

The Kurds and World War II: Some Considerations for a Social History Perspective

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Abstract

Scholars generally argue that during the Second World War the Middle East, and the Kurdish areas in particular, was a peripheral theatre of an otherwise global war. While this is largely true, it seems necessary to introduce some nuances into this analysis. A view from the borderlands, combined with a socio-historical approach to how the war was experienced on a daily basis behind the front line, reveals that military tensions, large-scale arms smuggling, inflation, food shortages and economic migration were common features in the Kurdish borderlands between 1941 and 1945. Furthermore, looking at the uneventful can help us to better understand the context in which the Kurdish nationalist movement developed during the war and in the immediate post-war years.

Keywords

Borderlands, Contraband, Borders, Kurds, WWII, Periphery.

Introduction

While Kurdish studies scholarship on the interwar years as well as the post-1945 era is now very rich, the Second World War remains, by and large, an understudied topic. True, some scholars have provided key insights into the diplomatic endeavours undertaken by diverse nationalist committees in Syria and Iraq as the war came to a closure as well as about the initial stages of Mustafa Barzani's revolt in Iraq from 1943 onwards.¹ Finally, the short-lived Republic

¹ O'SHEA, Maria. *Trapped Between the Map and Reality: Geography and Perceptions of Kurdistan*. London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 172–179. For the complete list of Kurdish memos and summaries of their contents, see

of Mahabad of 1946 has been the object of a couple of fascinating accounts that have not nevertheless been followed by further in-depth research.² Notwithstanding this, a social history about how the war was lived “at home” on daily basis in Kurdistan is still scanty.³ This omission can be explained by diverse factors.

To begin with, the Middle East and the Kurdish areas, in particular, have generally been considered as a peripheral theatre of an otherwise global war.⁴ In that sense, Christian Destremeau contends that Middle Eastern populations did not have a direct experience of the war besides the significant presence of the Allied forces deployed throughout the region.⁵ Likewise, Cyrus Schayegh considers that, when compared to WWI, the 1939-1945 war was less traumatic due to two chief reasons. On the one hand, warfare was mostly limited to North Africa and the southern Mediterranean Sea. On the other hand, unlike during the Great War, a severe famine did not hit the Middle Eastern region during the second world conflict.⁶

While largely accurate, these views beg for some nuance. First, the rapid progress of Italian and German armies between 1939 and 1941 created a phase of critical instability for Middle Eastern governments – particularly in Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq –, which in turn threatened the British Empire altogether.⁷ For one, Iran and Iraq were two key pieces of the imperial scheme, for the British needed unrestricted access to the region’s oil and to its lines of communication. In addition, Palestine was central for air communication to India, the overland route to Iraq, and a potential staging post for military support from India to Egypt.⁸ In sum, the Middle East and the Mediterranean formed thus 'a massive theatre of diverse conflicts, most of them with roots in Britain’s imperial past and imperial strategic predilections'.⁹

JWAIDEH, Wadie. *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Its Origins and Development*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006, pp. 272–276.

² See ROOSEVELT, Archie Jr. ‘The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad’, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1947), pp. 247–269; EAGLETON, William. *The Kurdish Republic of 1946*. London: Oxford University Press, 1963.

³ For some exceptions, see WICHHART, Stefanie K. ‘A New Deal for the Kurds: Britain’s Policy in Iraq, 1941–45’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (2011), pp. 815–31; YADIRGI, Veli. *The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey: From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. On everyday conditions in Turkey during WWII, see METINSOY, Murat. *İkinci Dünya Savaşında Türkiye: Savaş ve Gündelik Yaşam*. Istanbul: Homer Kitabevi, 2007; DOKUYAN, Sabit. ‘İkinci Dünya Savaşı Sırasında Yaşanan Gıda Sıkıntısı ve Ekmek Karnesi Uygulaması’, *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (2013), pp. 193–210.

