the right of any body of people to say that they would not continue to live under the Government they were then living under" (Wilson). While Wilson failed to convince Congress to join the League of Nations, his words, and the importance he placed on self-determination, would inform the actions of the League's member states in subsequent years.

The creation of the League of Nations, carrying with it the sacred Article Ten, offered renewed hope for self-determination and national sovereignty. According to historian Martyn

Housden, “although the nineteenth century had seen some attempts to protect national minorities the League of Nations made a more concerted effort to do so” (51). Among those hopefuls were the Kurdish people. Point 12 of President Wilson's “programme of the world's peace,” stipulated that the non-Turkish nationalities of the Ottoman Empire should be “assured of an absolute unmolested opportunity of autonomous development” (Edmonds 56). Furthermore, when a joint declaration was signed by France and Britain at the end of the war stating that they had no other aim but “the complete and final liberation of the peoples so long oppressed by the Turks, and the establishment of national governments,” it seemed natural for the Kurds to expect independence (United Nations 17). Historian M. R. Izady wrote that “by 1918 and the conclusion of the War, the prospect of Kurdish independence seemed likely--even taken for granted” (95) among many of the Kurdish people.

Despite the size of their population, though, the Kurds were rarely invited to participate in the hearings that ultimately decided their future. Instead, the British used the Kurds as bargaining chips to be “kept in play” (Cox 56). By 1925, the British had prevailed in making Mosul a permanent part of the Iraq mandate (Aziz 59). Casting aside the League’s commitment to self-determination, Britain convinced the League of Nations and the international community that containment in the Middle East, as well as the political and economic stability of Iraq, relied upon the continued occupation of Mosul.

In order to elucidate my argument I have divided this paper into three sections. Part One follows the years leading up to the Cairo Conference, when a glimmer of hope for an independent Kurdistan still existed. As the British weighed the costs and benefits of recognizing an independent Kurdish state, however, the Turkish national movement was rapidly gaining

momentum and ramping up propaganda campaigns in Mosul. The escalation of these events would mark a significant turning point in British handling of the Kurdish question.

Part two highlights the social Darwinist principles that pervaded British intervention in Mosul during this period. While this certainly did not *cause* the British to abandon self-determination, it helped to justify the conclusion that a Kurdish leader could not be found to unite the Kurdish cause, and would ultimately strengthen Great Britain's argument brought before the League of Nations in 1924.

Part three, drawing from the first two sections, explores how Great Britain ultimately ignored Kurdish sentiments and succeeded in convincing the League of Nations that the maintenance of peace and the success of the mandate system relied upon the incorporation of Mosul under the British mandate in Iraq. Beginning at the Lausanne Peace Conference, and ending with the signing of the Turko-Iraqi-British Treaty on June 5, 1926, the hope for self-determination for the Kurdish people living in Mosul was abandoned.

Part One: Hope for Self-Determination

With more than 800 tribes, nearly a dozen dialects, and a diverse religious community, the Kurdish people hardly seemed a nationalist or political threat in the wake of the Ottoman Empire's collapse (Yildiz 7-8). Until the mid-1920s, religious affiliation rather than racial or linguistic identification had shaped the development of local political and social dynamics in Mosul. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, however, the imposition of race as a determinant for political borders would encourage the Kurds' awareness of their own separateness, and increase their concern for the maintenance of tribal security under the new mandate system (Fuccarro 134).

When it became immediately apparent that the Ottoman Empire would likely be disbanded and Mesopotamia would fall under British sovereignty, several Kurdish tribes sent representatives to cooperate with arriving British political officers. Unbeknownst to the majority of the Kurds, the British, faced with a financial crisis at the end of the war, were already imagining the economic, political, and military advantages of incorporating Mosul into the future territory of Iraq, yet they would continue to promote self-determination until they had the proper justification to abandon the plan altogether. Over the next few years, the British continued to try to find a suitable leader for a united Kurdistan, making it a reliable buffer state between Turkey and Mesopotamia, and a friend of the British mandate (Fuccarro 117; 121). As they did in Baghdad, the British carefully weighed the advantages and disadvantages of each candidate, paying particular attention to his role as a potential ally to the Great Powers (Fuccarro 122-124).

