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A Moving Target, the Usual Suspects and (Maybe) a Smoking Gun: The Problem of Pinning Blame in Modern Genocide[1]

ABSTRACT In 1933 the army of the nascent Iraqi state launched an exterminatory attack on members of the Assyrian community who had fled to Iraq during the First World War. 'The Assyrian affair' which at the time sent shock-waves around the world has now been largely forgotten. But an examination of its origins and causation reveals much about the nature and pattern of modern genocide. Levene argues that typecasting genocide as the outcome of prejudice, racism or even xenophobia, while these may be significant ingredients, proves to be insufficient as a comprehensive explanation. Rather, these factors need to be analysed within the context of an emerging international system of nation-states. This itself may be a factor in helping to catalyse the most extreme and radically ideological responses, especially from new and untried national elites seeking to overcome perceived obstacles to their state's development and genuine independence.

KEYWORDS *Arab, Assyrian, Assyrian affair, ethnic, genocide, Hakkari, imperialism, Iraq, Kurd, nationalism, nation-state, prejudice, racism, Turkey*

In the early hours of 11 August 1933, a motorized machine-gun detachment of the newly independent Iraqi state entered the Assyrian village of Summayl, in the Dohuk district of the predominantly Kurdish northern part of the country, and proceeded to massacre systematically, in cold blood, its male population, either by machine-gunning or bludgeoning them to death.[2] In addition to 305 men and boys—the entire male population—four women and six children were killed. Many of the surviving women were raped on following nights.[3] For several days prior to this massacre Assyrians, mostly men, had been shot out of hand or hunted down and killed. At Dohuk itself, some eighty men, in batches of eight or ten, were taken away in trucks, turned out and machine-gunned. Two nights after Summayl, another army massacre was planned at Alqosh but aborted.[4] Kurdish irregulars mobilized by the civil

1 This paper was delivered as the opening keynote address at the conference, 'Racism and responsibility: 30 years of *Patterns of Prejudice*', London, 20-2 December 1997.
2 R. S. Stafford, *The Tragedy of the Assyrians* (London: G. Allen & Unwin 1935), 173-5.
3 Ibid., 176-7.
4 Ibid., 168-9, 177.

PATTERNS OF PREJUDICE, vol. 33, no. 4, 1999/0031-322X/3-24/011062
SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi)

authorities participated in the killings. Sixty-four Assyrian villages were looted and destroyed both by them and by Arab tribesmen. The local police stood by. In the following weeks the troops of the northern command, the leading perpetrators in the actions, received a rapturous reception in victory parades in Baghdad, Kirkuk and Mosul. In the last, triumphal arches were constructed on which decorated melons stained with blood and with daggers stuck in them were intended to represent the slain Assyrians.[5] There were celebratory speeches from the Iraqi crown prince and other dignitaries, and decorations and promotion for Colonel Bekr Sidqi, the officer commanding, as well as some of his subordinates.

These events were monitored and reported to London by Lieutenant-Colonel Stafford, the British 'man on the spot', in his official capacity as administrative inspector for the northern Mosul region.[6] Stafford made it clear that the massacre at Summayl had been no rogue attack perpetrated on the orders of a junior officer, as one later revisionist account was to claim,[7] but was premeditated, without military objective—despite disturbances involving Assyrian levies in the previous weeks—and 'definitely decided' upon by the Iraqi army with a view to the Assyrians being 'as far as possible . . . exterminated'.[8] Stafford also thought that the civil authorities were closely involved then and in the subsequent attempted cover-up, although he did not go so far as a later commentator, Samir al-Khalil, who charged that it had been planned with the connivance of Interior Minister Hikmet Suleyman.[9] Nonetheless, Stafford's more contemporary observations, published as *The Tragedy of the Assyrians* in 1935, and other more immediate and sensationalist accounts caused shock-waves which reverberated both in and well beyond the Middle East. In Zionist circles there was particular concern, the issue leading Weizmann to remark on the Assyrians' fate in his 1939 address to the London conference on Palestine,[10] while George Antonius, in his famous *The Arab Awakening* the previous year, was sufficiently outraged to condemn the Iraqi action as 'a shameful blot on the pages of Arab history'.[11] The League of Nations, though increasingly powerless and ignored, was equally alarmed. So too was the international jurist, Raphael Lemkin, *en route* to becoming coiner of the term

5 Ibid., 201.

6 Under the terms of the 1932 treaty between Britain, the former mandatory power, and Iraq, Britain maintained control over many aspects of Iraqi domestic as well as foreign and defence policy. This included a monopoly on all experts and advisors. See Reeva S. Simon, *Iraq between the Two World Wars. The Creation and Implementation of a Nationalist Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press 1986), 57.

7 Khaldun S. Husri, 'The Assyrian affair of 1933', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 5, 1974, 346-7.

8 Stafford, 168.

9 Samir al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear. The Inside Story of Saddam's Iraq* (London: Hutchinson 1989), 166-75 (cf. Stafford, 170-1).

10 David Ben-Gurion, *My Talks with Arab Leaders*, trans. from Hebrew Aryeh Rubinstein and Misha Louvish (Jerusalem: Keter Books 1972), 211.

11 George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening. The Story of the Arab National Movement* (London: Hamish Hamilton 1938), 365.

'genocide' and later chief political lobbyist for the United Nations Convention intended to outlaw such acts.[12]

All this may seen a little bewildering today, as the so-called 'Assyrian affair' is hardly remembered or, indeed, known at all. And it is easy enough to see why. From our late twentieth-century vantage-point it is just another instance in a familiar litany of modern atrocity, a rather small fry at that, even supposing that we accept the Assyrians' own, probably highly inflated, estimates of 2,000-3,000 dead.[13] So why is it important to revisit it? First, while clearly dwarfed by the Holocaust and other major recognized examples of genocide, the ephemerality of the 1933 killings takes on a rather different complexion when put in the context of repeated murderous onslaughts on the Assyrians, particularly those who came from the mountainous Hakkari region of what is now the south-eastern extremity of Turkey. This community, numbering in the nineteenth century no more than 50,000 souls, suffered massacres perpetrated by neighbouring Kurds in the 1840s in which possibly as many as one-fifth of their entire population were slaughtered.[14] Later, in 1915, the Ottoman state threw its full available military weight against Hakkari with every intention of exterminating it. The subsequent *en masse* emigration—of those who could get away—also led to mass death, this time mostly through cold and starvation.[15] The survivors sought refuge in Persia, first with Russian, then British forces. At the end of the First World War the latter intended to house them temporarily in camps in the former Ottoman vilayet (province) of Mosul, earmarked by the British for inclusion in their newly created terrritory of Iraq. The possibility of permanent Assyrian domicile in the area was reinforced by the Assyrians' attempts to return to Hakkari which were met by violent Turkish evictions and further massacres, notably in 1924. Having moved ostensibly out of the line of Ottoman or Turkish fire it was, thus, Iraqi guns which were pointed at them in 1933. This was in fact only the first in a long line of violent confrontations with the Iraqi state, culminating in the infamous Anfal campaigns in 1988, when Assyrian villages were part of a much broader genocidal onslaught on the region.[16]

12 Mark Mazower, 'After Lemkin: genocide, the holocaust and history', *Jewish Quarterly*, no. 156, winter 1994/5, 5.

13 Stafford's own estimate is 600 (Stafford, 179). See also Husri, 353.

14 See John Joseph, *The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbours: A Study of Western Influences on Their Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1961), 62-4; Martin van Bruinessen, *Aghas, Shaiks and State. The Social and Political Structure of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books 1990), 25, 180.