⁴ LEE, Lloyd E. *The War Years: A Global History of the Second World War*. London: Routledge, 1989.

⁵ DESTREMAU, Christian. *Le Moyen-Orient pendant la seconde guerre mondiale*. Paris: Perrin, 2011, p. 575.

⁶ SCHAYEGH, Cyrus. *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017, pp. 272–273.

⁷ JACKSON, Ashley. *Persian Gulf Command: A History of the Second World War in Iran and Iraq*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018, p. 2.

⁸ SHARFMAN, Daphna. *Palestine in the Second World War: Strategies and Dilemmas*. Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2014, p. 5.

⁹ JACKSON, Ashley. *The British Empire and the Second World War*. London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006, p. 97.

Second, the borderlands of Middle Eastern states, and the Kurdish areas for the matter, went through a period of considerable instability. Although the Spears mission in Syrian and Lebanon, together with the second British occupation of Iraq and the Anglo-Soviet military penetration in Iran contributed to clear the Middle Eastern region of direct Axis interference, both the external and internal borders of the Allied sphere of influence witnessed a dramatic increase of weaponry circulating across the border zones.

The origins of these weapons were diverse. First, as the pro-Vichy forces in the Levant surrendered to the British by August 1941, they were said to have distributed arms among Armenian and Kurdish settlers along the Turkish-Syrian border as well as among Bedouin tribes.¹⁰ Second, in the aftermath of the Iraqi revolt of 1941, the population seized important numbers of arms, while Italians and Germans also delivered weapons to local tribes in the event of a general uprising against the British. In addition, when the Anglo-Soviet troops occupied Iran, between 27,000 and 30,000 Iranian soldiers found refuge in Turkey. Even though the Turkish border authorities disarmed most of these troops, hundreds of the former sold their weapons on the black market. In turn, numerous Turkish soldiers also sold the guns seized at the border to make a living. It is within this context that hundreds of rifles made in Germany, yet with an Iranian stamp, were smuggled through the Turkish-Syrian border to be sold in Syria.¹¹ Subsequently, these weapons were to play a key role during the latest stages of the French Mandate in Syria when Kurdish and Arab tribes attacked Christian populations and French troops in the Jazira, with the complicity of the British forces based in the area since 1941; the latter wishing to force the end of the Mandate in the face of Free French hesitations.¹²

The situation was similar in Iraqi Kurdistan. British Ambassador Cornwallis in Baghdad, for instance, reported that Iraqi Kurds, influenced by events in Iran, where local tribes and irregular groups rose up against state forces following the Anglo-Soviet occupation of 1941, 'followed suit by taking every Persian army and police post along the whole length of the frontier'.¹³ Furthermore, unlike in the past, the Kurds on both sides of the Iranian-Iraqi boundary

¹⁰ (The National Archives, Kew) TNA, FO 371/27332. Military Attaché (Ankara) to the War Office, 17 August 1941.

¹¹ (Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre) SHAT, 307/4. Free French Delegation at Deir ez Zor, 3 January 1942.

¹² For a comprehensive, yet anti-British oriented report on the attacks upon Christians and Free France forces in the Upper Jazira in the summer 1945, see SAULCHOIR, D61, Dominican Mission in the Upper Jazira. 'British Activity in the Upper Jazira'. Beirut, 21 July 1945, pp. 1–12.

¹³ FIELDHOUSE, David Kenneth (ed.). *Kurds, Arabs and Britons: The Memoir of Wallace Lyon in Iraq, 1918–44*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002, p. 220. Cornwallis referred to the alarming dispatches sent by the British Consulate in Kermanshah who as early as 1941 informed that 'Kurdish tribal unrest' in the border zones separating Iran from Turkey and Iraq could take on a new character within the war context, for he 'suspected that

possessed now modern weapons.¹⁴ As a result, like in the Syrian-Iraqi borderlands, 'the use of coveted Brno rifles as currency meant that hijackings, sheep stealing and cross-border raids increased'.¹⁵