After a meeting in May 1917, the British agreed to recognize a provisional Kurdish government led by Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji, a religious and temporal chief, which would "adopt a policy of complete friendliness to the British" (McDowell 119). Two years later, when Sheikh Mahmud, seeing an opportunity for independence during a brief leave of absence of Major E.B. Soane, imprisoned Soane's officers and declared himself King of Kurdistan, British forces immediately drove him into exile (Lyon 70). The incident introduced an important lesson, one that characterized British occupation over the next decade: if the Kurds wanted independence, it must be achieved on Britain's terms.

The British wasted no time attributing Sheikh Mahmud's rebellion to his tribal nature. "It would be a mistake," British diplomat Cecil John Edmonds said, "to see the activities of the Sheikh as exercises of Kurdish nationalism. At the height of his appeal, he never exceeded the *primordial* bounds of tribalism" (Aziz 63). In 1924, a British newspaper correspondent attributed

the opposition to the “well known” fact that Sheikh Mahmud was an “ignorant fanatic, whereas his wise brother, Sheikh Qadir, had been a member of the Baghdad Assembly” (“Turkish Claim to Mosul” 3). Years later in his memoir, Wallace Lyon, a Provincial Administrator and Administrative Inspector in northern Iraq between 1918 and 1945, blamed the incident on Turkish propaganda and Kurdish unrest (Lyon 69). The British refused to yield to the rationale that the Kurdish people wanted control over their own territory without British assistance. The language of subsequent conferences and reports indicate that the British interest in the Kurdish Question was predicated not on the security of the minority people, themselves, as the language of the League of Nations covenant might suggest, but on their own strategic positioning in the province of Mosul and the appeasement of the new Turkish state.

Kurdish leaders, however, did not stop pressing for the creation of an independent Kurdistan. In 1919, Sharif Pasha headed a Kurdish delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, securing the insertion into the Treat of Sevres that would give the Kurds of Mosul the right to join an independent Kurdistan. When the Treaty of Sevres was signed on August 10, 1920, article 46 stated, “no objection shall be raised by the main Allied powers should the Kurds living in that part of Kurdistan at present included in the vilayet of Mosul seek to become citizens of the newly independent Kurdish state,” following the independence of the Kurdish people from Turkey (“Treaty of Sevres” 9). Subsequent revisions would give the Kurds one year to unite an independent Kurdistan (“Report of the Cairo Conference” 60).

The following spring, at a Middle East conference with meetings held in Cairo and Jerusalem, the recently appointed high commissioner in Iraq, Sir Percy Cox, was given strict instructions pertaining to the province of Mosul. His role, the British argued, would be to keep Kurdistan under a separate administration and prevent an Arab leader in Iraq that might "ignore

the Kurdish sentiment and oppress the Kurdish minority" (Yildiz 12). The deliberations at the Cairo Conference relating to the Kurdish Question, however, were far more complex than previous scholars have indicated. Although Cox was appointed to oversee the Kurdish people, he was encouraged to do so through direct negotiations with a *separate* Kurdish state ("Report of the Cairo Conference" 56).

According to a summary from the Cairo Conference, the British "realized that any attempt to force purely Kurdish districts under the rule of an Arab government would inevitably be resisted," yet whether the Kurds should comprise an independent buffer state or a separate mandate under the British empire remained up for debate (5). It is clear from these deliberations, conducted among British political officials and without Kurdish representation, as had been present at the Paris Peace Conference, that the greatest concern to the British was not the endorsement of the Kurdish minority, but continued sovereignty over a border-region that included Mosul's rich oil fields.

On March 15, 1921, the Cairo Conference's political committee re-convened to discuss the question of Kurdistan directly ("Report of the Cairo Conference" 59). Sir Percy Cox introduced the conference by outlining the situation in Mosul following the revision of the Treaty of Sevres, a revision that had given the Kurds one year, under Cox's supervision, to unite an independent Kurdistan. Cox proposed that the British re-evaluate the situation at the end of the year. Major Noel, however, offered a warning. "The Turks had not used the Kurds against us, but, now that the British forces were evacuating this area," he considered, "the Turks might attempt to detach Sulimanieh from the zone of our influence," as Sheikh Mahmud had done several years earlier. Major Noel continued by warning that the Kurds were likely to "demur to accepting any responsibility to the Iraq Government," leaving them vulnerable to Turkish

propaganda were it to be used to intensify resentment against the Arab State. “A Kurdish buffer State,” under the responsibility of the British Government, he concluded, “could be used to counter-balance any strong anti-British movement which might occur in Mesopotamia” (“Report of the Cairo Conference” 60).

