

**DISCOVERY OF OIL AND OIL BASED ENVIRONMENTAL
POLLUTION IN OTTOMAN IRAQ: THE INCIDENT OF
MOHAMMARAH (1913-1914)**

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Abstract

Oil was first discovered at Masjed-i Suleiman (Iran) in 1908 and subsequently pipelines were constructed to transfer oil from Masjed-i Suleiman to the Persian Gulf. Additionally, an oil refinery was built at Abadan Island (Iran), which is located the opposite side of Basra. Such developments were a sign of the impending danger. Few years after the discovery of oil, Iraq met her first oil-based water pollution. The pollution arose in Braim village, on the Abadan Island, by sinking of a pontoon, which was loaded 60.000 gallons of oil. The pontoon belonged to Anglo-Persian Oil Company and caused a serious pollution affecting both Dawasir estates, which was one of the most important cultivating lands in Basra, and drinking waters of Shatt al-Arab River. In this context, this paper discusses oil-based water pollution around Basra and Shatt al-Arab in the aftermath of the discovery of oil, dimensions of the risk caused by the pollution and its effects on the local people.

Keywords: Ottoman Iraq, Basra, Shatt al-Arab, Anglo-Persian Oil Company, environmental pollution.

Öz

**Osmanlı Irak'ında Petrolün Keşfi ve Petrole Bağlı Kirliliğin Ortaya
Çıkışı: Muhammara Örneği (1913-1914)**

Petrol Ortadoğu'da ilk defa 1908 senesinde Mescid-i Süleyman'da (İran) bulunmuş ve hemen akabinde boru hatları inşa edilerek Mescid-i Süleyman'dan Basra Körfezi'ne ulaştırılmıştır. Bu gelişmelere paralel olarak Basra şehrinin karşısında yer alan Abadan adasında da bir petrol rafinerisi inşa edilmiştir. Bütün bu faaliyetler yaklaşan tehlikenin habercisi olmuş ve petrolün bulunmasından bir kaç sene sonra Irak ilk defa petrole dayalı çevre kirliliği ile yüz yüze gelmiştir. Petrol sızıntısı Abadan adasında yer alan Braim bölgesinde, Anglo-Persian petrol şirketine ait 60.000 galon petrol yüklü bir dubanın batmasıyla meydana gelmiştir. Petrol sızıntısı bölgede çevre kirliliğine yol açarak hem bölge açısından ekonomik anlamda hayati olan tarımsal üretimini hem de en büyük su kaynağını tehlikeye sokmuştur. Bu makale bölgede petrolün keşfi akabinde Basra ve civarında yaşanan petrol kirliliği ve bunun bölgeye yansımaları konu alınacaktır.

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı Irak'ı, Basra, Şattü'l-Arap, İngiliz-İran Petrol Şirketi, çevre kirliliği.

Water was the basis of life for Iraq whose economy depends mostly on agricultural facilities like the rest of the world. This was not an exception for the late 19th and early 20th century. In Ottoman Iraq, especially in the areas around Baghdad and Basra, where land was easily cultivated by means of Tigris, Euphrates and Shatt al-Arab rivers, the main economic activity was agriculture. Economy of the Ottoman Basra was mainly based on date cultivation. Beyond being a source of economic livelihood, date was the basic consumption item for the local people. The land was fertile and suitable for natural irrigation without spending further effort, through tidal flows in Shatt al-Arab River. Besides, the river was the only source of drinking water for Basra and its neighborhood. Briefly the water of Shatt al-Arab River was vital both for economy and survival of the local people.

At the beginning of the 20th century, discovery of oil in the Middle East posed a serious threat to the fertile lands around Basra. The modern history of petroleum in the Middle East started with its discovery in 1908 in Masjed-i Suleiman, located within Eyalet of Khuzestan in southern Iran. The crude oil drilled in this region and then it was carried through pipeline transport to a refinery, located at the island of Abadan which is at the intersection of commercial center of the region, Basra, and the river of Shatt al-Arab. Upon the commencement of the refinery proceedings in Abadan in 1913, the crude oil was began to be transported to Abadan through pipelines, then was distilled and transported across the Persian Gulf to the international markets through the steamboats navigating in Shatt al-Arab. However, discovery of oil in Masjed-i Suleiman and the commencement of export of refined oil in Abadan brought an unintended consequence to the Ottoman Iraq: Environmental pollution.

I. Discovery of Petroleum in the Middle East

Persian government's concessions to the Anglo-Australian speculator William Knox d'Arcy, who was famous for drilling gold in Australia, start off the

history of petroleum in the Middle East¹. Persian government granted d'Arcy' to obtain, exploit, develop, render suitable for trade, carry away and sell petroleum and petroleum products from all of Persia except five *Eyalets* in the north controlled by Tsarist Russia². The search for oil had started in Qasr-i Shirin but the initial drillings were inefficacious. The further efforts to find oil in the region of Khuzestan, around Ramhormoz were in vain too³. The first successful attempt was at Masjed-i Suleiman⁴ in the Eyalet of Khuzestan, where oil drilling was operated in 1908 with the financial assistance of Burma Oil Company and Sir John Cargil⁵. The oil drillings eventually bore fruits, when the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was founded to exploit the newly discovered vast oil resources⁶.