Third, although the Kurdish areas along the Turkish-Syrian border did not witness any battle, tension was high. By early 1941, for instance, the French Intelligence services north of Aleppo gathered a number of reports on Turkish soldiers and officials spreading rumours about the imminent Turkish annexation of northern Syria.¹⁶ In addition, French officials reported on regular basis the concentration of a significant number of Turkish troops along the shared border. Furthermore, because the Baghdad Railway simultaneously marked the border between Turkey and Syria for over 350 km and became *de facto* the only land link between Europe and the Allied-controlled territory, its role was unique when it comes to counterintelligence and espionage activities during WWII for at least two interrelated reasons. On the one hand, the Taurus Express running through the Baghdad Railway carried passengers into or out of an otherwise closed Europe. On the other hand, as a British officer pointed out, during the war, there were only four frontiers between the Allied-held territory and neutral countries, excluding the Far East: United Kingdom/Ireland, Soviet Union/Turkey, Iraq/Turkey and Syria/Turkey. Yet, of those, he considered that 'the Taurus Express made the Turco-Syrian Frontier by far the most important'.¹⁷

Fourth, the first years of the conflict fatally combined with a series of natural disasters making the spectre of famine in the region real. In the spring of 1940, important floods affected many areas in Iraq, while locusts reduced the yield of wheat crops in Mosul, Arbil, Kirkuk and Sulaimaniya districts.¹⁸ Likewise, the harvest and the quality of barley were poorer than in previous years.¹⁹ Further, during the winter of 1941–42, Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Palestine were all affected by severe cold weather, which caused a high rate of livestock mortality. In Iraq, a heavy snow in the Mosul area in January 1942 covered the grazing pastures for the first time in many years, and the unprecedented cold of that month was followed by a warm, dry spring. To

the Kurds ... were being encouraged by the Soviet Russian authorities to resist the Iranian military forces'. TNA, FO 248/1405. British Consul (Kermanshah) to British Legation (Tehran), 8 October 1941.

¹⁴ FIELDHOUSE, David Kenneth (ed.). *Kurds, Arabs and Britons*, p. 220.

¹⁵ JACKSON, Ashley. *Persian Gulf Command*, p. 197.

¹⁶ (Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes) CADN, 1SL/1/V/2144. Captain Terras to the Turkish Qaimaqam of Kilis. Azaz, 24 June 1941.

¹⁷ PEARSE, Richard. *Three Years in the Levant*. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, 1949, p. 103.

¹⁸ TNA, FO 371/24556. 'Iraq. Report on Economic Conditions for May 1940'.

¹⁹ TNA, FO 371/24556. 'Iraq. Report on Economic Conditions for June 1940'.

make things worse, winter rains were scant in central Iraq, and poorly distributed in the Kurdish districts.²⁰

Finally, as the British re-occupied or consolidated their grip over most of Middle Eastern countries by 1941, they established a series of military commands in order to coordinate the war effort in the region with enduring consequences, particularly for the rural areas, including the Kurdish provinces.

The Kurdish areas under MESC's umbrella

In the early phases of WWII, the British Middle East Command established in Cairo a small office to assist the military chiefs in the solution of a worrying shipping bottleneck: a large flow of goods for the civilian population was arriving at the Eastern Mediterranean ports, preventing vessels needed by the military and thus congesting the limited delivering, storage and forwarding facilities aground. Against this background, the Middle East Supply Centre (MESC), established in April 1941, was given the task of selecting civilian claims on Allied shipping and of advising the Command on how to allocate maritime traffic to the Middle East in such a way as to increase the inflow of military supplies.²¹

MESC's territorial mandate covered British and ex-Italian Somaliland, Cyprus, Cyrenaica, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Malta, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Transjordan, Tripolitania, Yemen and the sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf. In other words, MESC dealt with over twenty different governments or administrations and separate fiscal and monetary systems. Although Turkey was not included at first within MESC scheme, Ankara eventually joined the group of states under British regulatory command for two reasons.²² Firstly, Ankara's trade relations were increasingly affected by British measures and pressures as a result of the consolidation of British presence in Syria and Iraq. From the British point of view, Turkey's southern borders were bound to play an important role in the economic warfare that the Allies were waging on the borders of enemy occupied territories or neutral countries

²⁰ (National Archives and Records Administration, Maryland) NARA, RG84, UD 2752. Box 8. 'Background Report on Economic and Financial Developments'. American Legation. Baghdad, 27 May 1942.