15 Joseph, 135, estimates that perhaps one-third of the Hakkari population died during the exodus and the vicissitudes of the subsequent First World War.

16 For full details, see Middle East Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds* (New York: Human Rights Watch 1993); David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris 1996), ch. 17; Martin van Bruinessen, 'Genocide of the Kurds', in Israel W. Charny (ed.), *Genocide, A Critical Bibliographical Review. Volume 3: The Widening Circle of Genocide* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction 1994), 165-91; Vera Beaudin Saeedpour, 'Establishing state motives for genocide: Iraq and the Kurds', in Helen Fein (ed.), *Genocide Watch* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1992), 59-69.

Something about the Assyrians seems clearly to have inspired both their neighbours and the states within which they dwelt to kill them. Yet even this has to be seen as part of a bigger picture. In 1915 the Assyrians were a subsidiary target for the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP)-led Ottoman state, whose principal object of enmity was the Armenians. Similarly, in the late 1980s, the Ba'athist Anfal campaign was directed primarily against the region's dominant Kurdish community. Assyrians, in other words, were just one of a number of peoples who suffered genocidal killings in what might arguably be considered a zone of genocide, albeit with the dubious privilege of being at its very epicentre.[17] In fact, a direct line can be traced, argues one historian, from Summayl to the single best-known massacre of Kurds, at Halabja, in March 1988.[18] One might reply that Bekr Sidqi, who would become Iraq's first military dictator, can hardly be compared with Saddam for sheer ruthlessness, or for the scale of his murderous undertakings, but sufficient similarity surely exists to ask legitimately why a society like Iraq has been so prone to throwing up brutal, authoritarian leader-figures with genocidal proclivities. Moreover, the fact that such behaviour has been repeatedly directed at minority communities demands not only an explanation but also the wherewithal to reach a verdict on what, or who, is guilty for it.

Rounding up the suspects

What then do we do? Draw up a shortlist of possible suspects: prejudice, intolerance, ethnic hatred, racism, xenophobia, ideology, nationalism? For good measure we might wish to add colonialism, or imperialism, to this list. (Except that we have a slight problem in that the Assyrians were massacred by a post-colonial state.) But whether we include it or not, we already have here the makings of a problem. Do we put all the suspects together, as if we were making a soup, the question of greater or lesser degrees of guilt being put to one side in favour of a potentially rather bland *mélange*? Or do we accept that, while all our suspects are ingredients, they need to be added, as in a recipe, in a particular order, though perhaps with some special surprise ingredient to give our soup its distinctive, even pungent, flavour? Or should we drop our culinary metaphor altogether, in favour of a routine criminal investigation, seeking to eliminate those suspects from our enquiry who have firm, watertight alibis, charging those against whom we have sufficient evidence as accessories to the crime, while nailing one ultimately guilty party?

While scholars of genocide are naturally cautious about delivering forthright and unequivocal verdicts some have been willing to discern evidence for

17 See Mark Levene, 'Creating a modern "zone of genocide": the impact of nation and state formation on Eastern Anatolia, 1878-1923', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 12, 1998, 393-433, for a fuller exposition of this thesis.

18 Ofra Bengio, 'Faysal's vision of Iraq: a retrospect', in Asher Susser and Aryeh Shmuelevitz (eds), *The Hashemites in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of the late Professor Uriel Dann* (London: Frank Cass 1995), 139.

prime suspect or suspects. Leo Kuper, a front-runner in the field, was particularly strong on the ethnic issue, arguing that ethnically-stratified nation-states have been particularly prone to genocide.[19] Barbara Harff and Ted Gurr, in their regular surveys of genocide, have also been inclined in this direction, though not exclusively so.[20] Helen Fein has cast her net considerably wider, though again noting the persistence of the ethnic card.[21] If, however, the comparative scholars remain cautious and certainly far from unanimous in either their approaches or conclusions, in the somewhat less arcane world of educational practice it often seems to be taken for granted that there are primary culprits. The Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance, for instance, seeks to educate the young about the wellsprings of the Holocaust by highlighting prejudice, racial intolerance and xenophobia as part of a proposed antidote against any future occurrence, and to enable its audience to spot the symptoms early, and learn about and practise tolerance. The Spielberg Foundation's *raison d'être*, judging by the film of its work shown immediately after the first viewing on British television of *Schindler's List*, seems to be very similar.[22] Indeed, it is often taken as so utterly self-evident that racial intolerance and prejudice are primarily to blame not only for the Holocaust but for other instances of genocide that to dissent, however slightly, from this view can be regarded as not simply wrong-headed, but utterly irresponsible.

Here, there *is* a genuine dilemma. To argue that these suspects may not be the ultimate key to understanding genocide might play into the hands of xenophobes, racists and Holocaust-deniers. In the present political climate in Britain moreover—where physical attacks on members of Asian and black communities remain not uncommon,[23] where the recent arrival of Romany refugees from the Czech Republic and Slovakia led to an outpouring of often naked racist vilification in the press, mirrored, if not in the language, then certainly in the letter of government measures preventing further Romany immigration,[24] and where the death of an overt political racist, Enoch Powell,

19 Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1981), 17-18, 57-83. Also his *The Pity of It All: Polarisation of Racial and Ethnic Relations* (London: Duckworth 1977).

20 See Barbara Harff and Ted Robert Gurr's most recent survey, 'Victims of the state: genocides, politicides and group repression from 1945 to 1995', in Albert J. Jongman (ed.), *Contemporary Genocides: Causes, Cases, Consequences* (Den Haag: Pioom 1996), 33-58. Also their *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics* (Boulder, CO, San Fransisco and Oxford: Westview Press 1994).

21 Helen Fein, 'Accounting for genocide after 1945: theories and some findings', *International*

provoked not so much obloquy as fulsome tribute from many establishment figures as his body lay in Westminster Abbey[25]—it may seem even perverse to be sceptical. Responsibility demands that racial violence and discrimination, whatever form they may take and from wherever they emanate, must be actively countered. However, that does not in itself *necessarily* lead to the conclusion that patterns of prejudice, either on their own or in tandem with other factors, can always explain a phenomenon which is, after all, archetypally an act of state, requiring a full state apparatus including a monopoly, or near monopoly, of the means of violence to carry it out actively. Or, to pose the problem from a different perspective, supposing we could educate people in modern society to be tolerant, unprejudiced and to love their neighbour whatever their creed, colour or background, would we have eliminated, thereby, the wellsprings of genocide?

