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After ISIS: Development and Demography in the Jazira

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In January 2018, the Syrian Democratic Forces held a graduation ceremony for newly trained soldiers in northeastern Syria against a backdrop of tan grain silos stretching to the sky.¹ Supported by the United States, the multiethnic though largely Kurdish cadre of troops promised to complete the dirty work of expelling ISIS from northeastern Syria. They have also caused a diplomatic uproar, as Turkey considers them to be a front for the Kurdistan Workers' Party, with which it has been fighting since the early 1980s. Though in the background and largely absent from analysis of what might happen in this region after ISIS, the grain silos hint at the constitutive role that agriculture has played in a region perched on both political and ecological borders.

As this region has been left largely in ruins, questions swirl over what will come next in the Jazira—the lands at the foot of the Anatolian Plateau between the Tigris and the Euphrates—and what types of reconstruction can best prevent a resurgence of violence. Most analyses emphasize that efforts to rebuild and stabilize this region must promote economic development, facilitate the return of refugees, and include ethnic and religious minorities in the planning and execution of whatever is undertaken.² This Brief argues that the commingling of two kinds of engineering—agricultural and ethnic—has a long history in the Jazira and, in many ways, made it ripe for unrest. Looking forward, consequently, would benefit from looking back.

Agricultural development has been crucial over the last century and a half to the transformation of the Jazira from a realm of limited state control and limited cultivation to some of the most productive—albeit still marginal—regions of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Ethnicity and agriculture have intersected as various states have mobilized minorities as well as majorities to populate this borderland region. Borders in the Jazira—including those that were spectacularly destroyed by ISIS—should not be thought of as having enclosed a volatile mix of different ethnicities and religions destined for conflict. Rather, the Jazira’s diversity—and, indeed, terms like “minority” and “majority” themselves—derive from historical processes involving colonialism, nationalism, and state violence. As a result, the region has again and again been a space in which states have attempted to generate not only agricultural products like wheat and cotton but also state *power*, through the manipulation of ethnicity as part of economic development schemes. Thinking about what may happen in this land after ISIS will require accounting for the various borders that have emerged in concert with one another, including those of states, environments, and ethnicities.

What Is the Jazira?

The Jazira is a region stretching across northwest Iraq, northeast Syria, and southeast Turkey. The region derives its name—meaning “Island” in Arabic—from its position between the Euphrates and the Tigris. Because the region has never become a state entity, its boundaries are inexact, just as was the case with respect to the areas identified by place-names like Syria and Iraq prior to their establishment as countries in the early twentieth century. (Though the Jazira was itself very nearly designated a state, given that at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, King Faisal acknowledged that the region might deserve its own government.³) Located roughly between Syria’s Aleppo, Turkey’s Mardin, and Iraq’s Mosul, the region encompasses portions of the Syrian governorates of Raqqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Hassaka; the Iraqi governorates of Ninawa and Anbar; and the Turkish provinces of Şanlıurfa, Mardin, and Şırnak.

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Figure 1: Proposed “Desert Province” of the Ottoman Empire, 1890, which roughly coincides with the greater Jazira region⁴

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In the last few years, large swaths of this territory fell under ISIS control, most notably the Euphrates Valley and cities like Raqqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Mosul. Many portions of the territory in Syria, particularly along the border with Turkey, have

been under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces. Population estimates are difficult given the magnitude of displacement over the last few years, but it seems safe to say that somewhere around seven million people reside in this borderland region. The population is multilingual, multiconfessional (referring to membership in particular religious communities), and multiethnic, and both its history and its future are deeply entangled with the region's agricultural fertility.