²¹ For a comprehensive study on the origins, functions, outcomes and shortcomings of MESC, see WILMINGTON, Martin W. *The Middle East Supply Centre*. Albany and London: SUNY and University of London Press, 1971.

²² To Ashley Jackson, the main reason for America's involvement in MESC was its growing significance as a provider of civilian and military exports. JACKSON, Ashley. *The British Empire and the Second World War*, op. cit., pp. 168–169.

such as Turkey, in order to prevent certain goods and materials from reaching the enemy.²³ Secondly, Turkey's full-scale mobilisation removed large numbers of workers from the farms of Anatolia, thereby reducing cereal productivity. Consequently, Turkey became an importer and had to look for suppliers in the Middle East, Europe and overseas; scarcity thus paved the way for the rapprochement between Turkey and the British.²⁴

Another major impact of the war in the Middle East was the presence of very large numbers of Allied troops and the demands they placed upon local economies for accommodation, labour, food, and in the case of Palestine, the production of essential military supplies. While Palestine became the most important training ground for British and Allied forces during the war in the Middle East, foreign military presence was also felt in the Kurdish majority districts.²⁵ As a result, the deployment of British forces in the Kurdish districts of Iraq stimulated business, and large engineering contracts related to the construction of fortifications, roads and bridges attracted labour from the most remote villages. By late 1941, there were up to 20,000 Kurdish labourers engaged in road and excavation works in Northern Iraq. The British army's presence also demanded compensation and rent for lands occupied around Kirkuk and Arbil.²⁶ Hiring local inhabitants within the war context pursued two complementary aims: securitization of the British positions, one the one hand, and "gaining" Kurdish support:

The proposed field fortifications would provide employment where it was most needed, and there was no propaganda better than a full belly. Moreover, if suitably handled, these same people might afterwards prove most useful in providing shelter for the Special Officers leading guerrilla forces in the event of a withdrawal... It was the first chance the Kurds had of full employment at a time when the cost of living was rising fast. It was also sound propaganda for the Allied cause.²⁷

This extract points nevertheless to an undesirable effect resulting from Allied presence across the region: a significant expansion in the money supply and the very high rates of inflation that persisted throughout the war. Indeed, a memorandum on the economic situation in Iraq elaborated in 1942 reported that prices of essential commodities had risen on average by 200% to 300% since 1939.²⁸ Although the decline in goods in circulation had had a

²³ TNA, FO 371/27282/E188/11/89. Ministry of Economic Warfare to Foreign Office. London, 4 January 1941; SHAT, 4H-430/2. 'Economic warfare. Turkish borders'. 12 July 1944

²⁴ WILMINGTON, Martin W. *The Middle East Supply Centre*, op. cit., p. 24.

²⁵ SHARFMAN, Daphna. *Palestine in the Second World War*, op. cit., p. 49.

²⁶ TNA, FO 624/25/507-1. Political Adviser. Mosul, 8 December 1941.

²⁷ FIELDHOUSE, David Kenneth (ed.). *Kurds, Arabs, and Britons*, op. cit., pp. 222-3.

