A History of Iraq

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A HISTORY OF IRAQ

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Illustrations

The Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the lands that were to become the territories of the modern state of Iraq were gradually incorporated into the Ottoman Empire as three provinces, based on the towns of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra. The term *al-ʿIraq* (meaning the shore of a great river along its length, as well as the grazing land surrounding it) had been used since at least the eighth century by Arab geographers to refer to the great alluvial plain of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, a region known in Europe as Mesopotamia. It was here that the Ottoman sultans were extending their own domains during these years and trying to check the ambitions of the Safavid shahs of Persia. Imperial and doctrinal rivalries between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shiʿi Safavids touched the histories of the peoples of these frontier lands, requiring strategies of accommodation or evasion from their leaders and affecting them in a variety of ways. The political world that resulted was a complex and fragmented one. Centres of power existed in many cases autonomously, interacting under shifting circumstances that gave advantage now to one grouping, now to another, and in which the control of the central Ottoman government in Istanbul gradually diminished. Instead, initiative and power lay with those who could command the forces needed to defeat external and internal challengers alike.

POWER IN THE THREE PROVINCES

At the summit of the systems of power in the three provinces stood the military elite of *mamluk* pashas who acknowledged the sovereignty of the Ottoman sultan, but were increasingly beyond his control. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, a succession of powerful Georgian *mamluks* (taken as boys from Christian families in Georgia and converted to Islam) ruled Baghdad, often extending their rule to the province of Basra as well. In addition to managing the military forces at their

disposal and defending their domains from Persians and others, they needed to maintain alliances with the powerful Arab tribal chieftaincies which pressed in upon Baghdad and Basra. Meanwhile, in the north, the local dynasty of the Jalili had entrenched itself as overlords of Mosul, and a number of semi-independent Kurdish principalities, most notably that of the powerful Baban dynasty of Sulaimaniyya, dominated the Kurdish mountains. In the centre and the south the shaikhs of the great Arab tribal confederations of the Muntafiq, the Khaza'il, the Zubaid and the Banu Lam, as well as of large and powerful tribes, such as the Shammar, the Fatlah and the al-Bu Muhammad, commanded forces that could often prove more than a match for those of the pashas of Baghdad or Basra. However, they could also be useful allies against the Persians or against other tribes reluctant to pay the tribute on which the patronage and thus much of the power of the *mamluk* pashas depended.

The *mamluk* pashas ruled over a tributary system. The main function of government was to maintain them and their entourage in an appropriate style by extracting the revenues which would enable them to service their clients and to defend the system against all challengers, internal or external. Thus, taxes were levied on rural communities within reach of the major towns and tribute was forthcoming from those tribal leaders who found it advisable to keep on good terms with the power that the most successful of these *mamluk* pashas could command. These funds were supplemented by the dues charged on goods in transit through Mesopotamia, increasing during the eighteenth century as trade developed with the British East India Company, in particular.

The attitude of these pashas to the Ottoman Empire was formally correct: the sovereignty of the Ottoman sultan was acknowledged in the coinage, in the Friday prayer and in other outward symbols of state. The pashas of the three provinces were also careful to obtain imperial confirmation of their position as *vali* (governor). However, they were less ready to accept material limitations on their rule. Appointees from Istanbul served on their staff, but only in subordinate positions. Imperial Janissary troops were stationed in Baghdad, but the pashas kept them under their direct command and ensured that their own elite force of *mamluks* could always subdue them. Tribute was sent to Istanbul, but irregularly.

In their dealings with the inhabitants of the three provinces the Georgian *mamluks* did not differ much from the ruling elites of the Ottoman Empire more generally. Their methods were those of

contemporary Ottoman administration, whether in the realm of tax-farming (*iltizam*), customs charges, raising armed forces or enforcing the will of the governor and, by association, that of the Ottoman sultan. Doctrinally, there was no taint of heresy to challenge the authority of the Ottoman sultan-caliph. Nor was there any desire on the part of the *mamluks* to change the established hierarchies of the many communities and societies that comprised the social fabric of the empire. They simply wanted to dominate them.

Taken as a whole, the inhabitants of the three provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra provided as broad a spectrum of social and communal structures as anywhere in the empire. In the Kurdish-speaking areas of the north and north-east of Mosul and Baghdad provinces, dynastic, parochial and tribal identities and loyalties shaped the lives of the inhabitants. Also important was the influence of the Sufi orders – most notably the Qadiri and increasingly the Naqshabandi – which lent to the observance of Islam in these regions a distinctive character, strongly shaped by Kurdish shaikhs and *sayyids*. Also prominent in this region were the communities of Yazidis (Kurdish-speaking adherents of the syncretic religion of Yazidism), of Christians and of Shiʿa, some Kurdish and some Turkoman. These features, as well as broader linguistic differences and geographical isolation, had led to the emergence of a number of local lordships and small principalities which enjoyed complex and shifting relations with each other and with the Ottoman and Persian Empires, the borders of which they straddled.

In the Arabic-speaking districts of Mosul province, the rural population was divided among sedentary and nomadic tribal groups, engaged in agriculture or pastoralism, with some profiting from the opportunities offered by the transit trade. Here too, strong tribal and local attachments coloured everyday life and helped to create distinct communities with particular identities and practices, linked by real or imagined bonds of kinship. These determined the relationship of individuals to the land and shaped the hierarchies of clans and families in the various settlements. Leadership was decided on this basis, but the size and remoteness, as well as the economic and military capacities, of the community in question would determine the power of the leader relative to that of the local Ottoman governor and the degree of autonomy he could therefore enjoy. For the majority of the members of such communities, any contact with the Ottoman state would be mediated by the leading family, encouraging worlds of difference to emerge in the views that people held of the histories of which they formed a part.