If what is being proposed, then, is a cautious re-examination of some basic assumptions, I take my cue from an eminent source with considerable first-hand experience of the subject. Professor W≥adis≥aw Bartoszewski, as well as a recent Polish foreign secretary, was also in the 1930s and 1940s a close observer of Polish antisemitism in its various manifestations and a co-founder of Zegota, the underground organization which sought to assist Jews during the Holocaust. He has never denied that antisemitism was a significant ingredient in Polish-Jewish relations. Nevertheless, his own caution as to the degree to which such intolerance and antipathy add up to an explanation of the Holocaust is implicit in the following statement:

> Alienation does not always have to be synonymous with enmity, as a lot of people in New York consider the Puerto Ricans to be foreign, but do not kill them. Many people do not like blacks but do not kill them. A large number of people can be antagonistic towards another national group but it does not mean there has to be some ultimate reckoning. But it is bad. It is always bad, because dislike and alienation are the beginning of a far-reaching dislike, perhaps prejudice, perhaps hate. That is bad, but it does not have to all be thrown into the same pot, as it is not the same.[26]

Homing in on an Assyrian target

It is with this statement in mind that I propose to interrogate some of our Assyrian affair suspects. First, however, a few more words about the people themselves, including an apology, given that the term 'Assyrian' is just plain wrong, owing everything to nineteeth-century western orientalism and nothing to the community it purports to describe. The correct appellation, at least the one the people in question themselves traditionally used, is 'Suraya', i.e. Syrians. Their use of this name does not mean that they understood their identity in ethnic terms or as originating in a place called Syria but as a reli-

25 John Ezard, 'Powell to lie in abbey but not in state, critics told', *Guardian*, 16 February 1998.
26 Quoted in Antony Polonsky (ed.), *'My Brother's Keeper?' Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust* (London and New York: Routledge 1990), 227.

gious creed.[27] To outsiders they were more commonly known as Nestorians, after the patriarch and fifth-century excommunicate Nestorius, though just to confuse the picture they were also sometimes called Chaldeans. Considerably later, this term became more exclusively associated with the Uniate branch of the Nestorian church which was reconciled with Rome.

In the early Christian centuries there were Suraya all over the Near East. Persecution as schismatics by the Byzantines as well as Mongol invasions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were chiefly responsible for their near-liquidation, though some small communities survived in the plains of Mosul and further east in the Urmiyah region of Persia. After these catastrophes, however, their main concentration was in the mountain fastnesses of Hakkari where a largely self-contained community remained until the nineteenth century, to a considerable degree isolated and insulated from the outside world.[28] This on its own makes the Hakkari Suraya unusually interesting from an ethnographic standpoint. Extremely hardy—they had to be, given the climatic and physical vicissitudes of this high mountainous region—they lived a pastoral existence, largely free of the lowly serf or tenant status of their co-religionists in the plains, and were divided into four fairly endogamous clans who nevertheless owed absolute allegiance to their hereditary patriarch, the Mar Sham'un. Thus, one might say that, while they had almost nothing in common with a nineteenth-century European Jewry then increasingly encountering modernity, a prosaic comparison might be made with the ancient Israelites. (The Assyrians, after all, spoke Syriac, a form of Aramaic which had been spoken throughout the biblical Near East, and defended their mountain Eden with an armed belligerence which made some western visitors immediately assume that they were in the presence of the lost tribes.[29])

By that time the Hakkari Assyrians had long been subjects of the Ottoman sultan and, as Christian ones at that, were not supposed to be armed at all but thoroughly servile as befitted *dhimmi* according to the tenets of a dominant Islam.[30] Here one might say that prejudice was in operation in clear political, social and cultural terms, Muslims having the status of full members of the Ottoman polity while Christians and Jews were both inferiors and, in a critical sense, outsiders, entitled—certainly—to its protection but not to its embrace. But it is doubtful whether this religiously sanctioned stigma in itself carried the seeds of a genocidal violence between either Ottoman state and Assyrian community or between the latter and its immediate neighbours. On the contrary, one might argue that, within its own terms, it fulfilled a rather

27 Joseph, 11-12 (this is the main source here on their social anthropology and religious history).
28 Stafford, 13.
29 Joseph, 16-17, notes that even in 1869, i.e. after the first wave of major massacres at Hakkari, a nearby British consul reported that the Mar Sham'un could count on 13,000 able-bodied warriors.
30 See Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi. Jews and Christians under Islam*, trans. from the French by David Maisel, Paul Fenton and David Littman (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and London: Associated University Presses 1985).

positive social function, providing clear and agreed boundaries between communities: clear because they were enshrined in the state-sanctioned millet system; agreed because the system enabled each Christian or Jewish millet to get on with the business of administering its own communal affairs without interference from the state or from each other.[31] One might go further and say that the system's emphasis on a form of decentralized self-rule was particularly beneficial to the internal cohesion of the Assyrians. Technically the Mar Sham'un had no specific authorization from the Porte (the central Ottoman government) to operate a separate millet.[32] In practice, not only did he do so but even the support given to his quasi-independent status by the Hakkari menfolk's bearing of arms—in utter contravention of the terms of their *dhimmi* status—was conveniently overlooked.

Of course, the millet system was rigid, hierarchical, patriarchal, firmly oligarchic and hardly palatable to late twentieth-century secular sensibilities. But, while it kept members of each community in—whether they liked it or not—and outsiders out, its ground-rules enabled Muslims, Christians and Jews to live alongside one another, often for generations, without killing each other. Prejudice, in other words, operating through a defined system of communal boundaries, might arguably have greatly contributed to the long-term stability and inter-communal peace of a recognizably multicultural empire while, at a local level, providing a precondition upon which good, even symbiotic, ethnic relations between Assyrians and their primarily Muslim Kurdish neighbours were sustained. Indeed, the paradox which confronts historians of the empire is that things overall started going dismally wrong when, in the mid-ninteenth century, it attempted to dispense with the system in favour of a creed-blind and supposedly level playing field founded on the notion of common Ottoman citizenship. If the implicit proposal here seems to be that we need to broaden the scope of our enquiry to consider entirely new suspects, this admittedly can only add to the frustrating puzzle of why, in 1843, our supposedly 'friendly' neighbouring Kurds threw themselves on the Hakkari Assyrians with murderous intent. I propose to approach the conundrum indirectly by interrogating another of our more obvious suspects: racism.

The introduction of European racial narratives

I take racism to be associated with the utilization of nineteenth-century ideas, both before and after the Darwinian watershed, in which the observation of biologically inherited characteristics in nature is applied to human groups in

31 In the traditional Ottoman system non-Muslims were technically members of one of three millets: Orthodox, Gregorian or Jewish. However, the millet system expanded considerably in the nineteenth century. See Kemal H. Karpat, 'Millets and nationality: the roots of the incongruity of nation and state in the post-Ottoman state', in Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire. The Functioning of a Plural Society* (New York: Holmes & Meier 1982), i.141-70.