²⁸ TNA, FO 624/28. 'The Economic Situation in Iraq'. British Embassy. Baghdad, 1942.

significant impact on inflationist tendencies, British expenditures occupied a central position in accounting for the high inflation in Iraq: between 1941 and 1943 alone, the British spent £61.5 million on military tasks.²⁹

In addition, the potential positive impact of 'British Keynesianism' was unevenly experienced in the Kurdish areas. While Kirkuk and Arbil benefited from Allied forces' presence, more peripheral districts remained foreign to this tenuous economic boom. Furthermore, the escalation of cereals prices encouraged landlords and merchants to try to get benefit from the export opportunities this offered, thus contributing to both the inflationary pressures within Iraq by creating scarcity and even 'creating real hardship, amounting to starvation' in Kurdistan.³⁰

The same ambivalent impact of Allied troops' presence was felt in the Syrian Upper Jazira, particularly in Qamishli, its main economic hub. Thanks to the presence of the Baghdad Railway, combined with the development of trade and contraband activities, by the mid-1930s Qamishli was garnered with warehouses, customs houses and other official buildings that gave Qamishli an urban semblance. The arrival of hundreds of British soldiers and Transjordan forces in northern Syria to monitor the Turkish-Syrian border reinforced the already on-going transformation of Qamishli.

As a result, new recreation venues, such as hotels, cafés, bars and a casino, attracted not only military personnel, but also merchants and local notables from the surrounding small towns. As in Palestine, the sudden increase of foreign soldiers led to some public order issues, such as frequent quarrels between drunken soldiers, and a previously unknown phenomenon in the area, such as prostitution. Most prostitutes arrived in Qamishli as 'artists' (foreign women performers), though, taking advantage of new transport facilities; namely, the Baghdad Railway.³¹

The Jazira was also affected by other Allied plans. Taking its cue from previous French endeavours intended to transform the Jazira into a fertile region throughout the 1920s and 1930s, by 1942 the MESC and the Office des Céréales Planifiables (OCP) worked together to bring significant amounts of machinery for cultivation to the rain-fed areas of the Jazira, as one of the means of helping to alleviate the war-caused food shortages in the Middle East. In order to increase agricultural production, the French launched a series of projects to improve and

²⁹ JACKSON, Ashley. *Persian Gulf Command*, op. cit., pp. 238–9.

³⁰ TRIPP, Charles. *A History of Iraq*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 116.

³¹ PEARSE, Richard. *Three Years in the Levant*, op. cit., p. 109.

expand roads and transportation infrastructures.³² Importantly, the expansion of agriculture in the Jazira alongside the development of infrastructures contributed to foster the integration of this area into Syrian the economy as well as reach its national threshold: statistics and reports about Jazira's production, situation of the anti-locust campaigns, evolution of prices, among others, rendered the Jazira a constitutive part of the Syrian territory, after almost two decades of unfinished national integration.³³

Both agencies acted through the channels of the national and local governments as well as of the large landowners of the Jazira who, conscious of the prevailing high prices of food and thus seeing the possibilities of large revenues, were by and large cooperative:³⁴

Syria was the first country in the Middle East to import agricultural machinery by lend-lease channels. The machinery itself was leased out to carefully chosen farmers and the Tractor Section itself operated on the advice of an Advisory Farm Machine Board, consisting of French, British, American, Syrian and Lebanese Representatives.³⁵

Tellingly, while before the outbreak of WWII, the quantity of agricultural machinery in Syria was negligible, by late 1949 there were 600–700 tractors and 350 combine harvesters in the Jazira, mostly imported during the war. Statistics are also available for the cultivated acreage of the Jazira in 1943 (543,600) and 1946 (783,000), respectively.³⁶ The pro-French newspaper *Le Matin* reported in 1943 that, according to local authorities in Aleppo, the wheat crop outlook was bright and made public statistics showing that the following areas would be able to supply the following quantities to the OCP: Jazira 100,000 tons, Euphrates Valley 200,000, Aleppo area 50,000, other Syrian districts 100,000. Those quantities were stated to be more than enough for the needs of Syrian and the Lebanon for the ensuing year.³⁷

The expansion of cultivated lands in the Syrian Jazira and its alleged economic boom had other unintended effects: namely, the influx of an important wave of immigration, which originated mostly from the Kurdish districts in south-eastern Anatolia.