By contrast, Mosul itself was a much more directly integrated part of the Ottoman imperial system. Powerful local families, such as the Jalili, as well as prominent families of *ashraf* such as the ʿUbaidi, dominated certain quarters of the town. Reflecting to some degree the composition of the surrounding countryside, the population was predominantly Sunni Arab, but there were also distinct communities of Turkomans and of Kurds, as well as of Jews and of Christians. The relative weight of these communities and their leading families was strongly influenced by the political hierarchies, the judicial system and the trading networks of the Ottoman Empire itself. Although families such as the Jalili tried to preserve a sphere of action free from the direct control of Istanbul, they, no less than the leaders of the *millet* communities in the city, owed their prominence to their successful and distinctive engagement with the powers of the Ottoman state. As the nineteenth century was to show, they were equally vulnerable when the priorities of that state began to change.[1]

Much the same could be said of the city of Baghdad. As a provincial capital, it had much in common with other great Ottoman cities. However, in several senses it was more remote from the controlling influence of Istanbul. The Georgian *mamluks* had introduced a distinctive and formidable military caste at the head of its social structure, dominating but separate from the respected hierarchies of the *ashraf*, led by the family of the al-Kailani. Furthermore, the proximity of Persia and the size of the Shiʿi community in nearby al-Kazimiyya added a distinctive character to the city, as did the size and prominence of the long-established Jewish community, which constituted nearly 20 per cent of the population. The frontier nature of the province also left its mark through the steady influx of people from various parts of the empire. Whether they were Ottoman officials who came, stayed and inter-married with one of the established Baghdad families, or formed part of the inevitable trickle of immigrants from Baghdad's rural hinterland, or were traders who settled in the city, bringing with them their connections to Persia, the Gulf or India, the population of Baghdad underwent various forms of renewal – vitally necessary if the city was to survive the devastating man-made and natural disasters that afflicted its inhabitants during the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Baghdad, like Mosul, ruled over a province that was only nominally under the control of the authorities in the capital. As in the north, the lives of most of the rural population were shaped by the practices and values of the sedentary, semi-sedentary and nomadic tribes and tribal

confederations to which they belonged. Only in the regions closest to Baghdad, more easily subject to the direct control of the administrative and political elite of the city, did tribal identities have less obvious political consequences. However the *mamluk* pashas could rarely impose their will on the more inaccessible, larger and more formidably armed tribes and tribal groupings, limiting their ability to extract tribute across the whole of the province of Baghdad.

A peculiarity of this province was the presence of the *'Atabat* (thresholds or doorways) – the collective name given to Najaf, Karbala, al-Kazimiyya and Samarra, four of the most venerated towns of Shi'i Islam, long associated with the sacred history of the Caliph 'Ali bin Abi Talib and his descendants. These towns – particularly the more important centres of Najaf and Karbala – had always constituted a potential problem for the Ottoman authorities in Baghdad. They were centres of learning and scholarship of the Ja'fari school of law which the Ottoman state did not recognise. Consequently, the Shi'a generally ignored Ottoman institutions. They were inhabitants of the Ottoman state, but they scarcely engaged with it. Furthermore, the importance of these centres of Shi'i pilgrimage and learning for the Safavid and Qajar rulers of Persia meant not only a constant flow of pilgrims, traders and settlers from Persia itself, but also the close scrutiny of the Persian state, ever sensitive to real or imagined injustices by the Ottoman authorities against the shah's subjects who had settled there.

Finally, the influence of these towns and of the Shi'i *'ulama* on the tribesmen who gravitated to them and had begun to settle in the mid-Euphrates region was becoming ever more marked. The notorious Shi'i disdain for the pretensions of the Ottoman sultan-caliph and thus for the legitimacy of the Ottoman state accorded with tribal suspicion and dislike of central state authority. This may explain in part the growing appeal of Shi'ism to the tribesmen of the region, large numbers of whom adopted the precepts of Shi'i Islam during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus an increasingly large proportion of the inhabitants of Baghdad province saw little reason to associate themselves with, let alone pay taxes to, a state which seemed not only alien, but even doctrinally repulsive. Some of the *mamluk* pashas of Baghdad handled this problem adroitly and maintained good relations with the notables of the holy cities. Others, whether under the threat of Persian invasion, or in order to ingratiate themselves with Istanbul, or indeed out of their own prejudices as new converts to Sunni Islam, succeeded in deepening the divide between the Sunni and the Shi'a under their rule.[2]

A similar set of tribal and doctrinal differences weakened the allegiance of most of the inhabitants of Basra province to the Ottoman state. In particular, the powerful tribal confederations of the Muntafiq and the Khaza'il and the substantial tribe of the al-Bu Muhammad dominated the lives of much of the population of the province, whether they were settled farmers, pastoralists or marsh-dwellers. The *mamluk* pashas in Basra had little or no influence in these regions, except on terms largely dictated by the tribal chieftains. Occasionally a pasha would emerge who through force or guile could get the better of one or all of the confederations. However, these were relatively short-lived episodes in a history that showed the balance of power favouring those who could dominate and mobilise the rural population. This was rarely the governor in Basra.