32 While the Chaldeans achieved millet status in 1844 there is some dispute as to whether the Mar Sham'un achieved the same. See Stafford, 20 and Joseph, 33-4.

order to argue that these characteristics predetermine, among other things, an individual's brain power and hence intelligence, beauty, physical strength, creativity, as well as other social and cultural attributes. For the racist, Darwinian scientific emphasis on genetic mutation as the creative dynamo in natural evolution is practically dispensed with in favour of a concentration on a historical record which allegedly proves distinctions between more advanced groups—or more specifically races—and those considered backward or even degenerate. The elevation of this race theory to a position of accepted scientific wisdom within Nazi state policy and its inculcation as the central tenet of its educational, medical and social programme is today assumed by many scholars to bear *a*, if not *the*, primary guilt for that state's exterminatory drive against Jews, Roma and other peoples.[33] Racism has also been viewed as bearing primary responsibility for the extermination or subjugation of native peoples in the Americas, Africa and elsewhere, for colonial slavery and for the perpetuation of white dominance both in domestic and imperial contexts, in some instances through to the present day.[34]

However, the immediate problem here is that racial categorization was neither part of Assyrian self-understanding nor in any sense relevant to the traditional discourse between the diverse peoples of the Ottoman empire. This is not to deny that in the nineteenth century a quasi-racial narrative *did* inject itself into these relationships. But its source was very clearly external, namely incoming westerners. The Assyrians' particular misfortune was one of historical conjuncture: being 'discovered' by Anglican and American Protestant missionaries, in the 1830s, at almost the same time that French and British archaeologists were unearthing Nineveh and pontificating on its meaning. Modern ethnographic wisdom considers the Hakkari people to be of mixed Persian, Kurdish, Aramean and possibly more ancient origins.[35] By contrast, Victorian archaeologists and travel writers were much more interested in the figures on monument bas-reliefs at Nineveh whose physiognomy, they proclaimed, displayed an extraordinary affinity with the Hakkari people. Seizing on Nestorian references to themselves as Chaldeans, i.e. from a geographical region which embraced ancient Mesopotamia, as well on the very term 'Suraya' itself which, of course, sounded like 'Assyrian', they concluded that the Hakkari community must be direct lineal descendants of that civilization.[36] When, in 1886, Lambeth Palace, in its infinite wisdom, sent a permanent mission to the Mar Sham'un's flock it was thus called 'The Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission to the Assyrian Christians'.[37] But well before that time

33 See, for examples, Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State. Germany 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991), and George L. Mosse, *Towards the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (New York 1978).

34 See, for example, David Stannard, *American Holocaust. Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (London 1992).

35 Joseph, 21.

36 Ibid., 8.

37 Ibid., 13.

missionaries had convinced themselves that the Assyrians were not only specially blessed but would take a commanding role in what one American zealot referred to as the 'spiritual regeneration of the east'.[38]

This was hardly the only example of a wilful nineteenth-century misreading of a group's origins in order to fit some preconceived European notion. Ethnographic interest in the Tutsi of Rwanda and Burundi, when they were 'discovered' a little later, provided them as well with a lineage, in their case Hamitic but probably with a touch of Aryan, which not only allegedly explained why a group of tall and beautiful pastoralists were masters over a short and servile Hutu peasantry, but ensured that they would be taken on as the stewards and assistants by German and later Belgian colonial rulers.[39] This European racial definition undoubtedly fed into the animosities which were eventually to lead to Africa's most appalling genocide. The paradox is that in both this and our case the racism was actually, at the time, advantageous to the peoples concerned. Even more so for the Assyrians than for the Tutsi given that, while the latter were already entrenched as the aristocracy in two kingdoms, the former were, in Stafford's words, as 'savage and uncivilised' as their Kurdish neighbours,[40] and, under other circumstances, would have gone on being treated by Europeans as little more than uncouth exotics. Instead, they found themselves being fêted, schooled, the subject of particular attention and encouragement, even to the point of being told that they were going to lead a return to some golden past. No wonder that many reports from this period describe them as haughty,[41] or that later, when many of their menfolk acted as levies for the British in Iraq, they simply mimicked British racial contempt for the Iraqi soldiery and were accused in return of possessing an overwhelming conceit.[42]

At least here we can begin to see why the Assyrian position eventually became untenable. Ethnic conflict in Anatolia was not, as the French foreign minister, Hanotaux, thought in the 1890s, 'one of those thousand incidents of struggle between Christians and Muslims',[43] but the direct result of external destabilization. What catalysed 'the first major conflict between native Christians and Moslems in modern times',[44] leading to the massacres of 1843, was, in the first instance, the role of Protestant missionaries from the United States who, having built a mission at Hakkari—locally referred to as 'the fortress'—promised to support the Mar Sham'un against Muslim oppression, followed by the intervention of Anglican missionaries who seemed, at least to the Mar

38 Ibid., 44.
39 Edith Sanders, '"The Hamitic hypothesis": its origin and functions in time perspective', *Journal of African History*, vol. 10, 1969, 521-32.
40 Stafford, 12.
41 Joseph, 54.
42 Husri, 165; Antonius, 365, similarly refers to their 'ostentatious aloofness'.
43 Quoted in Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books 1995), 78.
44 Joseph, 64.

Sham'un, to up the ante, and fially his own unsurprising decision to take all this at face value and concludehat he must indeed be important and that, if he ignored his local Kurdish ovlords in order to enhance his status and prestige with the Porte, he would lve the backing of some apparently very powerful allies. It was again unfortnate that he made his move at a juncture when the Ottoman state, itself bucling under the strain of Great Power interference—especially from the Rusians—had decided to face up to the challenge with a belated effort to modenize itself, plans for which included greater centralization and, accordingly, the removal of the quasi-independent Kurdish emirates in the East. Undoubtedly, the Assyrians would have found themselves caught in the interstices of this much larger and rather complicated struggle whatever they had done. But the fact that they had chosen to turn their backs on their Kurdish allies, to whom they were tied by traditions of obligation and good neighbourliness, and instead ostentatiously align themselves with foreign 'infidels' ensured that the reaction against them would be an ugly one.

No reminder is needed of how that ugliness works itself out in practice. Testimony from Rwanda and Bosnia is persuasive that the propensity to kill, rape and commit unspeakable atrocities is not the exclusive prerogative of some anonymous rent-a-crowd but can be committed by neighbours who have year in and year out worked, played and drunk beer together, brought up children alongside each other and extended hospitality to each other in their homes. The point at issue here is not that people who know each other are capable of doing such things—*they are*—or that there may be latent antipathies when neighbours have different ethnic or religious backgrounds. Rather, it is what turns a latent and otherwise dormant potential for violence into an active blood-lust, one which, in our case, judging from the baying of the Mosul crowds, was still being generated almost a hundred years after the first massacres at Hakkari. Which brings us to a consideration of a couple more shifty but closely related suspects: nationalism and imperialism.