Eventually, Chairman Winston Churchill agreed with Major Young’s recommendations, ordering that the British form “a frontier force of Kurds, under the command of British officers,” that could serve British security interests (“Report of the Cairo Conference” 61). The language of the Cairo Conference had ushered in a new era pertaining to the Mosul Question. No longer was self-determination of the utmost concern, but rather that the British, taking advantage of the strategic placement of the Kurds, protect their own interests in Mesopotamia.

Meanwhile, by 1920, the Turkish national movement under Mustafa Kemal Pasha was gaining strength. The movement had plans to revoke the partition established by the Treaty of Sevres, even threatening to extend their control into Mosul. CJ Edmonds, Adviser to the Ministry of the Interior in Iraq from 1935-1945, wrote that, “A difficult situation had been further complicated by the promulgation in January 1920 by the Turkish Cabinet of a manifesto known as the 'National Pact' which, while conceding the right to self-determination of the Arabs south of the armistice line of 1918, refused to contemplate the surrender of the Mosul vilayet” (58).

As the movement waged on, of primary concern to the British was how this might affect the sentiments of the Kurdish people within Mosul. The “feeling in Kurdistan is divided,” Great Britain’s general staff of the War Office reported, and “there is no doubt that the Turks are intriguing to the Kurds” (“The Situation in Turkey” 2). One of the provisions of the Treaty of Peace with Turkey was “the renunciation in favour of the Allied Powers of all the Turkish rights and titles over Kurdistan.” Yet the Turks would not carry the provisions into effect, the British

worried, “unless the Allies are prepared to take military measures to enforce them” (“The Situation in Turkey” 1). Given the uncertainty of Kurdish attitudes, and the fear that the Turks were unlikely to accept this provision, it was proposed that the Allies continue with the “assistance of Kurdish tribesmen” as a justification for maintaining forces along the Northern Mesopotamia border (“The Situation in Turkey” 6).

Later that year, the British brought Shaykh Mahmud back from exile in return for the promise that he would secure the expulsion of the Turks from Mosul. Yet in November, these promises were once again forgotten, and the Shaykh proclaimed himself 'King of Kurdistan.' The British tried once again to gather a “friendly” Kurdish leadership, calling on more moderate Kurds to “resist the aggressor” and “send responsible delegates as soon as possible to discuss boundaries and political and economic relations” of an independent Kurdish government. When the British found nobody capable of taking advantage of the offer, though, it lapsed (Edmonds 58).

Part Two: Western Superiority Prevails

As the situation in Mosul grew tenser, Cox began fueling fears of renewed Turkish claims to the area. His proposed solution marked a significant shift in British policy toward the Mosul question. In order to maintain the stability of the region, Cox claimed, Britain should press for the incorporation of Mosul into the Iraqi state. “Turks are hostile to Iraq and as soon as moment seems favorable to them are prepared to break into open hostilities,” (53) Cox wrote in November 1921. As evidence, Cox cited “persistent and definite signs of Turkish activity in intelligence and propaganda within and on borders of Iraq which appear to include encouragement of...anti-Arab prejudice of Kurds” (53). One of these reports came from a

"reliable agent" who asserted that in a September discussion with Kiazim Karabekim, a Turkish general and politician, Karabekim claimed that the vilayet of Mosul was of intrinsic interest to national policy and not to be abandoned. As a result, Cox warned, the Kurds must "be kept in play...We still want every possible assistance should present negotiations with Turkey break down" (53).