The society of Basra, as in Baghdad, was composed of a number of distinct groups, under the rule of the *mamluk* military caste. Overwhelmingly Arab and largely Shi'i in composition, its elite families were however predominantly Sunni. These were headed, in terms of status, by the family of the naqib al-ashraf, but they also included Ottoman officials and property owners and traders who had major interests in the local economy. This was based either upon the intensive cultivation of Basra's hinterland or on trading links with the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The importance of the Indian trade, in particular, had been underlined by the opening of trading concessions by the British East India Company (as early as 1639), as well as by French and other European traders who were seeking to profit from and eventually to monopolise this trade during much of the period in question. This greater openness towards India, as well as towards the Gulf and eventually Egypt, with all that this implied in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was to have a significant effect on Basra's society, as well as on the attitudes of its inhabitants towards the changes they were soon to experience.

THE OTTOMAN 'RECONQUEST' OF THE THREE PROVINCES

The significance of these differences among and within the three provinces became clearer with the Ottoman 'reconquest' in the early nineteenth century. The weaknesses of the empire vis-à-vis the European states and the worrying example of the growing power of the provincial governor of Egypt, Muhammad 'Ali Pasha, had set in train a reformist reaction in Istanbul. Under the rule of Sultan Mahmud II

(1808–39) the central Ottoman government began to reassert its authority in outlying provinces, and reconstructed the military forces of the empire. The *Nizam-i Cedid* (New Order) implied the consolidation of power in the hands of the sultan and his government and left little room for semi-autonomous provincial governors. It was not long, therefore, before Istanbul turned its attention to Baghdad, Basra and Mosul. In 1831, when Da'ud Pasha, the *mamluk* governor of Baghdad, refused to comply with the sultan's edict that he relinquish his office, an army under the governor of Aleppo, 'Ali Rida Pasha, marched on Baghdad, capturing the city and Da'ud Pasha himself. With his capture the rule of the *mamluks* in Baghdad ceased abruptly.

'Ali Rida went on to occupy Basra, bringing *mamluk* rule in that city to an end and in 1834 central Ottoman authority was restored in Mosul, ending the hold of the Jalili family on the governorship. As a result, by the beginning of the period of the *Tanzimat* (the reforms) of Sultan Abdulmecid, the three provinces were under direct rule from Istanbul, opening them up to successive reforms in landholding, administration, conscription, law and public education. However, these reforms were implemented at different rates, depending upon the initiative and energy – and length of tenure – of the Ottoman governors sent out by Istanbul. For much of the period that followed, the norms and methods of the *mamluk* era prevailed in government and administration, just as the great majority of the *mamluk* families retained their wealth and status, providing many of the key officials of the New Order. In addition, the reassertion of central Ottoman control over the major cities did not automatically bring about a greater degree of control over the semi-autonomous tribes and tribal confederations of the countryside. Nevertheless, the direct and indirect consequences of the reforms had the effect of creating new interests and groups, some with an explicit commitment to the reforms themselves, others seeking to find a role as the reforming measures began to erode their hitherto secure status.

Most notable from the point of view of the future of the political society of the three provinces were the gradual changes in the state itself as a distinctive regime of power. Ottoman reform had been prompted by the belief that the weakness of the empire was a structural weakness of the state when confronted by the phenomenon of European power. As a result, there was a growing determination to reconstruct the administrative, legislative, educational and resource bases of the state, in large part on the European model. This radical refoundation was piecemeal and many of its implications did not show themselves until much later, but

aspects of it were soon felt in the three Mesopotamian provinces. However tentative or resisted at first, new ways of engaging with state power created new spheres of action and required imaginative departures from the established forms of thought about the nature of politics itself.

It is during this period, therefore, that the rules (and languages) of a new kind of politics emerge to regulate power and to define authority and administrative duty. This was no longer a matter of choice, of willed engagement or disengagement: the modern state, with all its techniques of persuasion and compulsion, its retinue of committed servants, its opportunistic camp followers and its overall ethos, had come to the land of the two rivers and was not to be easily dislodged. A distinct political society began to form in the three provinces, owing much to the Ottoman reforms, but drawing also upon existing hierarchies of wealth and status. The interplay of these forces helped to create new social positions for individuals and gave them an opportunity to play a part in the Ottoman state and the new social order.

The principal instruments in the Ottoman attempt to reintegrate its Mesopotamian provinces into the empire were the reforms stemming from the Land Law of 1858 and from the Vilayet Law of 1864. The former sought to bring some regularity into the land tenure system of the empire, creating security of tenure (whilst reasserting state ownership of land) in the hope that this would encourage a more productive and settled agriculture, attracting investment and generating revenues for the imperial treasury. The second measure was the beginning of the administrative reorganisation of the empire. It was intended not only to demarcate the various provinces, but also to define the nature and shape of the state's authority vis-à-vis the provincial population and to spell out the exact functions and responsibilities of the provincial officials from the governor downwards.

With the arrival in Baghdad of the forceful and energetic Midhat Pasha as governor in 1869, decisive steps were taken to implement both the Vilayet Law and the Land Law. The Vilayet Law mapped out the territorial boundaries of the three provinces and established a new structure of administration from provincial down to village level, intending to bring the central administration systematically down to people who had hitherto been little touched by the apparatus of the state. More radically, at least in theory, it was also intended to involve them in the workings of the state through administrative councils which included not simply Ottoman officials, but also influential representatives of the population at large, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

Midhat Pasha was able to introduce these reforms with little difficulty since the initiative lay at this stage with the Ottoman authorities. The practical consequences were less clear-cut and took time to emerge. They were to be shaped by the personalities and the authority of the individuals involved, as well as by the changing fortunes of the advocates of decentralisation in Istanbul itself, who gradually lost out during the latter half of the nineteenth century to those who wanted to reassert close central control. During the second half of the nineteenth century, these were the factors which determined the nature of the three provinces' links to the centre and to some degree shaped the balance of power within the political worlds of Baghdad, Mosul and Basra.