The emergence of national consciousness

What is striking about late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalism in our region is the greater, or lesser, degrees to which the elites of all ethno-religious groups, victims as well as perpetrators, were turning to it as a solution to the problems of a changing world. (This recourse, incidentally, was also largely responsible for killing stone-dead on its starting-block any attempt to create a common, colour-blind Ottoman citizenship.) The Hakkari Assyrians, though living in a backwater, were not immune to these trends. The emergence of a modern national consciousness among them was not overt, dramatic or in any sense intellectually dazzling, as was the case with the Armenians. Alternatively, one might argue from a primordialist standpoint that it did not need to be, as the Assyrians were already implicitly a national community, having tight and cohesive kinship relations, a well-defined cultural identity at the heart of which was loyalty to church and patriarch, and close

ecological-cum-economic ties to their Hakkari hinterland.[45] But *implicitly* having all the facets of a nation is not necessarily the same thing as being aware of it, and this awareness only began to take shape with the arrival of the missionaries and their schools, increased personal contact with the outside world by means of a relatively small group of young men who went to study or work abroad,[46] and finally with the efforts of successive Mar Sham'uns to formalize Assyrian national existence by having the community fully recognized as a millet. Indeed, this process did not reach its full political enunciation until in 1932, modelling themselves on the Turkish national pact of 1920 but with the community significantly on the edge of its confrontational precipice with Iraq, they made their own Assyrian national pact.[47]

Thus Assyrian proto-nationalism increasingly found itself jostling with Kurdish restiveness as to its own relationship to a decaying Ottoman state, a revived and reactive Islamic backlash, as well as Turkish and what was later to become Iraqi Arab national aspirations. Perhaps what made these tensions most explosive, however, was the way, almost from the beginning, Assyrian assertiveness came to be perceived as aligned to a foreign, especially British, interest. When the Kurdish leader, Shaikh Ubayd Allah, asked a Turkish official in 1881, 'What is this I hear . . . that the Nestorians are going to hoist the British flag and declare themselves British subjects?',[48] he was voicing not simply a popular and consistently heartfelt resentment but one which had more than a grain of truth in it. The Assyrians looked to the British, or sometimes the Russians, because both their churches, and sometimes their governments, made extravagant and impossible promises to help the Mar Sham'un.[49] His declaration of war on the Ottoman empire in 1915 was precisely the result of Russian coaxing. After the evacuation from Hakkari and the collapse of the supply of Russian arms, the Assyrians continued to look to the British because they had literally nowhere else to turn.

But this is not how it was seen by other parties, particularly once the Assyrians were encamped in northern Iraq. Here the majority of their menfolk of military age were enlisted by the British as imperial levies,[50] primarily to help put down a series of Kurdish uprisings, i.e. of tribes and clans who were their new neighbours. Moreover, as the levies were under an entirely different jurisdiction to the nascent Iraqi army, when in 1924 some Assyrian

45 Much of the current debate about nationalism is between those like Anthony D. Smith ('The nation: invented, imagined, reconstructed?', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1991, 353-68) who veer to a more primordialist viewpoint and those like Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso 1983)), and the late Ernest Gellner (*Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell 1983)) who are more strictly instrumentalist in their explanation of its origins.

46 Joseph, 124. Some even returned to Hakkari having acquired US citizenship.

47 Stafford, 117.

48 Quoted in McDowall, 57.

49 Joseph, 57-61, 124, 134; McDowall, 83, 104.

50 See David Omissi, 'Britain, the Assyrians and the Iraqi levies 1919-1932', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1989, 301-22.

units, following a local dispute, ran amok in Kirkuk killing possibly fifty people in the process, the subsequent British court martial not only handed down very lenient sentences but failed to launch an enquiry.[51] Worsening alienation between a nascent Iraqi elite and Kurds on the one hand and Assyrians on the other continued as the British doled out land grants in the Dohuk and Amadiyah area to the latter in recognition of their military services. Here they were allowed, in effect, to rule themselves through their own leaders and were, in practice if not in principle, exempt from taxation. True, the Mar Sham'un's preferred agenda, namely to return to Hakkari under permanent British protection, failed to materialize in spite of a covertly assisted but ultimately abortive military operation.[52] Nevertheless, their future security was supposedly assured as early as 1920 when Article 62 of the largely British-sponsored Allied peace treaty with Turkey, signed at Sèvres, specifically guaranteed 'full safeguards for the protection of the Assyro-Chaldeans and other racial and religious minorities'.[53]

Perplexingly, then, while the Assyrians were utterly dependent on British rule and protection for their safety and well-being, they had become, by 1933, the butt of an emerging Iraqi nationalist xenophobia which charged them, at best, with being the agents and stooges of British power and, at worst, with seeking 'domination' in their own right.[54] Yet the great irony was that, by then, the British had no use for them whatsoever. Ten years earlier when Britain was attempting to hold on to the oil-rich vilayet of Mosul, rather than returning it to newly independent Turkey, their assurances to the Assyrians regarding 'compact settlement' either at Hakkari or close to their old Hakkari homeland but on the Iraqi side of the border dovetailed neatly—if entirely cynically—with their broader negotiating position. The enlistment of Assyrians as, in effect, ethnic mercenaries similarly served their purposes in Iraq, as well as indeed their broader policy of Middle Eastern divide-and-rule. The apparent advantages of this policy to the Assyrians were embedded in the Sèvres treaty with Turkey: Article 145 dictated that there should be citizenship combined with equality before the law for all in the new Turkish state; Article 149 proceeded flagrantly to contradict the former article by insisting on the preservation of all non-Muslim prerogatives and immunities.[55]

If the terms of the treaty had been equally applied to Iraq, the Assyrian position might well have been secured. However, by the late 1920s the name of the game had changed. The terms of the discarded Sèvres treaty were by

51 Stafford, 47, 67-8; Omissi, 308-9 puts the number of dead at thirty. There were also reports that Assyrian levies were used by the British to assassinate opponents of their regime. See C. J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs. Politics, Travel and Research in North-eastern Iraq 1919-1925* (London: Oxford University Press 1957), 420.

52 Joseph, 155; Stafford, 46-7.

53 Joseph, 150; Stafford, 81. Article 62 of the Sèvres treaty referred to a putative Kurdish entity which the British were then trying to create in the Mosul area.

54 The Iraqi claim, according to Weizmann; see Ben-Gurion, 211.

55 Joseph, 147-8.

then irrelevant and Britain was instead offering Iraq its independence in return for facilities primarily geared to British imperial defence. As a mandate territory ultimately under the jurisdiction of the League of Nations, the Assyrians were supposedly still protected by a scheme of local autonomy that embraced both them and the Kurds. This indeed had been the specific recommendation of a special League commission reporting on Mosul in 1924, at the time of the original British dispute with the Turks as to its future. Yet not only did the British ignore these provisions in negotiations for a 'treaty' with the Iraqis but proceeded, in 1930, to announce their inoperability to the League's Permanent Mandates Commission in Geneva, proposing instead that the solution for the named minorities was to regard themselves as Iraqis.[56]

No wonder, then, that Assyrian behaviour in the period of transition from British to Iraqi rule—completed in October 1932—displayed signs of the erratic, including a quasi-mutiny of the levies and increasingly shrill and desperate pleas from the Mar Sham'un for League assistance. Moreover, having been unceremoniously dumped by the very power they thought was their friend, worse was to follow. Not only did the British refuse to consider any formula which would rescue the Assyrians from their plight, the evidence instead points to a policy of active abandonment. Implicated and possibly directly responsible for the detention of the young and inexperienced Mar Sham'un in Baghdad, at the height of the crisis in the summer of 1933, the British put their bomb supplies at the disposal of the nascent Iraqi air force for their anti-Assyrian operation *after* the first killings, and informed Interior Minister Hikmet that 'British policy was not to support the Assyrians but to support the Arabs in the maintenance of the integrity of the Iraqi state'.[57] Demands heard at the League for an enquiry into the massacres received an equally stony British response. Indeed, their dire warnings that such an enquiry would lead to the collapse of King Faysal's regime and to his replacement by extreme nationalists who would incite an outbreak of xenophobia directed at foreigners and their property, or even to a repudiation of the recently signed treaty itself, ensured its suffocation at birth.[58] That the British somehow managed to overlook the Assyrians themselves in these pronouncements is surely significant. If this seems to be leading towards a charge of perfidious Albion, is it not so that we have equally overlooked the actual perpetrators of the massacres themselves, the Iraqis, or more precisely the emerging post-Faysal leadership of the Iraqi state? This might conveniently bring us to our last suspect: ideology.