At the same time, the British and the League of Nations were operating under a firm belief in a scientific basis for European superiority. When a commission was sent in 1924 by the League of Nations to investigate the situation in Mosul, they reported that (referring to the British presence), the Kurds "recognized the advantages of an enlightened and intelligent trusteeship" beyond their own cultural constraints ("Report Submitted to the Council by the Commission instituted by the Council Resolution of September 30, 1924" 87). Similarly, Cox's assertion that the Kurds could be "kept in play" ignites an image of reckless children, easily manipulated to act in accordance with outside instructions.

Historian David McDowell, while falling just short of attributing the British actions to Social Darwinism, drew on the same principles to explain Britain's broken promises to the Kurdish people. "Fancy notions like self-determination were all very well for vague statements of intent," he writes, "but the administration of Iraq must remain in the hands of the best-qualified personnel available, the Indian Expeditionary Force's team of political officers" (163). As evidence, McDowell draws from the comments of Major Hay. "The Kurd has the mind of a schoolboy, but not without a schoolboy's innate cruelty," Hay wrote in 1919. "He [the Kurd] requires a beating one day and a sugar plum the next" (163). Much like US-Latin American relations in the western hemisphere through the mid-twentieth century, the British justified their strategic intervention on the assumption of Kurdish inferiority and primitivism. If the Kurds were

incapable of uniting around a common leader, then without an outside power to watch over them, British security and national interests might be threatened.

In 1922, English travel writer Rosita Forbes echoed that sentiment in the *Sunday Times*, writing, "the Kurdish people are untrustworthy...Turkish propaganda is widespread in the surrounding district" (Forbes 2). Another British correspondent referred to Kurdistan as "a primitive country where every man is armed and every village at feud with a neighbour" ("A Ride into Kurdistan" 2).

Confidence in Social Darwinism and a hierarchy of the races was not uncommon among members of the League of Nations in the years following World War I. In 1927, Dobbs' contemporary, Anna Wicksell, was sent by the League of Nations to investigate "coloured schools" in the southern United States for the purpose of influencing educational development in the recently mandated territories of West Africa. In her memorandum, Wicksell reported, "I shall not give a description of these schools, but confine myself to stating what I found of value to the schools in the B- and C- mandated territories...The whole educational development of Africa is still in an experimental stage. That is what makes it so valuable to study the coloured schools of America and learn by their experience" ("Permanent Mandates Commission: Report on the Work of the Eleventh Session of the Commission" 181; 186).

Although Wicksell's assignment, to develop a specialized educational experience for colored persons, today seems inherently racist, the report indicates that Wicksell wanted her research to benefit not only the League of Nations but also the people of the B and C mandated territories. It is entirely possible that individuals on the ground, such as Wicksell and Cox, held positive motivations for interfering in the mandates, while their country remained motivated by imperialist interests and appeasement. In the years following WWI, more than a decade before

Hitler would wage an all-out genocide predicated on faulty science and principles of Social Darwinism, it was difficult for the League members to identify any contradiction in these judgments. Like Wicksell, the British charged with monitoring the Kurdish people in the vilayet of Mosul had an easier time justifying their continued occupation, because they firmly believed in the middle eastern peoples' cultural and racial inferiority. While the British claimed to promote international ideals such as self-determination and political sovereignty, the administration of these new territories had to be carried out under the most capable leaders, of which Western nations viewed themselves to be.

In his memoir, Wallace Lyon epitomized this contradiction. Lyon had to justify his own presence in Iraq by painting the British in a favorable light. "The Turks proceeded to stir up the tribesmen," following the 1919 Armistice, Lyon wrote, "Propaganda, murder, and insurrection were the means adopted to force us out; and in addition to setting up a civil government to preserve law and order, it was to combat this that we were enrolled" (64). According to Lyon, British intervention was predicated not on national security and self-interest, but on the implementation of "law and order," which the Kurds clearly lacked. The British were explicit in their need to keep Mosul under the British mandate, rather than Turkish jurisdiction, even if that involved continued intervention in Mosul.