³² TNA, FO 371/31447/E5513/207/89. Weekly Political Summary, No. 24, 16 September 1942.

³³ TEJEL, Jordi. 'Les territoires de marge de la Syrie mandataire: le mouvement autonomiste de la Haute Jazira, paradoxes et ambiguïtés d'une intégration nationale inachevée (1936–9)', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, Vol. 126 (2009), pp. 205–22.

³⁴ THOMPSON, Elizabeth. 'The Climax and Crisis of the Colonial Welfare State in Syria and Lebanon during World War II', in Steven Heydemann (ed.) *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000, pp. 75–6.

³⁵ TNA, FO 922/187. 'Increased Cereal Production in Northern Syria'. Spears Mission. Beirut, December 1944; TNA, FO 922/187. Section 'Machines'. Qamishli, 8 December 1944.

³⁶ COOKE, Hedley V. *Challenge and Response in the Middle East: The Quest for Prosperity*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951, pp. 167–8.

³⁷ *Le Matin*, 13 May 1943.

Famine and “official corruption” in the Kurdish borderlands

While Turkey remained neutral until the very last stages of WWII, it pursued a policy of full-scale mobilisation during the conflict.³⁸ Although neutrality did avoid the devastation of the country and its occupation by either of the two camps, as it happened during WWI, full-scale mobilisation had profound effects on its economy. True, the conscription of men was partly compensated by women in the agricultural sector. Yet wartime mobilisation had a negative effect on harvests, especially of cereals: 'Turkey's own production will be poor because of the million men she has under permanent mobilization'.³⁹

Like in most countries of the region, prices of foodstuffs climbed rapidly, and the provisioning of the urban areas became a major problem for the government. Like in other neighbouring countries, too, the new policy benefited mostly the middle farmers and big landowners. Notwithstanding, Şevket Pamuk contends that, when compared to the urban counterparts, the rural poor were actually better off, because basic foodstuffs were easily accessible to them.⁴⁰

Reasonable as it might sound, and as I have argued elsewhere,⁴¹ a closer look at the Kurdish borderlands suggests a different view of the wartime experience in the rural areas. While important numbers of peasants travelled to the urban areas for temporary, seasonal work, the rural poor populating Turkey's southern borderlands, mainly Kurds, looked towards Syria as an alternative to hardship. In that regard, the spring of 1943 seems to have been a particular turning point, as thousands of Kurds entered illegally into the Upper Jazira. In most cases, these migrants were depicted as 'miserable individuals', hoping to find a better life in Syria.⁴² Among these clandestine migrants, there were groups of women and children wandering along the border area unaccompanied.⁴³ Meanwhile, local informants reported that dozens of people north of Mardin had died after having eaten grass, exclusively, for a long period of time.⁴⁴

³⁸ PAMUK, Şevket. *Uneven Centuries: Economic Development of Turkey since 1820*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018, pp. 181–2.

³⁹ NARA, RG84, UD2752, Box 8. 'Report on Economic and Financial Developments'. American Legation at Baghdad, 6 August 1942.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 182.

⁴¹ TEJEL, Jordi, *Rethinking State and Border Formation in the Middle East: Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi Borderlands, 1921-1946*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, pp. 277-314.

⁴² CADN, 1SL/1/V/2202. Special Services at Deir ez Zor to General Delegate to the Syrian Government (Damascus), 8 April 1943.

⁴³ CADN, 1SL/1/V/2202. Sûreté Générale at Qamishli, 26 March 1943.

⁴⁴ CADN, 1SL/1/V/2202. Sûreté Générale at Qamishli, 1 April 1943.