Manufacturing enemies

The problem here is not so much which ideology but whose. Iraq, after all, was an entity entirely dreamed up by the British. It consisted of three very

56 Ibid., 180-4, 192.
57 Quoted in Stafford, 195. See also Husri, 173.
58 Husri, 358.

disparate, largely remote and backward provinces of the Ottoman empire. A myriad of diverse tribal, communal and religious loyalties within it militated against any notion of a common ethnically-based identity. The lack of a historically unifying core was equally underscored when the British foisted on to the territory a puppet-monarch, Faysal, from faraway Hejaz. Faysal, of course, was the son of the Sharif Husayn most associated with the 1916 anti-Ottoman 'revolt in the desert' and thereby with the cause of pan-Arab nationalism.[59] Yet the fact that he was also a British protégé, and indeed was seen—willingly or unwillingly—as a party to the division of the Arab fatherland at the hands of the western powers confirmed for any would-be Iraqi patriot that independence by and through him would be of an ersatz rather than authentic kind. To make of Iraq an instrument for the creation of a united and sovereign Arab nation thus implied not only repudiating the terms of the Sharifian compromise but, paradoxically, the very notion of Iraq.[60]

If we see here the origins of the ambitiously pan-Arab and virulently anti-imperialist ideology which would eventually dominate Iraqi political culture under the Ba'ath, the immediate problem, in the 1920s and 1930s, was two-fold. First, how would one seek to inculcate among the dominant but often rebellious Sunni and Shi'a Muslims of the central and southern regions a sense of their intrinsic 'Arabness' while alternatively cajoling, or possibly bludgeoning, the equally fractious Kurds of the North into a similar frame of mind? Second, who would be the transmitters of this project? Only via a strong state could the project, in itself a repudiation of British hegemony, be envisaged. Yet, in the absence of a significant western-educated middle class, the only group offering themselves for the role were the ex-Ottoman military officers who filled Faysal's key governmental and administrative posts.[61]

It was via this emerging military-cum-political elite that the ideological strands of the Assyrian affair become manifest, strands which, intriguingly, lead back to the Harbiye, the pre-war Ottoman military academy in Istanbul. Practically all of the Iraqi officers had been educated and trained there,[62] often

59 See Mary C. Wilson, 'The Hashemites, the Arab revolt and Arab nationalism', in Rashid Khalidi *et al.* (eds), *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press 1991), 204-21, for the nationalist dilemmas facing Faysal.

60 Actually the issue is a touch more complicated in that the 'national' elite, both in the 1930s and throughout much of the modern history of Iraq, was ideologically divided between clear pan-Arabists on the one hand, and those geared towards the primacy of the Iraqi state on the other. Bekr Sidqi and Hikmet, both strongly Kemalist in their tendencies, fell more obviously into the latter category. Nevertheless, both groupings were strongly militarist, nationalist and anti-imperialist. See the discussions in Simon, *Iraq between the Two World Wars*, 127-33 and al-Khalil, 175-9.

61 See Paul P. J. Hemphill, 'The formation of the Iraqi army, 1921-1933', in Abbas Kelidar (ed.), *The Integration of Modern Iraq* (New York: St Martin's Press 1979), 91-2 and Simon, *Iraq between the Two World Wars*, 56. Nine of fourteen premiers between 1922 and 1932 were ex-Ottoman officers as were thirty-two of fifty-six possible cabinet ministers.

62 See Reeva S. Simon, 'The education of an Iraqi Ottoman army officer', in Khalidi *et al.* (eds), 151-66. See also Simon's table in *Iraq between the Two World Wars*, 179-81, listing the educational background of key members of the Iraqi political elite.

graduating alongside contemporaries who now were generals or politicians in neighbouring Kemalist Turkey. On a personal and political level, therefore, it was the Turks who provided the obvious—and in practice the only—role-model for them. Turkey after all, in the 1930s, with the exception of Japan, was the only non-western country which could claim to be genuinely sovereign and independent. It had achieved this status, moreover, by a Herculean effort to throw off the shackles of European neo-colonial dependency. The CUP regime of 1908-18 had admittedly collapsed in the effort but not before it had gone some way to remoulding Turkey from a multi-ethnic and religiously-based imperial hulk into a modern, homogeneous nation-state. If the CUP theory for this process was radical pan-Turkism, their praxis was a mixture of rapid social engineering, infrastructural change and secularization combined with military struggle, genocide and ethnic cleansing, methods which were to be continued with renewed vigour, intensity and efficacy by their Kemalist successors.[63]

The Turkish Harbiye graduates, in other words, had already achieved aims to which their Iraqi counterparts only aspired. In the circumstances it is hardly surprising that the latter should seek to apply Turkish methods and ideas to the pursuit of Arabist goals. Their programme would begin at base with an essentially secular educational curriculum, prepared by the Syrian-born pan-Arabist, Sati' al-Husri.[64] This would aim in particular to inculcate Iraqi male youth with a love of fatherland founded on a reading of Arab history which looked back to national greatness and foretold of future restoration. But it would also instil martial values, thereby preparing boys for initiation into a more rigorous 'school for the nation': the army. Nationalist Turks had themselves imbibed this approach from Marshal von der Goltz, the Prussian military theorist who conceived of it as the binding and empowering agent of a Junker-led German nation.[65] Von der Goltz's agenda for nation-state building had both inspired and been directly applied by acolytes in Turkey and Japan. In the Iraqi version, too, the aim would be to unite youth from disparate backgrounds and communities into a seamless Arab body and spirit.

The Assyrian affair conveniently served this militaristic programme. The rather haphazard and ill-considered attempt by several hundred Assyrian levies, in late July 1933, to cross the Tigris into French mandate Syria in order to offer their mercenary services there, and the subsequent fighting which flared up between them and Iraqi troops at a border post provided the immediate

63 See Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press 1968) and Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London and New York: Routledge 1993), for aspects of Turkish state formation. Also Uriel Heyd, *Foundations of Turkish Nationalism. The Life and Teachings of Ziya Gökalp* (London: Luzac 1950), esp. 112-52 for pan-Turkish 'national' theory.