Growing the Jazira

As suggested at the beginning of this Brief, agriculture is often in the background—when it is not in the foreground—of clashes in the Jazira that in recent years have pitted the Assad regime, ISIS, Russia, the Syrian Democratic Forces, Turkey, and the United States against one another. Indeed, for all of the bluster over ISIS making money from oil, they also derived a substantial amount of revenue from grain production.⁵ While Iraq and Syria generally have to import some grain to feed their populations, ISIS conspicuously did not, since it controlled some of the most agriculturally productive lands in these countries. Meanwhile, when the United States established one of its first military bases for Special Forces operations at Rumeilan in northeast Syria, they used a basic airfield previously employed for crop dusting.⁶ Hassaka province alone was home to over thirty airstrips from which pilots deployed insecticides against agricultural pests.⁷ It is not entirely coincidence that sites devoted to fighting insects became involved in the fight against ISIS, the fighters of which some have even likened to locusts.⁸ The history of agriculture in the Jazira accounts for the presence of crop-dusting airstrips—and, as this Brief will suggest, can help explain the emergence of ISIS in the region.

For many centuries, the Jazira has been the subject of agrarian dreams of plenty. Archaeologists suggest that the region was home to some of the first states in human history and the first instances of sedentary agriculture.⁹ As far back as the nineteenth century, Ottomans saw the hills, or *tall*, that contained ruins of ancient Assyrian and Hittite empires as evidence of the possibility of transforming the arid region into a breadbasket. From their perspective, it was the nomads and their sheep and camels that were to blame for the region's scant population and minimal grain production. Even today, such groups have not disappeared. Journalists describing the airstrip at Rumeilan, for example, noted that a shepherd tending sheep owned by the Shammar tribe offered them tea before they were shooed away by American-allied forces.¹⁰

The Ottomans took a number of different approaches to the Jazira's nomads, whom they at times perceived as creating a dilemma for governance. In 1890 they even considered forming a massive "Desert Province" (*Çöl Vilayeti*), whose borders were drawn across today's Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, with the aim of bringing nomads under one administration and settling them.¹¹ The broader goal of the project, of course, was to render the province's proposed name—Desert—obsolete, by turning the region into the agricultural powerhouse it had been of old.

These dreams came to fruition in 1950s Syria, as "cotton sheikhs" made a killing on cotton cultivation.¹² Indeed, it was the scions of the great nomads of the nineteenth century who became the large landholders of the twentieth. Combining their land with capital flowing from merchants from Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, and Raqqa, these nomads-turned-cultivators had some 13,000 motorized pumps installed along the Euphrates during the 1950s, while the number of tractors jumped from 2,000 to 6,000.¹³ With these changes came new labor flows, with migrant workers recruited "in the shantytowns of Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Lattakia, and even Beirut."¹⁴

By 1972, Ibrahim al-Haj 'Ali, the governor of Hassaka, crowed that the region's wheat made it "Syria's storehouse," and that its oil constituted "the fuel for its factories and workshops."¹⁵ By the turn of the twenty-first century, the Jazira accounted for nearly two-thirds of Syria's cotton and wheat production.¹⁶ The Jazira's soil thus produced many kinds of gold: the white gold of cotton and the black gold of oil in addition to the wheat gold of grains.

As part of this transformation, the Syrian state emphasized how science and engineering had made Syria's environment into a more efficient version of nature. When Syrian schoolchildren read about the Euphrates in Omar Amiralay's 2003 documentary *A Flood in Ba'th Country*, their teacher asks them what Ba'th party management has turned the river into, and they respond, "a civilized river" (*nahr mutahaddir*). And this was not just rhetoric. A regime of fuel and fertilizer subsidies underwrote the "civilizing" of nature in the Jazira. The agricultural transformation of the region over the course of the twentieth century enabled new kinds of state interventions into this region, as will be detailed in the next section. It also exposed the Jazira's agriculture and its people to new kinds of vulnerabilities, as will be explained in the section immediately preceding the final section of this Brief.