Kurdish migration into Syria took such proportions that the authorities of the Mardin vilayet organised a population census to evaluate the number of individuals having left the region since January 1943. According to this census, about 18,000 people had migrated in only three months.⁴⁵ The increase of Kurdish migrants attracted by Jazira's 'prosperity' had inevitably an effect on the Syrian side of the border. On the one hand, some of these migrants provided an unexpected (and cheap) labour force that could play a significant role in the development of Jazira's agriculture production as well as in the road construction plans. On the other hand, the settlement of further Kurdish elements in the Jazira entailed some challenges for the French: the dramatic increase of Muslim elements in the border zone to Christians' detriment. For the Free French, this situation raised the question of what to do with these migrants: should they help or hinder the growth of the Kurdish population in northern Syria?⁴⁶

The answer to this conundrum was not an easy one, for some French officials suspected Turkish authorities of expelling on purpose poor Turkish citizens and even prisoners into Syria.⁴⁷ Moreover, according to some reports, even though Syrian gendarmes captured illegal migrants and brought them to the Turkish border, most of them returned to Syria either voluntary or encouraged by the Turkish authorities.⁴⁸ Therefore, some French officials came to the conclusion that the aim of this policy was twofold: diminishing the burden of poor rural populations in Turkey, on the one hand, and increasing the numbers of Turkish citizens in the Upper Jazira in the event of a territorial annexation of this region, on the other. Arab nationalists in Damascus shared the same concerns as they considered that the already settled Kurdish populations living in the Jazira were generally 'hostile' to the Syrian government.⁴⁹

Despite French and Syrian nationalists' suspicions, it is safe to argue that poverty was the main driver accounting for this sudden migratory movement. Drawing from a remarkable anthropological inquiry, Ramazan Aras also supports this view: 'Contrary to the devastating desperation in Turkish side, people remembered the other side, the French Mandate Syria as prosperous one'.⁵⁰ Thus, according to narratives and stories gathered in the border zone, 'the repeated narrative of *nanê ceyî jî tunebû* (there was not even bread made of barley) to survive indicates the level of scarcity in the region'. Against this backdrop, 'many girls were married to

⁴⁵ CADN, 1SL/1/V/2202. Special Services (Deir ez Zor) to General Delegate to the Syrian Government (Damascus), 8 April 1943.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ CADN, 1SL/1/V/2202. Bulletin of information of the Special Services at Qamishli, 13 March 1943.

⁴⁸ CADN, 1SL/1/V/2202. Special Services at Qamishli, 26 March 1943.

⁴⁹ CADN, 1SL/1/V/2202. Sûreté aux Armées at Qamishli, 20 April 1944.

⁵⁰ ARAS, Ramazan. *The Wall: The Making and Unmaking of the Turkish-Syrian Border*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 70.

a relative or someone from the Syrian side', thereby intensifying relations and kinship between the Kurds despite, or rather, because of the border.⁵¹

Cross-border kinship networks were also central when it comes to contraband of cattle and gold. While the former was closely related to the rise of meat consumption across the region during the war due to the massive presence of Allied forces, the latter was due to a greater demand for gold in Syria than in other Middle Eastern countries, owing to the lack of confidence in the local currency and the changing political conditions in that country.⁵² The situation was not different on the Turkish-Iraqi border; random checks on the road Mosul-Zakho and Mosul-Dohuk only confirmed that smuggling between Turkey and Iraq was equally extensive. Once more, according to British reports, this contraband was based on networks of trust on both sides of the border and a good knowledge of the geography.⁵³ That was the case not only in the rugged mountains separating Turkey and Iraq, but also at Feyshkhabur, where the borders of Turkey, Syria and Iraq meet. Here, traffickers used the waters of the Tigris to cross the border and smuggle their goods without being hassled.⁵⁴ While these policy failures questioned the efficiency of borders as a monitoring institution, smuggling and the informal movement of commodities along the Kurdish borderlands were not limited to state-defined contraband.

