

**City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk.**  
 Arbella Bet-Shlimon, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019). Pp. 296.  
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In this exciting, detailed, and accessible work of urban and social-economic history, author Arbella Bet-Shlimon convincingly argues that ethnic conflicts in Kirkuk are neither inherent to the city and its people, nor are they inevitable. Instead, the struggle amongst Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen for control over or influence in Kirkuk is the result of Iraq's relatively recent history as a key oil producer, Iraq's "city of black gold." In six chronological chapters, Bet-Shlimon describes how Kirkuk grew from a 19th-century Ottoman Iraqi market-town, first into a key node in Iraq's oil economy, and then into the focus of contested politics in northern Iraq between Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen. Communal identities gradually gained salience as a result of colonial governance, beginning with Kirkuk's growth, from 1927, into a key asset of British Mandatory power, as well as the project of the Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC; now British Petroleum). After the 1958 revolution, Kirkuk became a front-line, contested city between Baghdad's centralism and Kurdish independence, culminating in its role as the logistical hub for the Iraqi Ba'ath Party's campaign of ethnically cleansing Kurds in the late 1980s. Bet-Shlimon describes Kirkuk today as a "city in crisis," paralyzed by a struggle for power and influence that hinders Iraq's political and national recovery from the 2003 American invasion, subsequent civil war, and the rise of the Islamic State (p. xiii).

The power politics of late British imperialism, the IPC's encompassing ethos of development, and the Iraqi Ba'ath Party's Arabization campaigns brought serious changes to Kirkuk, but the city's Kurdish, Turkoman, or Arab population were by no means passive partners to history. Bet-Shlimon has carefully analyzed Ottoman, British, Iraqi, and American government archives, as well as those of British Petroleum, to simultaneously critique and thicken state-centered histories of Iraqi state-building and the role of oil in Iraqi economic and political development. The use of local periodicals, literature, and memoirs, as well as her interviews with Iraqis and others who worked and lived in Kirkuk, allows Bet-Shlimon to revise and reframe official or accepted narratives that treat communal identities in Kirkuk as antagonistic and determinative of political loyalties towards the state of Iraq. Instead, Bet-Shlimon connects these historical events with descriptions of how Kirkukis and other Iraqis took up, adapted, or reimagined the meaning of and relationship between ethnic identification and political (and economic) power.

Such developments are an important part of the picture that Bet-Shlimon paints of daily life in Kirkuk as it grew in size and stature as one of Iraq's main oil-producing cities. Crucially, the focus here is on connecting the development of communal relations there to specific events and actions of identifiable individuals and organizations. Bet-Shlimon carefully reexamines seminal events in the history of communal relations in modern Kirkuk, such as the Assyrian Levies Massacre of 4 May 1924. Most secondary scholarship on this massacre of Kirkuki civilians by members of the Levies highlights, to various degrees, the fact that it began with an argument between the Christian Assyrian Levies and a Muslim shopkeeper. Instead, Bet-Shlimon concludes that the massacre, as well as the 5 May rioting and killings by Muslims against "Christian" businesses and Kirkukis, was new to intercommunal relations in Kirkuk, a case of "sudden sectarianism" made possible only because of longer-term sources of tension that had salience for the broader Muslim and Christian population of Kirkuk (p. 64). These include the perception that, on the one hand, the Christian Assyrian Levies were outsiders, in Kirkuk only as part of an effort to extend Anglo-Iraqi authority into northern Iraq, and on the other, that Christians of Kirkuk were guilty by association of favoring centralized rule. By making sense of the violence on 4 and 5 May using the logic of communalism, these events entered Kirkukis' collective memory as a communal conflict in its origins, and not only in the way it unfolded.

Moreover, Bet-Shlimon does not take for granted the way semi-official enterprises like the IPC achieved imperial goals such as resource extraction and territorial and social control, while also shaping

the lives of its subjects cum citizens for generations to come. New housing and education schemes, for example, came to reinforce communalism because Turkmen and Assyrians were more likely to have the resources to purchase IPC-built homes, whereas the company's Muslim and Kurdish employees were generally poorer and thus likely to take up residence in the city itself (pp. 113–14).

Ultimately, this book calls upon Iraqi studies scholars to look beyond the zero-sum framework of ethnic conflict; after all, as Bet-Shlimon reminds us, “political, social, and economic trends over the course of the twentieth century subjected every Kirkuki to profound harm in some way...” (196). The extension of state authority using (and if necessary, creating) privileged communities or classes allowed to accrue monetary and sociopolitical capital in return for loyalty, consent, or cooperation is a much more consistent feature than the saliency, legibility, and status of ethnic identities in modern Iraq. Centering analysis on political economy and the way that specific, contextual, contingent decisions by members of communal groups may have contributed to the subject or time period in question actively deconstructs constructed ethnic categories that hinder the search for solutions to short and long-term problems faced by all Kirkukis. This is not just responsible scholarship; this is the value of public-facing scholarship that holds Iraqi and American leaders accountable for perpetuating ethnic, regional, and communal categories that put all Iraqis, all of Iraq, at risk, and prevents advancement of encompassing, universal reforms.

*City of Black Gold* is highly recommended. Bet-Shlimon's interdisciplinary research provides clear evidence of the role of institutions—state, private, and those in-between—in the state-building process in both colonial and post-colonial settings. The book itself ably roots those developments in different eras of Ottoman, Hashemite, and Republican Iraq, highlighting what is unique while showing continuities and legacies that influence regional and communal responses to politics over time. As a work of urban and sociopolitical history, it is required reading for any scholar of modern Iraq, the oil industry in the Middle East, or the material and psychological legacies of using ethnicization as an instrument for political and economic aims. This concise, organized, and clearly-written book, which also includes new versions of maps of Kirkuk that are otherwise difficult to find, will be equally useful in the classroom at the advanced undergraduate and graduate level. In keeping with the book's attention to perception, power, and management of information and resources as a form of political power, Bet-Shlimon's insightful essay on the archives of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party, held by the National Defense University and the Hoover Institution in Washington, D.C. and Stanford, CA, respectively, should also be read by all scholars working on these and other imperial archives.

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## **National Symbols in Modern Iran: Identity, Ethnicity, and Collective Memory. Menahem Merhav, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019). Pp. 258. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780815636663**

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Despite the potency of contemporary nationalist identities, the advent of the nation-state is still young within the greater span of human history. In the 20th century, the burgeoning of nation-states, and with them the complex idea of nationhood, was central to social movements and conflicts the world over. Given its weight and consequence, it is no surprise that the study of nations and the formation of national identities has captured the attention of so many scholars. The case of Iran in the 20th century presented an especially perplexing case for adherents of a westernized model of modernity. Fundamentally tied to imperialism, this sort of Orientalist bent understood Europe and its offshoots as the models for how all new nations would develop over time. Menahem Merhav's *National*