Midhat Pasha's implementation of the Land Law was far from complete by the time he was recalled to Istanbul in 1872. Nevertheless, he began a process whereby the land tenure system was to be thoroughly revised, with far-reaching consequences for the majority of the population, who depended on the land for their livelihood. One of the main pillars of the land reform was the granting of title deeds (*tapu sanad*) to anyone who was in possession or occupation of land. The land remained the property of the state, but the registered owner of the title deeds would enjoy virtually complete rights of ownership. Across great tracts of the three provinces the Land Law introduced an institution akin to private property in agricultural land, initiating profound changes in structures of social power, the consequences of which were to be felt long after the demise of the Ottoman administration itself.

In the first place, collective ownership of land was expressly prohibited and registration of the title deeds could only be in the name of an individual. In areas of largely tribal cultivation, it was often the name of the shaikh, as the most powerful or prestigious individual, that was placed on the title deed. Either through ignorance or suspicion, or through a misplaced trust in the altruism of the shaikhly families, the great majority of the tribal cultivators failed to register and were thus transformed into tenant farmers. In other areas – and under Sultan Abdulhamid II – specifically the *saniyya* lands (the tracts belonging to the sultan himself), the practice of *iltizam* or tax-farming continued, leading to periodic auctions of the tax-farming rights and denying the peasants the possibility of establishing the kinds of stable tenancies that would allow successful application for title to the land. Attempts to enforce the new law were often fiercely resisted by the cultivators themselves, since the new principles conflicted with the rights recognised for years under various forms of customary practice. Hostility was sharpened in many

cases by the fact that those who registered as owners of the title deeds were wholly unconnected with the cultivators of the land. Rather, they had used their influence or the capital they had accumulated within the urban administrative and trading worlds, as state servants, merchants or otherwise well-connected individuals, to secure for themselves rights over the land and over those who worked it.[3]

The consequences for the new political order associated with the refounding of the state were significant. As the potential for social conflict increased, based on different rights to the land, so the attitudes of new groups of landowners to the state began to change. For those in possession of title deeds, the state had become more than simply an exacting, tax-extracting agency. It was now something in which they had a material stake, since it guaranteed a certain kind of order and promised to enforce that order – and with it the rights of the principal beneficiaries. In this way, new groups of individuals in all three provinces became complicit in the state project. It was now in their interest that the writ of the central state should be enforced in the lands from which they stood to profit.

Among the shaikhly families who had registered as individual owners of tribal lands, there was also a growing realisation of the need for state assistance in extracting that which they felt was their due. This encouraged changing attitudes among some towards the mechanisms of state extraction. Rather than avoid taxation through violent resistance, they came to see that it was more fruitful to engage with the administrative personnel and offices of the state to ensure reduced tax demands or indeed exemptions. They would thereby also hope to enlist the force of the state to help them extract revenues from their tenants.

Consequently, even in this sector of society, traditionally wary of the state and disdainful of engagement with it, there was a growing number for whom the advantages of participation in some effective form began to outweigh the advantages of keeping their distance. However, it was to be a participation largely on terms set by the state. Hitherto the shaikhs had been powerful not because they owned land, but because of their authority over their tribesmen. In their new role as landowners, however, it was the state which conferred power upon them by granting them land rights – rights which could be withheld or withdrawn with equal facility. This did not break the relationship with their tribesmen, but it significantly transformed it and thereby helped to change the very meaning of tribal identity.

These transformations were, of course, gradual and drew different

people into the state-directed reforms at varying rates. For certain families of urban notables and of Ottoman officials, the reform process satisfied both their material interests and their feelings of political propriety. For certain tribal chiefs, whether Arab or Kurdish, their welcome for the state's conferral of title deeds was unmatched by any sense of reciprocal obligation. Reluctance to pay taxes remained a constant irritant in relations between the state, based in the provincial capitals, and the countryside. Sometimes this was due to the inability of the title-holder, even though from a shaikhly family, to extract the revenues from his tribesmen who had now, in the eyes of the law, become his tenants; sometimes, however, it was due to the delayed acceptance of any sense of obligation to the state that went beyond symbolic fealty to the sultan.

From the time of Midhat Pasha, these were the processes which helped to shape political society in the three provinces. They were supplemented by further innovations and transformations such as the founding of a printing press and the publication of the first newspaper (the official paper *Al-Zawra'*, in 1869), the initiation of irrigation projects, the establishment of new factories around Baghdad and the setting up of a number of educational institutions. In addition, communications were improved, linking the provinces more effectively with each other and with the outside world. In some areas Midhat Pasha was building on the work of equally energetic predecessors, such as Mehmed Namik Pasha; in other areas, he instituted innovations which would be consolidated or neglected, depending upon the quality of his successors.

Inevitably, the growing intrusion of the Ottoman state into the lives of the inhabitants of the three provinces provoked resentment of new and unwelcome demands upon people's time and resources. In some cases this worked to the advantage of the Ottoman authorities. For instance, the late nineteenth century saw the decline of the great tribal confederation of the Muntafiq of Basra province, undermined in part by the changing relationship between the ruling family of *sayyids*, the al-Saʿdun, and their tribal followers. Regardless of other factors, the changes in land tenure and the tensions this had caused within the al-Saʿdun family and between them and the tribesmen had eroded their authority. Thus, by 1900, although the Ottoman governors could not afford to ignore the activities of the al-Saʿdun and the tribes of the Muntafiq confederation, the latter no longer wielded the kind of power that had once kept the Ottoman state itself in check.