According to Yildiz, the unsubstantiated belief that a "Kurdish leader could not be found that would sacrifice either his own or tribal interest for the greater purpose of the Kurdish nation," had by this point overrun the need to promote self-determination, laying the groundwork for British incorporation of Mosul into the Iraqi territory (10). "For the next five years," CJ Edmonds wrote, "the Kurds were subjected to a campaign of intensive propaganda from Turkey" that would be too fierce for them to overcome (58). Despite earlier concerns at the Cairo

Conference that forcing Kurdish districts under Arab rule would "would inevitably be resisted," the British began pressing for the incorporation of Mosul under the British mandate in Iraq. Having given the Kurds ample opportunity for independence, Britain's final step would be convincing the League of Nations of the importance of Mosul to Iraq.

Part Three: Self-Determination Abandoned

By 1921, the Turkish had defeated the Greek army in Asia Minor and the British worried that Mosul might be their next stop. "The obviously aggressive attitude of the victorious Turks, who had announced their intention of recovering Mosul Province for Turkey...created a new and menacing situation," stated Leopold Amery, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies (1). Given the situation, British authorities agreed that the best way to protect Iraq's economy, thus exploiting Mosul's rich oil fields, would be to maintain a single Iraqi state, abandoning any previous encouragement of an independent Kurdistan (Aziz 60). The Cabinet Committee exhaustively reviewed the situation, ultimately determining that a withdrawal by British forces "would inflict irreparable damage on British honor and prestige throughout the East, as well as a breach of faith towards the League of Nations." Furthermore, a withdrawal would "certainly" lead to "the downfall of the Kingdom of Iraq" (Amery 1).

From 1922-1925, as Turkish border raids became more numerous and the need to control the Kurdish people became more urgent, reports of British activities in Mosul surged in the British press. Not only was the Mosul Question at the top of British political and military agendas, but the disorder within the region was of common knowledge to the British public as well. Articles in London's *Times* represented the prevailing opinions and attitudes of the British regarding the Turks and the Kurdish people. One headline read, "THE TURKISH RAIDS INTO

IRAQ. INTRIGUES AMONG THE KURDS" ("Turkish Border Raids"). Another warned, "TURKS AGAIN OBSTRUCTIVE. CONFERENCE IN DANGER" ("Turks Again Obstructive"). These press releases both strengthened negative sentiments toward the Turks and increased public willingness to believe in Kurdish inferiority, justifying the nation's ongoing intervention in Mosul. In each article, reporters grappled with how to define "the Kurd." As in diplomatic negotiations, though, the voices and opinions of Kurdish representatives were absent.

In 1923, the British and the Turks came together at the Lausanne Peace Conference to discuss their ties to the territory of Mosul. Unrest in the border-region had only escalated since the establishment of the Turkish nationalist movement. At the time of the Conference, many Turks still felt that there was a large Turkish population in the province, yet the British were unwilling to budge on allowing the province to fall into Turkish hands (Amery 4; McDowell 142). London's *Times* reported, "they [the Turks] have been wasting time....They have solemnly appealed to cuneiform inscriptions as a proof that the Kurds are Turks." Yet the reporter was quick to debunk any ties that the Turks might have to the land. "The Turks had held an uncertain sway over the vilayet for some centuries, but the Kurds and the Arabs have never been assimilated by them, and twice over these people have voted for deliverance from Turkish rule" ("Clouds at Lausanne" 2).

The British strategically avoided offering oil as the sole justification for British interest, even if it did serve as the driving force behind occupation. In a speech delivered at Lausanne and published in the *Times*, Lord Curzon argued, "It is supposed and alleged that the attitude of the British Government in regard to the retention of Mosul is affected by the question of oil. The question of the oil of the Mosul Vilayet has nothing to do with my argument" (1).

Instead, Lord Curzon relied on justifications relating to the ethnic composition of Mosul, with Turks comprising only one-twelfth of the population, and the security of the Kurdish and Arab people (3). He proceeded to lay out proof that the British Government had been "bombarded with representations from disappointed Kurds asking them to take up the matter of Kurdish autonomy," free from Turkish jurisdiction, when they entered the region. Lord Curzon concluded by asking, "Was it not obvious that a Turkish army placed at Mosul would have Baghdad at its mercy and could make an Arab kingdom well-nigh impossible" (3)?