64 See Simon, *Iraq between the Two World Wars*, ch. 4, 'Education'.

65 Ibid., ch. 2, 'The officers, Germany and nationalism'. Simon is particularly good on developing the Iraqi military's Germanophile connections. Note, for instance, the reference (137) to Bekr Sidqi's close relations with the German ambassador, Dr Grobba.

pretext for Bekr Sidqi's exterminatory campaign. But it also provided the necessary riposte to the British claim that, given the lack of obvious enemies, the Iraqis did not require a large standing army.[66] Suitably demonized, the Assyrians were the enemy: the fifth column, the spoke in the wheel, the tool of the imperialists, the avant garde in an alleged conspiracy to sabotage Iraqi nationhood and return the country to perpetual British domination. Bekr Sidqi—a Kurd—and others of the officer class may have had their own more personal and vengeful reasons for killing Assyrians. The British had seemingly, throughout the 1920s, ignored their Ottoman or Sharifian military credentials, always in favour of the Assyrians, every time it came to putting down a Kurdish or Shi'a revolt. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to surmise that the officer class took this as a direct slur on their virility. Not only would the insult be expiated with Assyrian blood but the campaign against them would be proof-positive of Iraqi warrior prowess. All this was undoubtedly also intended to notify the British, in no uncertain terms, who was now in charge (Faysal had fortuitously died within weeks of the campaign) and how the country was, in future, going to be run.

Moreover, it could be argued that the army's unilateral actions against the Assyrians were primarily designed to engage and involve the peoples of Iraq in their project. Accordingly, they first demonstrated to them how a group of outsiders allegedly represented a mortal danger to a national existence of which up to that point they may only have been fleetingly aware. Fear awakened, they were then encouraged to share in the euphoria when the 'invincible' threat had been defeated. On the back of this euphoria, national conscription was rushed through the following year. Two years thereafter, popular hero Bekr Sidqi declared himself dictator.[67] Perhaps none of this should surprise us. Modern states are adept at turning on the 'enemy' switch and then turning up the xenophobia volume at moments of crisis. Such actions are always a gamble: consider, for instance, Britain's 1982 Falklands war. Nevertheless, when your boys come home having trounced the opposition, the dividends are immediately tangible.

It is as if having an enemy—any enemy—is the necessary precondition for creating one's own heightened sense of group identity and belonging. In the Falkands, however, the Argentines were a rather problematic hate-model, British state and media having to work overtime rapidly to manufacture sufficient ingredients for antipathy largely out of the Atlantic blue. To pursue this line of reasoning with regard to the Assyrian case runs into the different problem that Iraq was a new, weak state with no obviously well-oiled propaganda machine or record of this sort. Could it be, therefore, that the Iraqis did not need to manufacture an Assyrian hate-model because genuine and very intense anti-Assyrian antagonisms were already there? This would bring us much closer to Daniel Goldhagen's explanation of 'ordinary' German sup-

66 Hemphill, 94-8.
67 Ibid., 107-9 and al-Khalil, 171, 175.

port for, and participation in, the Holocaust.[68] Alternatively, Goldhagen's thesis, rather than being the last word on the subject, could simply be grounds for further urgent research on the interconnections, as well as stepping-stones, between sociocultural phobias and state-building agendas. The frequency with which actually very vulnerable minority groups—Armenians, Tutsi, Jews, Roma—are tainted with having powers or connections which go far beyond the geographical confines or social mores of the state or states in which they live or, even worse, are perceived to act for some larger and allegedly menacing foreign power is a particularly noteworthy feature of modern genocide. In the Holocaust, the genocide *par excellence*, the Jews fulfilled all these perceived roles and more, being supposedly at the centre of a world-wide conspiracy geared towards the emasculation and subjugation of Germany through both international finance and Bolshevism. If the Assyrians were, by comparison, a lowly scapegoat—only the 'tools and creatures of imperialism',[69] rather than the power itself—the toxicity of the charge nevertheless lies in their being seen not simply as outsiders but *somebody else's outsiders*.

In 1933 the Iraqi nationalist leadership discovered that you could use this accusation to whip up popular outrage against the Assyrians while putting yourself at the head of a movement which claimed it could do something about the larger problem of which the Assyrians were supposedly part. And having done it once you could surely do it again, as happened, using another obvious scapegoat, the Jews, at the height of Iraq's war-time crisis in 1941 and, yet again, in 1968-9 when the Ba'ath were attempting to consolidate their hold on the country.[70] It is not difficult, with these examples in mind, and given its subsequent record, to pin blame squarely for Iraq's genocidal acts on a series of increasingly authoritarian regimes whose top-down manufacture of internal enemies primarily served their own partisan interests.

However, something vital still seems to be missing from this conclusion. Why should Iraq, or any other state, conjure up fantasies of malevolent conspiracy at every turn and why, even though Iraq has been a prime example of this recidivist behaviour, has it actually been replicated in so many other countries with similarly genocidal results? My final remarks, therefore, seek to locate the Assyrian affair in terms of its broader context and significance.

Genocide *is* the mainstream

During the inter-war period a nation-state system which had previously been confined to a select group of advanced western polities was beginning to emerge from its chrysallis to become the international system of nation-states we are familiar with today. Following Turkey, which had punched its way into the system by military means, Iraq was one of the very first non-western states to

68 Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Little, Brown 1996).
69 This is what the banners for the Baghdad victory parade proclaimed. See Husri, 352.
70 Al-Khalil, 48-51, 171, 177-81.

be formally accepted into it, with due legitimation from the League of Nations. The impetus for this major shift away from the prevailing imperial framework came as much from the British as it did from the Iraqis and, having made their decision,[71] the British were determined not to be sidetracked by any previous promises they had made, especially to those who might be wanting to pull Iraq in a direction other than that of nation-statehood. In these terms, our Assyrian case-history is highly instructive. If Assyrian demands for local autonomy had been conceded it would have required a much looser, more decentralized Iraq, the single national government having to give way to a more complex, consociational series of arrangements. Alternatively, guarantees of minority rights for culturally and ethnically distinct groups, as enunciated at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, with regard to East European 'new' states, were also, in theory, applicable. However, these were never intended to be anything other than notional and certainly were not considered by the British as a licence for resource- or power-sharing at the expense of Iraqi sovereignty. As Sir Francis Humphrys, the British high commissioner in Baghdad, wrote home to the colonial secretary in June 1932:

> Assyrian demands . . . if granted would be followed by similar claims from other communities such as the Kurds, Yezidis, Chaldeans, Shia and even the people of Basrah. It is realised in Baghdad that to grant such demands would result in the final extinction of the authority of the Central Government.[72]

The British, in other words, had set themselves against a multicultural reading of the modern state and had decided, like the Iraqi leadership itself, that the Assyrians represented the threat of a bad example.

One might surmise that this new British approach had much to do with their recent experience with regard to the Ottoman empire where they had found that supporting minority groups, such as the Armenians, only conferred benefits if the state either remained willingly submissive or submitted to *force majeure* partition at the hands of the Great Powers. If, however, it proved not only obdurate but resilient, showing signs in the process of transforming itself into a recognizably modern nation-state, greater long-term political and commercial benefit might result from treating it as an equal partner. What Britain and its western partners began, in effect, with the treaty of Lausanne with Turkey in 1923, has been a policy pursued ever since, currently under the title of 'constructive dialogue'. This euphemism effectively translates as long-term access to a country's resources and markets, under stable conditions, and on commercial terms usually highly beneficial to the

ence or adverse comment on the domestic arrangements or internal security of that state. In short, no awkward questions about human rights.[73]

At Lausanne the major awkwardness had been the Armenian question. So the treaty-makers simply expunged it completely and utterly from the protocol.[74] Humphrys's 1932 observations on the Assyrians amounted to the same thing, confirming that what Britain now wanted was good relations with a client Iraq and that the price it was prepared to pay was indifference to the fate of independent-minded or difficult subject communities. While one might remonstrate that the British a year later did belatedly intervene to halt the Assyrian massacres, their record and that of their western partners and allies since then proves the general rule. Every one of the communities to which Humphrys referred, and some more besides, have suffered pogroms, massacres or genocide at the hands of an independent Iraq, without any meaningful reprimand—until the 1991 Gulf War when western interests were directly challenged.[75] This amounts to a negligent and shameful omission on the part of the West. But does it constitute an act tantamount to my smoking gun?