In other cases, however, the very contested nature of authority, the unsettled feelings of the tribesmen, when combined with resentment

and fear of the depredations of central government and augmented by local disputes over land rights, led to a series of revolts. On occasion these were crushed by the Ottoman forces stationed in one of the three provinces. However, in a number of instances, especially in the Kurdish areas and in Basra province, coerced compliance was often beyond the capacities of the Ottoman governor's forces. As a result, a wary relationship developed between the provincial capital and the tribal lands. It was in these areas that the Ottoman authorities fell back on a traditional strategy of encouraging dissent and factionalism within the tribes and their leading families. This weakened the capacity of any one of them to challenge the Ottoman state. At the same time it implicitly limited the degree to which the Ottoman state could undermine the tribal system, even while helping to transform it.

Senior officials in Istanbul and even in the provinces may have wished to weaken tribalism as such. For many it affronted the vision of modernity which they had mapped out for the empire. However, for officials of lower rank who were concerned with local order, tribal hierarchies and internecine tribal rivalries were too important a factor to be ignored and potentially too valuable an asset to lose in the task of maintaining control. By selecting allies within such a system and giving them the backing of the Ottoman state, the administration was inevitably complicit in a game which effectively reinforced a certain kind of tribal ethos, understood as the exploitation of networks of obligation deriving from real or imagined kinship. These networks supplied the channels through which the resources of the state could be distributed to chosen clients, giving the latter the means to sustain their own followings. In providing people with a material incentive to participate in such a system, the Ottoman state ensured that it acquired new meaning for some, whilst retaining it for many – a meaning appropriate to the demands of the new state order. This strategy undermined particular leaders at various times, just as other strategies were eroding the structures that had made certain tribes and tribal confederations formidable adversaries of central government in previous generations. However, it did nothing to undermine the importance of tribal affiliation or hierarchy. On the contrary, these were to remain crucial instruments of power, helping to sustain two languages and two worlds of political discourse.

In the province of Baghdad, this process was most advanced, in part because of the military strength of the Ottoman administration (Baghdad became the headquarters for the 6th Army Corps), but also

because it was here that many of the tribal shaikhs had been drawn into
a political game in which it was very much to their advantage to partic-
ipate. The most prominent amongst them maintained agents and
establishments in the city, supplying them with key intelligence and
acting on their behalf to secure their interests at the court of the gover-
nor. It was in Baghdad that the centre of land registration lay, that deci-
sions on changes of tenancy of *saniyya* lands were made and that public
works central to the productivity of the lands in question – such as irriga-
tion schemes or transport plans – were initiated. In exchange for this
involvement by the shaikhs, which ensured a remarkable absence of
rural disturbances in Baghdad province during the latter half of the
nineteenth century, the Ottoman state honoured them, confirmed them
in their positions and did little to undermine the principle of shaikhly
domination in the countryside.[4]

SULTAN ABDULHAMID II AND THE YOUNG TURKS

The value of the shaikhs' involvement for the Ottoman authorities was
all too apparent in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It was then
that the fiscal crisis of the empire manifested itself, indicating a chronic
shortage of funds to back up many of the reform measures that had once
been planned. It also meant that the revenues from the provinces were
that much more vital to the well-being of the empire since, quite apart
from other demands, there was the Public Debt Administration to
service. This coincided with the accession to the throne of Sultan
Abdulhamid II (1876–1909) and the suspension of the constitution, as
well as the ending of the liberal reforms associated with the Young
Ottomans. For the absolutist sultan, mistrustful of many of his officials
because of their connection with the constitutional movement and their
Young Ottoman sympathies, it was important to establish direct ties with
the chief notables in the provinces of the empire.

In the case of Mesopotamia, this led Sultan Abdulhamid to cultivate
ties with prominent tribal leaders, with leading families of the *ashraf* and
with the principal figures of the various Sufi orders. Connections of this
kind were not only tactically useful, but, in the case of the *ashraf* and the
Sufi shaikhs, also accorded with his pan-Islamic world view. The effect
was to deepen the engagement of the prominent tribal and religious
hierarchs with the Ottoman state, since they could now look to Istanbul
for support against threats from provincial governors. However, the
policy also ensured that frustrated Ottoman officials and social critics

would make common cause, angered by the sultan's use of traditional hierarchies to bypass the administration and to reinforce his own absolutism.

These resentments eventually gave rise to the Young Turk movement throughout the empire, including the three Mesopotamian provinces. As the opportunities increased for young men from the provinces to undergo a modern education and to be trained either as officials or military officers, so were they influenced by the currents of thought both in Istanbul and in the provinces, among the growing circles of educated officials and professional people. In Baghdad a number of state educational establishments had been opened since 1869, most notably the civil and military Rashidiyya schools, and increasing numbers of young men attended the Law School or the War College in Istanbul.