Notably absent from the Lausanne Peace Conference negotiations, however, were the requirements set-forth by the Treaty of Sevres. The treaty, which in 1920 stipulated a commitment to "local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas" of the former Ottoman Empire, was henceforth deemed irrelevant. While the idea of an independent Kurdistan, uniting the Kurds of Iraq, Turkey, and Persia, had been toyed with, by 1923 the idea was seen as lacking any practical possibility (Amery 3).

After Lausanne, however, the Mosul Question remained deadlocked. The crux of the problem rested upon the fact that Iraq would not be politically, militarily, or economically viable without the incorporation of southern Kurdistan. The extent of the Mosul oil reserves were becoming better understood, and the British were becoming more-and-more unyielding to Turkish pressure (McDowell 143). On August 6, 1924, the British officially referred the question to the League of Nations (McDowell 144).

The Mosul Question, meanwhile, continued to draw headlines across Great Britain. Journalist Crawfurd Price wrote, "British interest in the dispute is both vital and varied" yet "the retention of the province in *friendly* hands is, again, essential to the safe development and

maintenance of our imperial airway to India." Second, he added, "there is oil....diplomacy certainly cannot ignore its existence" (12).

Despite his summary of British intentions, Price was careful, like Lord Curzon at Lausanne had been, to justify intervention as a means of helping the new Iraqi leadership, an argument that would drive deliberations with the League of Nations. The British could not rely on oil as the sole justification for British interest in Mosul at the risk of losing considerable international support. "With the vilayet in the hands of the Turks," Price explained, "Baghdad would live under the constant menace of its most probable invader." And Price did not stop with his portrayal of Turkey as a "menace" and an "invader." If this were to occur, he continued, "the permanent and peaceful settlement of the Middle East would be jeopardised" (2). According to Price, Sir Percy Cox, with his recent arrival in Constantinople to carry out additional Anglo-Turkish negotiations, held the fate of an entire region in his hands (1).

Price limited his discussion of the Kurdish people occupying the contested region, though, to a short and simple explanation, casting the Kurds as a dark, uneducated, and uniform entity. "They consist mostly of semi-nomadic tribes, among whom discontent with Turkish rule has always been rive, save, perhaps, when it involved the indiscriminate slaughter of hapless Armenian peasants." In marked disregard of the truth and British deliberations at the Cairo Conference, Price added that "from the Arabs they know they have little, if anything, to fear, and would doubtless accept the shadowy rule of Baghdad in preference to that of Angora" (1).

That same year, London's *Times* published a report by a newspaper correspondent entitled "Turkish Claim to Mosul: The Real Bone of Contention." The correspondent opened the piece with a shining picture of the mountains lining Mosul. "A visit to Mosul is a pleasure that must not be missed," he wrote, "The Kurdish hills...From my billet on the River Tigris at Mosul,

I could see them stretching along the horizon, snow-clad for half the year" ("Turkish Claim to Mosul" 1). With this picture in mind, the British correspondent proceeded to blast the editor of a moderate Turkish newspaper with whom he had discussed their ties to the region. "The turkey is a wily bird and so is the Turk," the correspondent wrote. "He seems to know little of recent happenings along the frontiers of Iraq. In his anxiety for friendship, he forgets the flood of anti-Iraqi and anti-British propaganda which his agents have distributed through the Kurdish villages." The prevailing attitude of the British was certainly not one of forgiveness. "Had it not been for Turkish interference the Kurds would long ago have settled down everywhere to cooperate with the Arabs in Iraq, as they have done already in those places whence Turkish influence has been eliminated," he claimed, straying, like Price, from the reality of Kurdish sentiments for the purposes of the press ("Turkish Claim to Mosul" 1).

While the press served to strengthen public support, the British still needed to justify their position to the League of Nations. In a November 1925 Memorandum, British Colonial Secretary Leopold Amery identified three questions for the British to consider before reconvening with the Council of the League of Nations in December. The first would be "whether the general policy which," since the Cairo Conference of April 1921, "has governed our position in Iraq under successive Governments still holds good." Second, the British would need to determine whether "the retention of the present frontier is essential to the success of that policy." And finally, they had to decide if the general policy would strengthen the authority of the League of Nations.

