

Imperial Control, Local Knowledge, and Administrators in British Iraq

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What explains variation in the appointment patterns of imperial administrators? After capturing Mesopotamia from the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the British established a client monarchy as well as a state, Iraq, to facilitate their control over the region. This state had its own imperial bureaucracy, with local administrators assigned to administrative divisions around the newly captured territory. These bureaucrats were crucial to the British and Iraqi attempt to secure the territory, provide law and safety, and tax its inhabitants. A review of official records of their appointments, however, shows staffing did not follow one logic applied uniformly across Iraqi territory. Appointments were not made solely on an ethnic basis: the British-Iraqi system neither only matched administrators' ethnicities to their districts, nor appointed members of a single ethnicity to all posts. Appointments were also not made solely based on accrued expertise in particular contexts: at times and in certain areas, administrators moved between posts governing similar human and physical geographies; in others, they transferred between wildly different ethnic, sociocultural, and geographical features. And at times, new appointments were not made at all: administrators instead stayed in their posts indefinitely. What drove the variation in these practices?

There is a growing literature on bureaucratic staffing practices, ranging from work on staffing of the security apparatus (Scharpf and Gläsel 2020, Gläsel et al 2024; Mattingly 2024); to staffing of local bureaucrats in states and empires (see eg. Peng 2022; Magiya 2022; Hassan 2020; Carter and Hassan 2021). Much of this literature in some way relates to the loyalty versus competence tradeoff in state (and often authoritarian) bureaucratic management. Under this dilemma, autocrats, when appointing bureaucrats, must balance between loyalty, on the one hand, and competence, on the other. Loyalty allows authoritarians to protect themselves against possible challenges to their power: as Svolik (2012), Greitens (2016), and others have illustrated, authoritarians face threats from within the regime to their power. The literature suggests different ways that authoritarian leaders evaluate this loyalty, such as co-ethnicity (Greitens 2016; Hassan 2020) or shared past experiences (eg. Mattingly 2024). But loyalty does not necessarily increase in competence, meaning that autocrats' attempts to protect themselves from internal threats can leave their bureaucracies staffed by incompetent individuals (Scharpf and Gläsel 2020). Indeed, the dilemma often posits a direct tradeoff between these two qualities, with loyalty often decreasing in competence, and with autocrats forced to make a direct choice between the two.

There exist, however, two major deficits in our understanding of these staffing practices. The first is that, despite the growing literature on imperial rule and state capacity, imperial bureaucrats themselves still remain relatively understudied in the literature. Furthermore, partially due to data availability issues, bureaucratic staffing and methods of authoritarian control more generally remain understudied in the Middle East. Combining the two problems, there is a serious dearth of political science literature regarding bureaucratic staffing in the imperial Middle East, and on systems of imperial control in the Middle East in general. (For examples from other disciplines, see, for example: Satia 2008; Thomas 2008; Berda 2022).

Imperial Iraq provides a strong case for the study of these dynamics. Following their capture of the three Ottoman Mesopotamian provinces in World War I, the British created a new state of Iraq. Granted to them by the League of Nations as a "mandate," the British were ostensibly responsible for helping the Iraqis to build a self-governing, self-determined polity.

Instead, under this mandate system, the British clung to Iraq because of its strategic position and possible oil reserves, running it as an imperial holding through the cooperation of a British-installed constitutional monarchy. Even so, during and after the Mandate, Iraq faced a series of internal and external security crises.

Iraqi administrative regions varied greatly by demographics. Iraq was ethnically diverse: while much of the country was Arab, it contained significant minorities of Kurds, Assyrians, Turkmen, and other ethnicities. It was also religiously diverse, in that it contained Sunnis, Shia, Christians, Jews, and other religious minorities such as Yazidis. Lastly, it was diverse in terms of social organization. In deserts and areas with nomads, life was organized around tribal or familial ties. Rural farming areas were also largely organized by tribal custom and landholding practices, though large landowners had begun to encroach on these systems in the Ottoman era. In cities, especially large cities, tribal ties were at times less salient, and the ethnic makeup was more diverse. Any attempt to govern Iraq by appointing appropriate administrators to these divisions had to contend with this extreme diversity.