These developments indicated a growing critical engagement with the politics of the Ottoman state by increasing numbers of people in the three provinces. That engagement took various forms. It reflected both their positions within established society, but also the transformations of the preceding couple of generations. The fact that different avenues and forms of involvement were open to people was testimony to the hybrid nature of the Ottoman state under Abdulhamid, filled with contradictions perhaps, but also seeking to accommodate existing structures of power and legitimation with new principles of order and new mechanisms of power. Increasingly, Ottoman officials, military officers, merchants, professionals, absentee landlords and tribal leaders encountered one another, as competitors or collaborators, on broadly similar terrain. The language and the proper sphere of political activity were becoming more generally recognised, but also more widely contested.

As a result, a variety of groups emerged in the three provinces, aimed at securing political advantage or reform, but their concerns were still those of subjects of the empire and the boundary of their political world was still effectively the boundary of the Ottoman Empire itself. In the process, however, they established close contacts with like-minded individuals from neighbouring provinces, often in the educational institutions of Istanbul where similar backgrounds and languages formed bonds between the growing numbers of young provincials. This made some realise how much certain provinces had in common with one another and for others it underlined the strategic value of co-operation in political activity.

Whilst these necessarily covert and scarcely organised forms of activity were beginning to shape the lives, the political concerns and

imaginations of some of the younger officials and army officers from the
three provinces, there were others who pursued a more traditional form
of political activity within the framework of the empire. Focused on
securing immediate advantage, although no doubt underpinned by a
larger sense of political propriety and desirable social order, this other-
wise diverse group is best represented by figures such as the naqib al-
ashraf in Baghdad, ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Kailani, or the naqib al-ashraf
of Basra and his son, Sayyid Talib, as well as by Kurdish chieftains, such
as Shaikh Saʿid Barzinji, scion of a shaikhly family of the Qadiriyya
order. They cultivated their links with the sultan in Istanbul in part to
outmanoeuvre the transitory parade of Ottoman provincial officials and
thereby to secure their own positions.

The same could be said of the shaikhly families of the great tribal
confederations which sometimes needed the power of Istanbul to help
them assert their own rights to land, or which were rent by intra-family
disputes requiring mediation or recognition by the sultan. Furthermore,
the advantages of engagement had become so apparent that it was not
uncommon to find in many prominent families, such as the al-Saʿdun,
both Ottoman officials and 'tribal shaikhs'. On a lower level, similar pre-
occupations drove lesser shaikhs to petition the relevant provincial gov-
ernor and to maintain a presence in the main towns in order to take care
of their interests at the governor's palace. Even on this level, of course,
such access was still the prerogative of a very few. Nevertheless, it was
drawing them into a world which was not simply the preserve of the gov-
ernor or, behind him, the sultan. A different and larger kind of politics
was taking shape throughout the empire and these apparently 'tradi-
tional' figures could not help but be affected by it, often adapting their
public behaviour accordingly.

The Young Turk revolution of 1908, which forced the sultan to
reintroduce the Ottoman constitution and saw the emergence into the
open of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), allowed many of
the hitherto suppressed currents of political opinion within the three
Mesopotamian provinces to find public expression, as they did elsewhere
in the empire. The proliferation of clubs, groups and societies after 1908,
as well as the explosion of journals and newspapers (an estimated sixty
titles were published at various times in the three provinces in the years
following the revolution of 1908), is testimony to the political engage-
ment of growing numbers in Mosul, Baghdad and Basra. At the same
time, of course, other forms of political activity by no means dis-
appeared, indicating varying political trajectories and contrasting nar-

ratives, playing themselves out at different rates in the three provinces.

The sultan himself was deposed as a result of the failed counter-revolution of 1909, but Istanbul remained as much the central hub of the empire as ever. However, the game of provincial politics became more complicated than before because of uncertainties about the political convictions and connections of any given official or officer. This made it all the more necessary for those keen to preserve and advance their interests to engage directly with a political world now swept by currents that could not easily be predicted or controlled. In the years that followed the 1908 revolution, some found new ways of organising and others found new reasons to organise. Young men from the Mesopotamian provinces, such as Tawfiq al-Suwaidi, Naji Shawkat, Hamdi al-Pachachi and Hikmat Sulaiman, took part in the debates raging in Istanbul about constitutionalism, liberalism, decentralisation and secularism. Equally, the common currency of Ottoman reform – strengthening the state through modern administrative techniques and the development of military and economic capacity – featured largely in their thoughts.

At the same time, among the Shi'a of the *'Atabat*, the revolutionary example of Persia was causing ferment. Debates about constitutionalism flourished here too, but in a very different setting to that of Ottoman officialdom. In Najaf, Karbala and elsewhere, the role of the clerics and, through them, of distinctively Shi'i sensibilities in the Persian constitutional revolution of 1906 had caused great interest. Although decried by some of the more conservative *'ulama* of the *'Atabat*, these new ideas and the visible success of clerical involvement in the political process had generated excitement among many. It had set them thinking about their own situation and the polity that dominated their lives, but that largely denied them a role.

With ideas of a politics of participation came the growing realisation that in the new political order some might find themselves better positioned to participate effectively than others. Initially, these concerns fuelled the ongoing debate about the relative merits of decentralisation versus central control. The restoration of the constitution and the elections to the Ottoman Parliament in 1908 had raised expectations about the commitment of the new regime to the representation of truly empire-wide interests and the possibility of meeting the varying claims of the provinces through some form of decentralisation. These hopes were dashed by the strong centralising policies of the CUP and it was not long before groups began to form which called for equality of all

Ottomans, for the Arabic language to be given equal status to Turkish and for greater power to be devolved to the provinces.