When Amery had visited the Mosul region in April, he was able to assure himself that the present policy was working successfully. "Relations between the Iraq Government and its British advisers were excellent," he said (1). And many of the internal disputes that had "still bulked

large in 1921 and 1923" had disappeared. The only difficulty that remained unsolved was the Turkish-Iraqi frontier (Amery 3).

Amery introduced two primary reasons for the abandonment of the Treaty of Sevres and the incorporation of Mosul as the line the British officials would take at the Council of the League of Nations (3). First, Amery argued that the British and the League of Nations must commit to preserving the frontier "as a matter directly affecting the success of our policy of setting Iraq on its feet and enabling us to free ourselves from the financial and military burden which its occupation at present involves" (4-5). Amery's argument paralleled that of Wallace Lyon's memoir, in which he argued that the British were sent to Mosul for the purpose of "setting up a civil government to preserve law and order" (Lyon 64).

Second, British control, Amery argued, would directly affect all members of the League of Nations. "It seems clear that apart from our own interest in maintaining the integrity of Iraq, we are vitally concerned in the principle at stake in our reference to the League. And in this respect all the other nations represented on the League are equally concerned with ourselves," Amery said (6).

When the British referred the Mosul Question to the League in August 1924, the League immediately began making preparations to send their own delegation to the region, charging them with exploring Britain's claims and the impossible task of drawing a line based on economic and ethnic principles (McDowell 144). In the delegation's subsequent report, they wrestled with their complex findings, carefully weighing the facts alongside the British and Turkish arguments for incorporation. "If the ethnic argument alone had to be taken into account," the commission reasoned, "the necessary conclusion would be that an independent Kurdish state should be created, since the Kurds form five eighths of the population" ("Commission Report"

57). Yet the complexity of ethnic considerations and the difficulty the British had faced in trying to find a reliable Kurdish leader, lead the League to abandon that approach and instead focus on economic and strategic factors (McDowell 145).

In these deliberations, the League, more than the British, did take the attitudes and opinions of the Kurdish people into consideration. “Opinion among the Kurds is divided,” the commission reported, outlining the various geographical boundaries and political sentiments. They argued, however, that while a Kurdish national feeling had developed among some tribes, “they recognized the advantages of an enlightened and intelligent trusteeship” (“Commission Report” 87). Perhaps because they were not yet “enlightened” enough for diplomatic discussion, a Kurdish representation still remained utterly absent when the League of Nations re-convened in December 1925. The Great Powers were left to decide their fate.

The persuasive language of the British delegation to the League of Nations, and the visit by the committee to Mosul ultimately proved successful for Great Britain. In 1925, the League formally awarded Mosul to Iraq under the British mandate, submitting to the British claim that Mosul's oil reserves, as well as its positioning as a buffer zone on the Turkish-Iraqi border, would be necessary to ensure the sustainability of Iraq’s economy (Aziz 62). While the Turks did not immediately recognize the resolution, they eventually yielded to British pressure, signing the Turko-Iraqi-British Treaty on June 5, 1926 (Barzani 14). The treaty should have marked the end of a nearly decade long struggle, yet by shifting their focus from ethnic considerations and self-determination to those of strategic and economic importance, the League of Nations ignored an important consideration: the satisfaction of the Kurdish people in Mosul.

Conclusion

Massoud Barzani, the son of Mustafa Barzani, the Kurdish liberation movement's most famous leader, knew first hand the degree of betrayal and dissatisfaction that permeated among the Kurdish people in the years following the treaty. "The Treaty of Lausanne and its consequent developments, especially with regard to what has become known as the Mosul question," he wrote, "worked against Kurdish interests" (15). When Sir D. Clayton made it known to the Iraqi government that the British were ready to support the entry of Iraq into the League of Nations, resulting in a 1930 treaty, complaints from the Kurds began pouring into Geneva and London ("Where Iraq Plays a Commanding Role" 18). Many would attempt to boycott the elections that summer. While the border had been drawn, Kurdish unrest and British interference in Mosul were far from over.

Ultimately, the failed independence of the Kurds represented a failure, too, of the League of Nations. In this case, the British were convincing to the League, and they could provide Eurocentric arguments to support the belief that the Kurds were unfit for self-governance. Furthermore, by declaring Mosul part of Iraq, Britain claimed to be able to protect the Kurdish minority as well as their own strategic interests in Mesopotamia.