Sowing Sectarianism

When ISIS spectacularly moved across the borders of Iraq and Syria in June of 2014, it set in motion flows of refugees. Yazidis fled through the parched Sinjar landscape. Thousands were killed, and thousands of others were held as sex slaves by the Islamic State. Many others fled toward Erbil, fearing the prospects of ISIS rule. Responses to these tragedies have ranged from the perennial imperial parlor game of redrawing maps of the Middle East on Western editorial pages to calls for greater respect for minority populations.¹⁷

Yet what both of these types of responses invoke—and leave unexplored—is that the very concept of a minority derives from recently drawn borders, alongside tenets of international order dating back to the end of the Ottoman Empire. To describe various states in the region as simply manipulating minority or majority groups, then, ignores the fact that the borders and institutions of post-Ottoman nation-states in fact created the very concepts of minority and majority.¹⁸ And again and again, agriculture was at the core of these ethnically anchored resettlement schemes.

Tensions over both ethnicity and cultivation in the Jazira region emerged in the late nineteenth century. As in other parts of the Ottoman Empire, refugees from the Balkans and the Caucasus acted as a vanguard of agricultural settlement, most notably when Chechen refugees resettled in Ra's al-'Ayn and sometimes found themselves at odds with their neighbors. Yet there were other ways that agriculture in a multiconfessional, multiethnic empire became complicated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In one 1911 debate in the Ottoman parliament, for example, such tensions emerged over one deputy's advocacy for funding to support the settlement of nomadic groups on the edge of the province of Diyarbakır. Other deputies cried foul. They suggested that the tribes to be settled were not in fact native to Diyarbakır, but rather hailed from Deir ez-Zor.

The subtext was not simply that Diyarbakır was benefiting at the expense of southerly Deir ez-Zor, but rather that a largely Arab population of nomads was being moved to a largely Kurdish area. Halil Bey, the Minister of the Interior at the time, bemoaned the debate and its insinuations, wondering: "Is it now that we are inventing these things, when there was no such thing as Arabness or Turkishness in the six-hundred-year history of this state?"¹⁹ His words attested to how the Ottoman Empire had presided over a diverse population for

centuries without ethnicity being connected to politics in such overt ways. The fact that a plan to promote nomadic settlement and cultivation is what sparked such claims—inventions, as Halil Bey put it—foreshadowed how ethnicity and agriculture would intersect in the Jazira in the wake of the Ottoman Empire.

If agriculture in the Jazira became a flashpoint for rancor in the last days of the Ottoman Empire, it would also function as a painful endpoint in the case of the empire's Armenian population. The Ottoman Empire's genocide against the Armenians in 1915 largely involved sending these populations to the deserts of Syria, including the Jazira. In the infamous words of Ottoman interior minister Talaat Pasha, the Armenians could "live in the desert but nowhere else."²⁰ Of course, the Armenians did not so much live in the desert as largely die there. Thus the Ottomans turned an environment that had for so long thwarted their attempts at control into a weapon in itself.

As multinational empires collapsed, ethnicity became the new international order's currency for establishing a legitimate connection between oneself and one's polity. Once, Armenians, Assyrians, and Kurds had lived in communities so multicultural that the very terms "Armenian," "Assyrian," and "Kurd" did not always have a clear reference. The proposed solution to their plight as minorities represented a profound change in thinking about relationships between citizens and states. Added to this novelty was the fact that none of these groups would come to possess the nation-state they hoped for. The commitment to this principle was so great that transfer of various populations to a variety of locations was seriously considered. After violence against Assyrians in Iraq in 1933, the League of Nations considered sending them to Brazil, South Africa, Timbuktu, and British Guiana.²¹ Nor was this approach exceptional. It echoed the approach of the Zionist movement, which considered establishing a state in East Africa, as much as it did the rhetoric of someone like Marcus Garvey, who advocated the repatriation of people of African descent.²²

In this changing international order, the French saw an opportunity. Controlling Syria and Lebanon by virtue of a mandate from the League of Nations, they faced opposition from many people who objected to what amounted to colonialism in a new guise. To combat this opposition, the French cultivated minority populations—including Armenians, Assyrians, and Kurds in particular—who might serve as intermediaries. In the Jazira, the French sought to attract these groups as part of their plans for agricultural development in the

territory they controlled. And so they came, fleeing ethnic cleansing in Turkey and Iraq alike.