As increasingly authoritarian CUP governments proceeded to entrench themselves in power in Istanbul, in the Arab provinces of the empire the frustrated calls for provincial autonomy fed into and reinforced emerging sentiments of Arab nationalism. In the Mesopotamian provinces, it was in Basra that this call was heard most loudly. In part, this was because of the proximity of the semi-independent Arab rulers of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, such as Shaikh Mubarak al-Sabah in Kuwait, Shaikh Khaza'il of Muhammara and the emerging power of ʿAbd al-ʿAziz Ibn Saʿud in the Najd. The more cosmopolitan society of Basra was also in touch with Egypt, where many of the Arab critics of the Ottoman state had established themselves and where a lively and relatively free press gave voice to new ideas concerning both reform of the empire and questions of national identity. However, the phenomenon also owed much to the forcefulness and energy of Sayyid Talib al-Naqib who was intent on carving out for himself a virtually unassailable position in Basra.

Having initially enjoyed the patronage of Sultan Abdulhamid, Sayyid Talib was elected to the Ottoman Parliament in 1908 and soon became associated with the opposition to the ruling CUP. In 1913 he set up the Reform Society of Basra, demanding virtual provincial autonomy. This followed a meeting organised by him and attended by the shaikhs of Muhammara and of Kuwait at which, reportedly, a resolution was agreed calling for the autonomy – even independence – of Iraq (understood as the provinces of Baghdad and Basra). When Sayyid Talib proceeded openly to attack the 'Turkification' policies of the Ottoman government and called on Arab soldiers in the imperial army to rebel, the CUP government tried to arrange for his murder. The attempt failed and thereafter both Sayyid Talib and the CUP government called a truce. Indeed, in recognition of his power base, Talib was asked by the government to mediate with Ibn Saʿud to secure his acknowledgement of Ottoman suzerainty; for his part Talib asked the government to grant a number of the Reform Society's requests. Surprisingly, they agreed to do so, but avoided committing themselves to a timetable. This seems to have satisfied Talib who then declared that he was joining forces with the

1 Sayyid Talib al-Naqib (naqib al-ashraf of Basra), c. 1912

government, and managed to secure the required pledge of allegiance from Ibn Saʿud.

In recognition of this service, there was a plan to make Talib the governor of Basra province. This was perhaps Sayyid Talib's principal ambition and the main reason for his volte-face towards the Ottoman government. However, the plan was abandoned when the strength of local opposition became clear. Instead, in a curious reversal of policy, orders were sent to the governor of Baghdad to arrest Sayyid Talib in October 1914. Since this coincided with the British landing near Basra, following the outbreak of war, Talib lost no time in approaching the British (with whom he had long been in contact), and asked them to make him shaikh or *amir* of Basra under their protection. Although certain British officials were at the time toying with the idea of making Basra a British protectorate, they also knew of his chequered history and thought it safest to despatch him to India where he remained until 1920.

In Baghdad, the emerging politics of the city and the province were not dominated by a single figure as they were in Basra. There was a greater variety of opinions and a number of powerful figures and families, many of whom had mixed feelings about the forced abdication of Sultan Abdulhamid in 1909. Those who had welcomed the sultan's fall were well represented in the CUP which brought together officials, landowners and merchants, encouraging political debate and disseminating the distinctive mixture of authoritarian and liberal reformist ideas characteristic of the CUP at this stage. Because of the composition of the CUP in Baghdad, where Arabic-speaking provincials predominated, there was little evidence of the Turkish nationalism that was later to become associated with the party. Instead, debate focused either on questions of political and social reform similar to those mooted elsewhere in the empire or on matters of parochial concern to the inhabitants of Baghdad province.

Disagreements in both these areas led to the emergence of a lively and varied press in Baghdad, as in the other two provinces. Sometimes political disagreements led to the establishment of branches of rival political parties, such as the Liberal Unionist Party (LUP), which also had a metropolitan origin. Attracting those who were concerned about the secularising and centralising tendencies of the CUP, as well as about the implications of some of its reform proposals for the privileges and wealth of established hierarchies, the LUP brought together individuals of a more religious, conservative and landed social background. Nevertheless, debate was still about issues that were empire-wide in their implication, even if they concerned the application of the general mea-

sures to the particular conditions of Baghdad province. As in the other provinces of the empire, those who were becoming involved in the widening political world still focused primarily on the limits and nature of state power, rather than on the legitimacy of the Ottoman state itself.

This was to change, particularly after the CUP coup d'état of 1913. In Baghdad province, as in Basra, young Ottomans of Arab origin and culture began to feel exasperation and frustration at the CUP's dictatorship, which not only seemed to bring with it a contempt for the concerns and interests of the provinces, but was also seen by some as tolerant of, or even impelled by, a decided 'Turkification' of the empire. Some feared the implications of this policy for the language and culture of the Arabs; others resented the centralisation which accompanied the policy, giving provincial officials and institutions less autonomy to deal with the particular concerns of the provinces in question; others, in the Ottoman officer corps or the corps of administrative officials, were angered by the effect of these policies on their own careers, since – rightly or wrongly – they believed themselves to be routinely passed over in favour of less qualified Turkish candidates. For many, of course, all of these forms of resentment were linked.

