

Middle East

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In comparison to other Ottoman Arab provinces, little has been written on Ottoman Iraq, and still less on Basra, historically Iraq's main outlet to the sea. To the vast majority of Arab historians, Basra only retains its importance because of its dominant contribution to the intellectual and religious debates of early Islam. Its later development as a key trading port for the Ottoman Empire is largely glossed over by those scholars still riveted by the 'golden age' of Islamic thought. And yet, Basra's social, demographic and intellectual evolution in the 18th and 19th centuries largely set the pattern for the province's interaction with Istanbul and the larger region throughout the rest of the Ottoman period.

The socio-economic and cultural changes that the province of Basra underwent in the latter part of the Ottoman era were of such enduring importance that they are now seen as influencing the governing paradigm used to explain the formation of present-day Iraq. The transformed socio-political cast of the population, the revival of sectarian movements over a decade and a half, the politicization of frontiers and the diminution of regional affiliation are all elements that figure in the historical development of Iraq as a modern nation-state. And these features were all central to the growth of Basra's societal make-up at the turn of the 20th century.

In the last quarter of the 18th century, Basra was in sorry shape. Plagues, financial mismanagement, reverses in trade and Persian invasions had cut into its once thriving economy and disrupted its role as a port of transit between central Iraq, Iran, Syria, the Gulf and India. However, even though the export trade suffered, Basrawi merchants retained a firm grip on the inland trade amongst the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf coast and the Indian subcontinent. Horses, dates, grain, textiles and other finished goods were circulated and bought and sold throughout the region. As a result of this networking, a number of influential merchant families from Basra itself, as well as from Najd (northern Arabia), al-Hasa (eastern Arabia), Kuwait and Muhammara (south-west Iran) managed to hold on to their strong links with Bombay, despite increased British commercial competition. This was to come to an end in the 1860s, when the opening of the Suez Canal gave a boost to exports from Iraq, Arabia and the Gulf, and British shippers captured the vast volume of regional trade. Both developments seriously affected the regional merchant class and shook its foundations.

The fall – and partial recovery – of the regional economy (through the revitalized land trade) mirrored the vast social and intellectual changes occurring in Basra from the latter part of the 18th century. Two important developments were to have an enduring influence on Basrawi society. One was the increasing conversion of southern tribesmen from Sunni to Shi'i tenets, largely instigated by activist scholar-preachers from Najaf and Karbala interested both in defending the shrine cities from Wahhabi fundamentalism and spreading the teachings of the 'righteous' faith. The second was the attempted revitalization of Sunni schools and Sunni education under Sultanate aegis, as Abdul-Hamid II gradually came round to the view that the wayward province of Iraq had to be reformed by means of the more systematic inculcation of Sunni precepts. To understand the implications of this evolution, it is important to realize that Basra was composed of two worlds: Basra the port, a bustling arena

Culture and Identity in the Work of an Historian of Ottoman Basra

where the inhabitants of the rural districts mixed and conducted business with merchants from all of the towns in the region; and Basra the periphery, where the tribes held sway and frequently came under the influence of the two Shi'i shrine cities, Najaf and Karbala. A growing scholarly literature, both in Arabic and English, has detailed these two intertwined developments (the most important being the works of Abdullah Nafisi, Yitzhak Nakash and Selim Deringil).

Cultural movements and sectarian developments

The most interesting aspect of the conversion movement and the challenges that it posed to the Ottoman authorities both in Basra and in Istanbul is the way it was interpreted in the local histories of the period. By far the most engaging version is that of Shaykh Ibrahim al-Haydari, a contemporary of the movement who wrote his history in the latter part of the 19th century. An 'orthodox' Sunni scholar whose family had deep roots in both the Hanafi and Shafi'i legal traditions, al-Haydari wrote a local history that gave free rein to his Baghdadi-bred cynicism, especially with regard to the movement of conversion from Sunni to Shi'i principles among the tribes of southern Iraq. Al-Haydari's chronicle is one of the most detailed sources for this development; and even while he uses disparaging terms to describe these mass conversions, he nonetheless records the names of tribes, the dates of their religious-ideological shift and the ramifications these changes had on the province of Basra.

Among the most important reactions that this movement caused was the at times energetic, though somewhat uneven campaign launched by Sultan Abdul-Hamid II to build new schools, educate more Sunni scholar-preachers and re-establish firmer ties with Sunni notables in Basra province. Al-Haydari's book dovetails neatly with this exercise. Throughout his history, he details the decline of Basra's glory and the growing ignorance of its population due to the lack of schools and, more importantly, the failure of the Ottoman leadership to remedy the situation. And he notes that the original Basrawis were Sunnis but had lapsed into Shi'ism because of the lack of official guidance and concern.

Part of al-Haydari's problem must have stemmed from the diminution of the position of the intellectual class in Iraq as a whole. The mid to latter part of the 19th century is known to have been a period of indignity for many scholarly families of Ottoman Iraq; their livelihoods came in for renewed inspection by the centralizing governors of Baghdad and Basra. Even al-Haydari's family itself was stripped of certain hereditary posts in the *ulema* hierarchy. It may be therefore be surmised that al-Hay-

dari's book was also written as a barely disguised appeal to the Ottoman Sultan to revoke decades of neglect of the Baghdadi intellectual class, and to restore the Sunni religious aristocracy to favour once more.

Ideology and Identity

Yet another anxiety in al-Haydari's book, and one intimately linked to the Shi'i problem, was the increased weakness of the Ottoman Empire in the face of its regional and international foes. A staunch Ottomanist, al-Haydari viewed with dismay the many European attempts throughout the 19th century to carve up the empire. He was especially indignant with regard to creeping British annexation in Bahrain and Yemen. This led him to reassert a sometimes fictive Ottoman sovereignty on districts that had been at best a no-man's land, such as Muhammara (now south-west Iran) and its adjoining villages. In so doing, he traced the beginnings of an idealized Iraqi identity, couching it in an Ottoman context and lacing it with strong Sunni overtones. Thus, at times he completely disregarded the sovereignty of districts that adjoined Basra, preferring to regard them collectively as Ottoman territory, even though these same districts had come under different jurisdiction. At the same time, he used the term 'al-Iraq' on several occasions to include these same areas, awarded to Iran by international treaty. Al-Haydari's book is therefore one of the first works of history in the period to affix an Ottoman-Iraqi-Sunni identity on what had historically been a fluctuating frontier region. Multi-tiered as it was, this identity perfectly expressed the flexibility and practicality of 'belonging' and affiliation in what had been for centuries a regional world.

The permutations of identity aside, al-Haydari's work also redraws the configurations of the regional commercial class in Basra, showing that many of these long-distance merchants had homes (and businesses) throughout the region and yearly plied their occupations in areas as diverse as Najd or Bombay. By the end of the 19th century, however, this merchant class had lost the war to European shipping concerns. Trade was re-routed to British India and Europe by means of British commercial firms (many with 'native' agents in Baghdad and Basra) and British ships. Al-Haydari's book is therefore a bittersweet look at the regional market in its heyday, when Kuwaiti horse dealers fielded the best mares in the India trade and Basrawi date merchants sold their product at regional fairs. It explains the dynamics of culture within the context of a constantly changing economic picture. It portrays socio-cultural ferment within a readily understandable context where intellectual change is perceived as a reflection of economic disruption, and the loss of one's livelihood correspondingly injects an urgency into the reformulation of an individual's worldview. ♦