Meanwhile, the growing influence of the Turkish national movement ushered in a significant turning point in the handling of the Mosul question. As the Turkish threat grew, so, too, did the justification for the incorporation of Mosul, offering a contrast in strong figurehead movements. Kurdish nationalism would never garner the strength or ferocity of the Turkish national movement, making it easier for the British to exile their rulers and abandon Kurdish requests for political independence. McDowell, as cited earlier, summed up this sentiment when he said, "Fancy notions like self-determination were all very well for vague statements of intent,

but the administration of Iraq must remain in the hands of the best-qualified personnel available.” In the end, article ten of the League of Nations Covenant and the 1920 Treaty of Sevres, which offered a final glimmer of hope for independence among the Kurds of Mosul, would be lost among a series of broken promises.

Works Cited

PRIMARY SOURCES:

Amery, Leopold. “Iraq and the Mosoul Question: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies.” *Property of His Britannic Majesty’s Government*. November 10, 1925.

Cox, Sir Percy. “Paraphrase telegram from the High Commissioner of Iraq to the Secretary of State for the Colonies dated 21st November.” *Property of his Britannic Majesty’s Government*. 1921.

General Staff of the War Office. “The Situation in Turkey.” *Property of His Britannic Majesty’s Government*. March 15, 1920.

League of Nations. “Permanent Mandates Commission: Report on the Work of the Eleventh Session of the Commission.” Geneva, June 20-July 6, 1927.

League of Nations. “Report Submitted to the Council by the Commission instituted by the Council Resolution of September 30, 1924.” Document C. 400, M. 147, vii. Geneva, 1925.

Lyon, Wallace. Kurds, Arabs and Britons: The Memoir of Col. W.A. Lyon in Kuridstan, 1918-1945. Ed. David Fieldhouse. I. B. Tauris, 2002.

“Report of the Cairo Conference: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies.” *Property of His Britannic Majesty’s Government.* July 11, 1921.

United Nations. “Treaty of Sevres: Section III, Article 64.” *Summary of the Memorandum presented by the Kurdish delegation in Paris on November 29th 1948 to His Excellency Mr. Trygve Lie, Secretary General of the United Nations*. Paris, France, 1949.

United Nations. “Where Iraq Plays a Commanding Role.” *Summary of the Memorandum presented by the Kurdish delegation in Paris on November 29th 1948 to His Excellency Mr. Trygve Lie, Secretary General of the United Nations*. Paris, France, 1949.

Wilson, Woodrow. “President Woodrow Wilson's Address in Favour of the League of Nations.” Pueblo, CO (25 September 1919).

Articles from *The Times*:

“A Ride Into Kurdistan.” *The Times*. London, England (November 3, 1924).

“Clouds at Lausanne.” *The Times*. London, England (December 28, 1922).

Forbes, Rosita. “Mesopotamia and its Problems.” *The Sunday Times*. London, England (March 19, 1922).

"Lord Curzon on Mosul." *The Times*. London, England (January 24, 1923).

Price, Crawfurd. "The Problem of Mosoul." *The Sunday Times*, London, England (May 18, 1924).

"Turkish Claim to Mosul." *The Times*. London, England (September 27, 1924).

"Turkish Border Raids." *The Times*. London, England (1924).

"Turks Again Obstructive." *The Times*. London, England (1922).

SECONDARY SOURCES:

Aziz, Mahir A. The Kurds of Iraq: Ethnonationalism and National Identity in Iraqi Kurdistan. London; New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2011.

*Barzani, Massoud. Mustafa Barzani and the Kurdish Liberation Movement (1931–1961), edited by Ahmed Ferhadi. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Edmonds, C.J. *Kurds of Iraq*. Middle East Journal, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter, 1957), pp. 52-62.

Fuccarro, Nelida. The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999.

Housden, Martyn. The League of Nations and the Organization of Peace, Longman Publishing, 2011.

McDowell, David. A Modern History of the Kurds, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004.

Yildiz, Kerim. The Kurds in Iraq: the Past, Present and Future. Rev. ed. London: Kurdish Human Rights Project, 2007.