To answer that question we need to turn again to the Iraqi leadership and to try and understand the world as they have seen and doubtless continue to see it. At the time of the Assyrian affair they justified their actions as a necessary response to a British plot, the aim of which was to keep Iraq permanently in imperial thrall.[76] On one level this sounds hopelessly paranoid. The last thing the British desired was the destabilization of a state upon which they had just conferred independence. However, it does need to be recalled that it was an independence struck with a very pliant Faysal, and on the explicit understanding that it entailed, in practice, subordination not only to British interests but to a global political economy to all intents and purposes determined, controlled and supervised by a small coterie of the most powerful western nations. Like emerging national elites in scores of post-colonial states created thereafter, the Iraqis entered into a 'community of nations' which

73 On this score, note, for instance, the current controversy over the British government's financial support for Turkey's proposed Ilisu mega-dam in Eastern Turkey in spite of its likely environmental damage to the region, the dangerous potential of water wars with neighbouring countries which it augurs and, of course, Turkey's continuing flagrant abuse of Kurdish rights in the area. And all this in the wake of Britain's new and much trumpeted ethical foreign policy supposedly highlighted by Prime Minister Blair's robustness over Kosovo. See Paul Brown, 'Minister in court over dam deal secrecy', *Guardian*, 26 June 1999.

74 'The absolute Turkish triumph was reflected in the fact that in the final version . . . neither the word "Armenia", nor the word "Armenian", was to be found. It was as if the Armenian Question or the Armenian people themselves had ceased to exist' (Richard G. Hovannisian, 'Historical dimensions of the Armenian Question, 1878-1923', in Hovannisian (ed.), *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction 1986), 37).

75 Even then the West stood by to watch the Shi'a massacred. It has also been persuasively argued that the Kurdish 'safe haven' in the North was primarily sanctioned to let the West's Turkish ally off the hook from a flood of 'destabilizing' Kurdish refugees. See Katherine A. Wilkens, 'How we lost the Kurdish game', *Washington Post*, 15 September 1996; Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World* (London: Jonathan Cape 1993), 57-104.

76 Husri, 350.

was actually a seriously uneven playing field, where the ground-rules had already had been set by the other side and where complaint to the umpire, in the form of the League of Nations, was pointless. The post-Faysal leadership, of course, could have simply accepted their new neo-colonial status with grace and thereby gained some of the benefits which would have undoubtedly accrued. But what then was the point of being the inheritors to a great Arab legacy or having a sense of self-worth as the leaders of the restoration and fulfillment of that greatness, if one could not even claim to be master in one's own house? From the very first, therefore, commitment to the realization of a full national agenda implied breaking out from, if not transcending, the limitations implicit in the system. Or, to continue with my soccer analogy, in order to reach a position where your team is taken seriously for inclusion in the premier division, you have to dispense with weak players or those who, for whatever reason, insist on continuing to play by the rule-book and, instead, start playing dirty.

The analogy should, of course, fall down at this point on the grounds that, if one attempts to ignore or circumvent the rules, in football or in real life, one is instantly ejected from the association. Or is one? In order to attain their positions in the international system, few states, including the most powerful and certainly all those with grandiose pretensions, have not taken short cuts, at some stage, aimed at reducing the distance between themselves and their competitors or to ensure their dominance at the top. The system, which has only fully emerged since the Second World War with an added recent impetus from the collapse of the quasi-alternative Communist system, does not *only* operate in this social Darwinian fashion. If it did, nation-states might well be in a continual state of war with one another.[77] Yet, while inter-state conflict has been in decline, there is compelling evidence to suggest that exterminatory war committed by nation-states against their *own* peoples, i.e. genocide or politicide, has been on the increase. Harff and Gurr, for instance, have charted nearly fifty post-1945 cases widely spread across all continents.[78]

If we were to seek an explanation for this rising incidence by reference back to our archetypal modern genocide, the Holocaust, and were to focus on racism as its driving force, we would be hard-pressed, except in one or two instances, to find obvious replication in successive case-histories. In Iraq, for instance, racism was neither organizing principle nor driving force in either the Assyrian affair or in Saddam's more egregious anti-Kurdish campaigns. If, however, we were to consider the Holocaust as the action of a very powerful state which was nevertheless obsessionally phobic and frustrated by its failure to have attained what it considered to be its rightful dominant place in the international system, and blamed this failure on a communal group whose perceived international power represented the primary obstacle to the achieve-

77 See Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan 1977), for powerful advocacy of the 'system'.
78 Harff and Gurr, 'Victims of the state'.

ment of its goal, we would be much better positioned to draw parallels. The Assyrian affair, in short, represented a sort of dress-rehearsal for what Iraqi and other aspiring national elites would do time and time again in the twentieth century: namely, attempt to extirpate a communal group which was perceived to be standing in the way of their rapid if not accelerated nation-formation, state-building, development and 'independent modernisation',[79] the ulterior purpose of which was to make their state more competitive and powerful within the international system.

It may strike one as a little rich to argue that our Assyrian affair smoking-gun might be found not so much in the aberrant behaviour of a particularly unpleasant regime so much as in the dysfunctional nature of the system itself. But the unwillingness of Britain, as a system leader, to consider other possible directions for pre-independence Iraq than that of nation-statehood is one indication of the degree to which it was complicit in supporting a monocultural, centralizing path which inexorably led down the road towards genocide. This does not mean that there were no western liberal institutions which did not raise their voices or wring their hands in response. The League of Nations was clearly anxious about the British abandonment of the Assyrians. Being a body which had no real power, however, its only role in the affair was to help pick up the pieces: the sad and ultimately futile tale of its attempts, alongside the British, to find an alternative home for Assyrian survivors in British Guyana and Brazil being an uncomfortably familiar one.[80]

The lesson to be drawn from all this is not that *Patterns of Prejudice* should not continue to be vigilant in combatting ethnic prejudice and hatred, or in putting the antics of right-wing demagogues, racists and Holocaust-deniers under close scrutiny. However, if we wish truly to understand the nature of modern genocide and thus take some responsibility for the world around us, we cannot afford to pretend that this phenomenon is simply, or even primarily, about such tendencies and groupings infiltrating the mainstream. Genocide *is* the mainstream, not simply because of the way it very tangibly operates through the sale of western arms to Third World genocidal practitioners, but rather in the degree to which it is a by-product of our current global political economy. So long as that remains dominant, minority groups in nation-states had better watch out.

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79 See al-Khalil, 93-9, 160-6, for more discussion of this crucial theme.
80 Stafford, 211.