The significance of these refugees to the making of the state of Syria not only points to the long entanglement of displacement with its history. It also demonstrates how the borders put in place in the wake of the Ottoman Empire were not simply drawn incorrectly, as some accounts would have it, because of the way they included different groups of people. There are many flaws in this argument, most notably the premise that different groups of people cannot live together, itself an artifact of early twentieth-century accepted wisdom. In addition, the argument misses the point that the way the borders were drawn *stimulated* migration, often with active colonial encouragement, to the extent that a 1926 treaty between Turkey and France stipulated that Kurds and Armenians in Syria could not live within 50 kilometers of the Turkish-Syrian border. The French policy of support for both agriculture and refugees succeeded so well that in 1937, the Jazira region even sought a status apart from the rest of Syria, as a protectorate. The flag of the stillborn state, in a nod to its multiconfessional, colonial, and agrarian nature, featured a crescent, cross, and spike of wheat against the backdrop of the French tricolor.²³

If colonial powers worked to fortify their rule by cultivating loyalties among minority groups, post-colonial nation-states in Iraq and Syria enacted similar policies of manipulating ethnic division as part of development schemes. In a telling echo of the resettlement schemes of the 1920s and the 1930s, the short-lived Syrian government of Husni al-Za'im even agreed with the nascent state of Israel in 1949 on the Jazira as a site for the transfer of Palestinian refugees.²⁴ Al-Za'im was assassinated before he could enact such a plan.²⁵ But agrarian development of the Jazira was to remain crucial to state power in Syria in the coming decades.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Syrian state took an even harder line in the Jazira to prevent the formation of Kurdish ethnic enclaves along the border. These areas had been a product of ethnic cleansing in Turkey, as mentioned—as well as of French efforts to support smuggling. One director of intelligence in the Jazira region, Muhammad Talab Hilal, articulated the premises of these policies in a pamphlet published at the time. He described the Jazira as a land of “contradictions,” with some parts akin to the Latin Quarter of Paris and others evocative of pre-Islamic Arabia.²⁶ The problems of the region, he maintained, were its minorities, whom he distinguished from the region's original inhabitants. Kurdish presence on the borders amounted to “an old

colonial plan,” while lack of services in Arab regions constituted a “stupidification plan.”²⁷

These claims were turned into policy in 1962, when the Syrian state conducted a census in the Jazira and, by virtue of decree no. 93, revoked citizenship from some 120,000 Kurds inhabiting the border region (roughly 20 percent of Syria's Kurds), arguing that the population had infiltrated the region from outside.²⁸ Those who lost citizenship became referred to as “aliens” (*ajanib*), and received a document identifying them as those without national identity. Those who did not participate in the census lacked any papers whatsoever, and came to be referred to as the “hidden ones” (*maktumin*).²⁹ The specter of Muhammad Talab Hilal, the architect of Kurdish exclusion within Syria, so haunts memories of the Jazira's inhabitants that he even appeared in 'Amuda native Fawaz Hussain's 2016 novel *Orages Pèlerins*. When Rustem Zal, one of the main characters, flees Syria for Greece, he nearly drowns—and, while unconscious, sees the notorious Hilal.³⁰

The wedding of ethnicity and agriculture was re-enacted with respect to the Tabqa Dam, completed in 1975.³¹ In addition to transforming the Euphrates into a “civilized river,” the massive project also produced Lake Assad. In a bid to exploit those displaced by the flooded countryside for the Syrian state's purposes, the largely Arab population of 25,000 was resettled in Raqqa but also in parts of the Jazira region with large Kurdish populations, thus forming what became known as an “Arab Belt” between Ra's al-'Ayn, Qamishli, and Malikiya.³²

Even alongside such mobilization of political and economic resources on behalf of certain groups, sectarian or ethnic identity cannot be understood as an unchanging predictor of one's relationship to the state.³³ Still, the policies had staying power. Several accounts of the Syrian Uprising and subsequent Civil War have alluded to how troops and interrogators of the Assad regime spoke with the distinctive accents of the Jazira and Deir ez-Zor, a testament to how state patronage networks capitalized on marginal regions.³⁴