Data from Iraq's official Government Gazettes allow us to see how the central imperial power used official appointments to manage these dynamics. These Gazettes contain a complete record of all local administration appointments including and above the level of the *nahiya*, or collection of towns. First, we can see when the imperial state engaged in administrative shuffling or shakeups during moments of crisis (or at other times, likely to prevent administrators from forming rival bases of power). Second, we can track patterns in appointments within and across ethno-religious populations. That is, it allows us to compare when the imperial state prioritized appointing and promoting administrators *within* certain areas, allowing them to build expertise in overseeing and governing particular types of people and social organization; and when it promoted administrators *across* these areas, prioritizing loyalty built through steady service in the core of the territory.

How did these appointment patterns vary? The paper focuses on the choice of administrators based on context-specific knowledge. It is assumed that imperial decision makers prize contextual knowledge accrued through experience governing and administering territory. When found in administrators, this knowledge increases job competency. The concept of contextual knowledge fits James Scott's understanding of *legibility* (Scott 2020). Imperial administrators without contextual knowledge, such as knowledge of an area's language and customs, can struggle to successfully administer the area, collect taxes, and ensure security—a problem exacerbated if the area is ethnically diverse (Magiya 2020). While such confusion impairs an administrator's ability to fulfill his or her role, it is possibly overcome by developing expertise related directly to the local context of the area being administrated. This form of understanding, what Scott (borrowing from Detienne and Vernant) terms “practical knowledge” or *metis*, “represents a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment” (Scott 2020, 313).

In the context of Iraq, this knowledge was directly linked to Iraq's ethnic, religious, and social-structural diversity, sketched in the previous section. Areas varied based on the density of population and its accessibility, as Iraqis lived in a dizzying array of environments: dense and diverse cities, deserts, hills and mountains, swamps, and river-fed farmland (Sluglett 2007; Satia 2008). The Iraqi tribal system was notoriously complex and required local knowledge to navigate its thickets of family and loyalty ties (and to realize whether or not these ties were, in fact, still relevant) (Solzoff 2009). Some areas of Iraq were largely inhabited by nomads with strong tribal systems; others by farming *fellahin*, whose ties to their tribes and sheikhs varied in structure and

intensity. Iraqis also varied based on their ethnicity, with Kurds inhabiting much of the north, Arabs in the south, minorities of Yazidis along the desert border with Syria, and Iraqi Turkmen scattered in towns and villages; and religion, with Iraqis counting themselves as Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, Yazidi, Jewish, and a variety of Christian sects.

Thus, the appointing body had to evaluate a potential administrator based on his experiential knowledge of local context. Such accrued experience was hard won, and administrators varied in the degree to which they possessed it. Imperial central decision makers thus had to choose, when appointing an official, between appointing an official with long experience in the kind of area he was to oversee, versus appointing an official with little relevant experience.

The paper presents three claims. First, the paper illustrates how the British-Hashemite imperial state used rotation, or regular movement of administrators from one post to another, as a means to prevent local administrators from amassing power within a particular administrative division. It also finds that the imperial state preserved these administrators' hard-won local knowledge by rotating them within similar administrative divisions: specifically, divisions that resembled one another in their ethnic makeup and social-political organization. Lastly, exploiting the 1929 global economic downturn, it demonstrates that the imperial power valued loyalty over local knowledge when making appointments during economic and political crises that undermined central control.

To evaluate these claims, the paper presents a new geocoded dataset with appointment and biographical information about all British and Iraqi administrators at the province, county, and township levels. Data regarding official appointments are taken from the 'Iraq Government Gazette to test these hypotheses. The 'Iraq Government Gazette was (and is) an official newspaper regularly published by the Iraqi state apparatus. Beginning in 1921, it was published roughly bi-weekly. They are also taken from capsule biographies produced by both the British and Iraqis written in both English and in Arabic.