First, as in the past, these two phenomena were embedded with what Eric Tagliacozzo frames as the 'political economy of corruption'.⁵⁵ Indeed, Turkish archival sources reveal that contraband, cross-border raids and informal cross-border flows along the Turkish-Iraqi border were partly facilitated by the connivance of border and local authorities on the Turkish side. For one, poverty, isolation and the difficult climatic conditions made the Kurdish provinces the least popular places of appointment for Turkish state employees. As the consequences of WWII were increasingly felt in southern Anatolia, gendarmes' dysfunctional behaviour became the main subject of complaints among the Kurds in the Hakkari and Mardin provinces.⁵⁶ Against this backdrop, some officials suggested certain measures to reverse the situation. In 1943, for instance, First Inspector-General Avni Doğan wrote a long and detailed report where he underscored the corruption and ill treatment of local populations. Concretely, Doğan asked the government to appoint honest and capable people to the Eastern provinces, as well as to improve

⁵¹ Ibid. pp. 70–1.

⁵² TNA, FO 922/317. 'Smuggling from and to Syria'. Controller of Foreign Exchange. 31 January 1945.

⁵³ TNA, FO 624/27. 'Iraq Censorship'. Deputy Controller. Baghdad, 4 November 1942.

⁵⁴ TNA, WO 201/1423. Couldrey to General Staff Intelligence, 9 December 1943.

⁵⁵ TAGLIACOZZO, Eric. 'Smuggling in the Southeast: History and its Contemporary Vectors in an Unbounded Region', *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2002), p. 194.

⁵⁶ Respectively, (Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi, Ankara) BCA, 490.01.998.856.1, p. 51; BCA, 490.01.512.2005.1, 14 February 1944, p. 4.

their salaries in order to eradicate ‘bad practices’ such as theft and accepting bribes from smugglers.⁵⁷

Official corruption was mirrored in Syria, too. In a secret note drafted by Lieutenant-General Holmes from the Ninth Army to the Free French, the British official lamented that the latter showed little concern in the face of the widespread phenomenon of corruption among French, Syrian and British personnel serving in the border area:

You consider that corruption and contraband are a sort of local hobby and that it is worthless for us to attempt to end with local customs and traditions. I will not debate on this ... Nevertheless, I consider that corruption among officials who facilitate the contraband of drugs and arms should be addressed ... Our soldiers are threatened by either the inaction of the Syrian Gendarmerie or the light punishments inflicted to our soldiers: sabotage, theft of arms or military material, corruption of English officials. It is not a matter of isolated instances, but rather frequent cases in all our sub-sections.⁵⁸

The situation was similar in Iraqi Kurdistan, where some names of British officials were 'on the lips of many' because they were 'getting bribes on a very large scale, on dealing with contractors'.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Drawing both on the work of social historians interested in how the war was experienced 'at home' and on the field of borderland studies, the article argues for a reassessment of the 'peripheral' status of the Kurdish borderlands during the conflict. On the one hand, the MESC intervention in the Middle East as a whole had significant side effects (inflation, competition, massive slaughter of cattle, etc.), combined with a series of natural disasters in the Kurdish borderlands, which scholars should not underestimate. On the other hand, the Kurds were not mere observers of these dynamics. As in the interwar period, they tested the limits of regional and Western states by pursuing their interests, which sometimes overlapped and sometimes clashed with those of the states. Thus, during the Second World War, the diversion of global and regional flows of goods and commodities to land routes - railways and roads - and the role played by local populations in either accelerating or, on the contrary, slowing them down, led

⁵⁷ BAYRAK, Mehmet. *Açık-Gizli/Resmi-Gayriresmi Kürdoloji Belgeleri*. Ankara: Öz-Ge Yayınları, 1994, p. 253.

⁵⁸ SHAT, 4H 311-4. 'Very Secret', 4 July 1943

⁵⁹ TNA, FO 624/27. Political Adviser (Mosul), 1 July 1942.

to an increasing entanglement of local, regional and global economies, as well as increased contacts between Kurdish inhabitants and a variety of state and imperial actors.

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