Meanwhile, the citizenship of many Kurds was reinstated in April 2011 only as part of a ploy by the Assad regime to mollify any Kurdish challenges in the face of a growing movement of protests. Although much organizing in Rojava has aimed at inclusiveness, there have also been calls for de-Arabization of the region, most notably by Kurdish leader Salih Muslim.³⁵ Arabs around Tal Abyad received a similar message, being reportedly told by Kurds in the area to “go back to the desert.”³⁶ The use of such language in the Jazira was evocative, as

it recalled not only the death sentence administered by the Ottomans to the Armenians during World War I but also the Ottoman effort to bring the entire Jazira environment under the rule of the Desert Province. Thanks to the way that both colonial and post-colonial state development policies entangled ethnic identity with agrarian development schemes, such policies had also ensured that ethnicity would remain never far in the background—much like the silos of Sabah al-Khayr or the crop-dusting airstrip at Rumeilan.

Ripe for Revolt?

In 2010, a farmer named Ahmed Abdullah told the *New York Times* that his 400 acres of wheat had turned to desert, forcing his family to move to Raqqa. There they lived in a tent fashioned from plastic and burlap sacks.³⁷ In a land once described as Desert Province, where tent-dwelling nomads were to become wheat-cultivating farmers, Abdullah's plight represented quite a reversal. Yet the development of desert in Syria's erstwhile breadbasket was not simply a natural disaster stemming from one of the worst three-year droughts on record.³⁸ It was also a neoliberal disaster. Cuts to subsidies for fuel and fertilizer in 2008 and 2009 made nature suddenly expensive to manipulate in this marginal environment. And these changes, moreover, came on the heels of a series of bad omens for agriculture and ecology in the Jazira.

Dating back to the 1980s, the specter of desertification haunted Syria. The Ba'ath Party's fifth five-year plan of 1983, for example, called for planting 45,000 hectares of the desert with 45 million drought-resistant plants so as to prevent erosion.³⁹ It's unclear what impact these measures had, though in other places tree-planting in arid regions has devastated ground-water stocks.⁴⁰ In any case, the Syrian state largely blamed environmental woes on unlicensed grazing, cultivation, and firewood collection in arid regions, depleting soils and groundwater stocks.⁴¹ As of 1999, the Khabur River did not flow during the summer, and the springs from which the border town of Ra's al-'Ayn took its name had also dried up.⁴² Problems lurked beyond Syria's borders as well. Plans for regional development on the Tigris and Euphrates in Turkey, for example, prompted fears of increased "pesticide and fertilizer run-off" into the water supplies of northeast Syria, with Hassaka's groundwater reserves in particular threatened.⁴³

Of course, neither the demise of agriculture nor its historical sectarian underpinnings in the Jazira explains ISIS on their own. But such an approach does offer

perspectives largely left out of some commentary on ISIS. By focusing solely on Islamic theology and the violence of ISIS, such accounts, in the words of Daryl Li, amount to a "demonology" that is not simply racist but also "boring."⁴⁴ As others, like Ali Nehme Hamdan, have argued, attention to the political economy of the Jazira region can offer valuable insights into the emergence of ISIS in a way that accounts for the particularity of ISIS without getting overwhelmed with exoticism.⁴⁵

Indeed, the scant harvests of the Jazira prior to the Syrian Uprising did in provocative ways align with an approach outlined in an early 2000s text called *The Management of Savagery* (*Idarat al-Tawwahush*), written under the pseudonym Abu Bakr Naji.⁴⁶ That text articulated a strategy in which al-Qaeda struck central areas (like, say, Aleppo) to force the central government to withdraw from marginal areas (like, say, the Jazira). The subsequent vacuum would provide groups like ISIS with an opportunity to swoop in and swiftly provide public order. And with respect to agriculture, they did, to some extent. While many reports have emphasized oil as an al-Qaeda funding source, grains, too, figured importantly in its finances as draught lessened and agriculture rebounded.