Increasingly, protest found expression in organisations or publications which emphasised the importance of Arab identity and Arab culture. The two most significant organisations that emerged at this time in Baghdad itself were the National Scientific Club and the Baghdad branch of al-'Ahd (the Covenant). The National Scientific Club was founded in Baghdad in 1912 by a group of young Arab intellectuals, some of whom had been studying in Istanbul. It was led by Muzahim al-Pachachi from the School of Law in Baghdad and enjoyed the patronage of the prominent al-Suwaidi family of *ashraf* in Baghdad and of Sayyid Talib in Basra. This allowed its members to pursue the club's aims of promoting general knowledge, focusing particularly on Arab culture and literature. It also brought together Sunni and Shi'i intellectuals. The latter were generally modernist reformers, but they also included representatives of a growing movement in the Shi'i cities which sought to revive interest in Arab traditions and culture. Inevitably the club acted as a forum for political debate and took a role in organising opposition to the CUP's centralising measures. As the authoritarian side of the CUP showed itself ever more strongly, the club came under threat. By the end of 1913 its newspaper had been closed down, Muzahim al-Pachachi and others had fled to Basra where they were protected by Sayyid Talib, and the remainder had been arrested by the Ottoman authorities.

Suppression of open opposition encouraged the growth of secret soci-
eties, the most significant of which in the case of the three Mesopotamian
provinces was al-ʿAhd, founded in Istanbul by Arab officers from various
provinces of the empire. Branches were soon established in Mosul and in
Baghdad by Taha al-Hashimi, himself of Baghdadi origin. In Mosul his
brother, Yasin al-Hashimi, became the leader of a branch which included
a number of army officers who, like him, were to become prominent in
the future Iraqi state – men such as Mawlud Mukhlis, ʿAli Jawdat al-
ʿAyyubi and Jamil al-Midfaʿi. In Baghdad, Hamdi al-Pachachi (a cousin
of Muzahim al-Pachachi) became head of the branch and was joined by
Nuri al-Saʿid, Jaʿfar al-ʿAskari and others who were also to play promi-
nent roles in Iraqi politics. Both of these branches established contacts
with the Reform Society of Basra, and Muzahim al-Pachachi became the
leader of the smaller branch of al-ʿAhd in that city.

The members of al-ʿAhd shared many ideas about the nature and
direction of reform with the dominant CUP, but they differed sharply
on the question of decentralisation and on the identity of the state itself.
Al-ʿAhd had initially concerned itself with the rights of the Arabs within
the empire, but came to question the raison d'être of the empire itself.
The young Arab officers became convinced that the Ottoman Empire
had become a vehicle for an increasingly strident Turkish nationalism
and began to think about the possibility of independence for the Arab
provinces. Their plans for action were neither co-ordinated nor well
thought through. However, they showed that this group of Arab officers
and officials was losing faith in the Ottoman state itself and was now
dreaming of an independent state, ill defined territorially and of uncer-
tain structure, but nevertheless with a distinct Arab identity.[5]

The Ottoman authorities, however, were already beginning to suspect
the existence of al-ʿAhd and in 1914 began to move against it. Most of
its members in the three Mesopotamian provinces avoided arrest, but
some, realising that they were under suspicion, fled to Egypt or Arabia.
By this stage, however, events elsewhere were taking a course that would
have a lasting impact on the three provinces, paving the way for their
eventual incorporation into the new state of Iraq. The CUP govern-
ment's increasingly close alliance with Germany and its conflicts with
Russia in the years preceding 1914 made it difficult for the Ottoman
Empire to remain neutral when war was declared between Germany
and Russia in the summer of 1914. In October 1914 the Ottoman Empire
entered the war on the side of the Central Powers. This fateful move set
in motion a train of events that was to end in the empire's destruction.
Appropriately enough in this context, the first indication of how things

might end came in Mesopotamia with the British occupation of Basra in November 1914.

It would be fanciful to assume that in the years leading up to the British occupation of Mesopotamia the future state of Iraq was somehow prefigured in the common experiences of these provinces. In many respects, the central political relationship with the Ottoman state was broadly similar to that of other Arab provinces where the forces of Ottoman reform and the unforeseen consequences of the interplay of those forces had been at work for over half a century. From the perspective of the government in Istanbul, the three Mesopotamian provinces were neither treated administratively as a unit, nor accorded any form of collective representation that set them apart from other regions of the empire. Meanwhile, those inhabitants who were beginning to rethink their identities as political actors tended to think in categories that linked them to like-minded people in other provinces. In some cases, their thoughts coincided with those of their compatriots elsewhere in Mesopotamia, but they also established organisational and imaginative links far beyond these provincial boundaries. Even Sayyid Talib's apparent reference to the autonomy of an entity called 'Iraq' cannot easily be separated from his view that the smaller stage of Basra was inappropriate for his personal ambition and that he needed to control Baghdad as well.

Nevertheless, some features of emerging political society in the three provinces had helped to create a basis for distinctive ties, if scarcely for unity of purpose or action. Baghdad, as the seat of the major governorate and the headquarters of an Ottoman army corps, did exert a certain gravitational pull on the other two provinces, stronger in the case of Basra than Mosul, but nevertheless visible even in the latter. Equally, as the emerging political organisations indicated, personal links were being forged between members of these groupings – links which were often reinforced by family connections through trade or through membership of the Ottoman administration or of the officer corps. The secrecy of associations like al-'Ahd placed a premium on personal trust and close acquaintance. This served to bring similarly situated young men in the three provinces together. Interconnections and interrelationships did exist therefore among certain sectors of society in the three provinces. Under the aegis of the Ottoman state, these were insufficient to create internal momentum for the establishment of a separate state. However, once that state was created by the intervention of the British, the interplay of these groups and the similar experiences they had undergone in the last decades of Ottoman rule inevitably influenced the positions and attitudes of those who were to find themselves inhabiting the new state of Iraq.