The use of the term "savage" to describe this strategy is especially poignant in the Jazira region. Not only was the Jazira home to the Euphrates, a river deemed "civilized" by the Ba'ath by virtue of the massive dam at Tabqa; it was also a region that Ottoman reformers such as Midhat Pasha had slandered as one filled with "savage tribes" (*kabâil-i vahşiye*), on account of the (rather reasonable) reluctance of its inhabitants to settle and till the land.⁴⁷

Thus the space that the Ottomans had called savage, the Ba'ath had called civilized. And ISIS, if it followed Naji's advice, ought to have made the Jazira savage so that they could provide it with civilization. The overlap of such historical terms of denigration in a marginal environment, moreover, connects to a rather provocative observation about the locations of U.S. drone strikes: They occur almost entirely on a line of territory from Niger to Pakistan receiving 250 mm of rainfall per year, the amount necessary for non-irrigated cultivation.⁴⁸ In other words, the frontline of the so-called War on Terror is also the frontier of cultivation, a line that passes directly through the Jazira region. It is also, as the Jazira's residents have demonstrated, a frontline of political challenge. One of Syria's first and forgotten acts in solidarity with the Arab uprisings occurred in Hassaka on January 28, 2011, when Hassan 'Ali al-'Aqleh set himself on fire and died in protest against the region's difficult economic circumstances.⁴⁹ In doing so, he

emulated Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian fruit vendor whose self-immolation catalyzed regional protests.

Conclusion

The intersections of environmental and political challenges offer two insights that should be taken into account when considering the Jazira's future. First, with respect to political borders, the history of migration in the Jazira underscores how populations and borders exist in dynamic relation to one another—so the challenges of the region cannot be solved merely by changing a few lines. Similarly, sect and ethnicity, as well as terms like “minority” and “majority,” cannot be myopically understood as the only determinants of politics in the region.

Second, political borders cannot be thought of in the Jazira without attention to environmental borders. Regardless of where borders between states are, the marginal environment of the Jazira renders it an ecological borderland. This point should not be confused, though, with geographical determinism—that is, with any sort of crude equation between aridity and political instability.

But the particular dynamics of the Jazira's political ecology—its agriculture dependent on extensive subsidies in a marginal environment—have nevertheless made it sensitive to shocks. And that has implications for the region's potential rebuilding. The Jazira's environment is not an inanimate object, but rather a joint product of rainfall levels, laborers driving tractors, and fertilizer prices. Failing to recognize these connections, and failing to sustain support of them, could mean the end of the dream of agrarian prosperity propagated by the Jazira's many states over the past century and a half.

The greater Jazira region, like most places, has no shortage of ghosts. They include not only the victims of ISIS, and of the subsequent destruction of Mosul, Deir ez-Zor, and Raqqa—whose civilian casualties, though mourned, will likely never be reckoned.⁵⁰ They also, as this Brief has shown, encompass those who have suffered over a much longer history in which the agricultural development of the region has become intertwined with colonial and nationalist manipulation of religion and ethnicity, sometimes violently so.

The way the tragedies of the present echo those of the past will be little consolation to anyone. But the Jazira also has a legacy of regeneration. Even in the nineteenth century, when it was described as an empty desert and

a place of ruin, few could ignore the bounty of its spring pastures, its “buttercups, chamomile, and milk thistles”⁵¹ that transformed its wadis into what Mark Sykes—someone whose name is deeply tied to the landscape's colonial legacy—described as “trailing serpents of olive grass and brilliant flowers.”⁵² Given the long history of colonial and national manipulation of ethnic division as part of its agricultural development, planting the seeds for a Jaziran efflorescence will prove challenging—but such is not impossible. An important part will be appreciating the importance and vulnerability of agriculture in the Jazira as well as the historically contingent nature of sectarianism and ethnicity in the region.

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