The discovery of petroleum in Masjed-i Suleiman placed issues of oil transportation and international marketing at the top of the agenda for the major actors of Middle East. Pipeline transport was singled out to carry the crude oil from drilling zones to the available ports.⁷ This project was started in 1909 and completed in 1912.⁸ The Burma Oil Company signed an agreement with Khazal Khan, Sheikh of Mohammarah⁹ for the purchase of 1300 square meter field, 150 miles away from the

¹ Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, **Oil in the Middle East: Its Discovery and Development**, Oxford University, London 1954, p. 17; William D. Brewer. "Yesterday and Tomorrow in The Persian Gulf", **The Middle East Journal**, vol XXIII/2, (1969), p. 152; Volkan Ş. Ediger, **Osmanlı'da Neft ve Petrol**, Ankara: ODTÜ Geliştirme Vakfı Yayıncılık, 2005, pp. 242-244; Henry Longhurst, **Adventure in Oil: the Story of British Petroleum**, Sidgwick and Jackson, London 1959, pp. 18-19.

² Persian government granted the concessions in exchange for twenty thousand pounds in cash and 6 percent of its annual profits, Longrigg, **ibid**, p. 17.

³ For a detailed account on the oil drilling process in the region, see **Ibid**, pp. 18-22; Antoin Poidebard, **İran Yolları Mültekasında Seyahat**, Matbaa-i Osmaniye, Dersaadet 1341, pp. 19-23.

⁴ F.R.C. Bagley, "A Bright Future After Oil: Dams and Agro-Industry in Khuzistan", **The Middle East Journal**, vol XXX/1 (1979), p. 26.

⁵ Alexander Melamid, "The Shatt Al-Arab Boundary Dispute", **The Middle East Journal**, vol. XXII/3, (1968), p. 353.

⁶ The company has had approximately thirty oil wells in the region in 1914. Longrigg, **ibid**, p. 19.

⁷ Longhurst, **ibid**, pp. 37-43.

⁸ Longrigg, **ibid**, p. 20. 400,000 tons of oil could be transported within one year upon the completion of pipeline. Norman Kemp, **Abadan: A First-hand Account of the Persian Oil Crisis**, Allan Wingate, London 1953, p. 17.

⁹ Longrigg, **ibid**, p. 20; X de Planhol, "Abadan", **Encyclopaedia Iranica**, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1985, vol. I, p. 53.

oil extracting zone¹⁰, in order to construct refinery in the island of Abadan. The construction of refinery began in 1910 and completed within three years. The reason behind selecting this particular location for erecting refinery was that the island, with its sturdy landscape, was a naturally sheltered spot from water floods.¹¹ Refined oil products began to be exported from Abadan to the international markets starting from 1913¹² and Masjed-i Suleiman happened to be the first place in the Middle East producing oil for commercial purposes.¹³ The transportation in the river of Shatt al-Arab came to a prominent role upon the discovery of oil, and intensification of oil drilling in the region in the early 20th century. Thus, it brought about two results: There has been an increase in the number of ships for the transportation of refined oil to the overseas and a rise in ship sizes for providing the oil drilling facilities.¹⁴

There were multiple geographical difficulties in the process of transportation at Shatt al-Arab. The ships in the river could carry 340-400 tons in high tide and 280 tons in low tide. These ships could arrive at Baghdad in five days and could return back to Basra in four days¹⁵. They also carried on the postal services between Baghdad and India. The large ships, which sail between Fao and Basra, could not navigate through the Persian Gulf with full capacity of shipload. Therefore, the large ships pass the Persian Gulf at a time of high tide¹⁶ if only they were loaded of half capacity. Then, with the assistance of small ships, larger ships were reloaded to a full capacity in offshore of the Persian Gulf.¹⁷ In order to transport half of the shipload to offshore of Fao, there were four buoys¹⁸ and two launches belonging to multifarious

¹⁰ Longrigg, *ibid*, p. 20

¹¹ Planhol, *ibid*, p. 53.

¹² Kemp, *ibid*, p. 17.

¹³ Charles Issawi, Muhammed Yeganeh, *The Economics of Middle Eastern Oil*, Faber and Faber, London 1962, p. 9.

¹⁴ Melamid, *ibid*, p. 353.

¹⁵ *The Persian Gulf Pilot: The Persian Gulf, The Gulf of Umman and Makran Coast*, 6. Edition, Archive Edition: London 1989, p. 295.

¹⁶ For a detailed account on the impact of the ebb-tide movements on navigation, see Derviş Paşa, *Tahdid-i Hudud-ı İraniye*, Dersaadet: Matbaa-i Amire, 1286. pp. 10-11.

¹⁷ *Birinci Dünya Harbi'nde Türk Harbi: Irak-İran Cephesi (1914-1918)*, c. III/1, Genelkurmay Askeri Tarih ve Stratejik Etüt Başkanlığı, Ankara 1979, p. 50.

¹⁸ For the location of these buoys in Shatt al-Arab, see Bahriye Nezareti, *Şattü'l-Arab*, Matba'a-ı Bahriye, Dersaadet 1327, pp. 4-5.

companies.¹⁹ Yet, ebb and tide movements on Shatt al-Arab and gravel beds of the river have been hampering the transportation. Due to the shallowness of water in the rivers of the region and the alluvial deposits that create dunes in the rivers, the long-distance transportation could only be carried out at a time when the rivers are in high tide. The ships, sailing on Shatt al-Arab, occasionally sink due to the gravel beds of the river during the low tide. The transportation of goods and passengers could be carried between the straits of Fao and Basra along the Shatt al-Arab only in the time of high tide.²⁰

II. The Socio-Economical Significance of the Region

A majority of the economy in the Basra province was dependent on agriculture and trade in agricultural productions. Agriculture was an extremely common source of livelihood among the settled population and semi-settled tribes in the Basra province. The economic structure dependent on agriculture in the region was constituted of both large and small scale tax farmed territories in the north and large date palm orchards in the south. The southern part of the province was formed of extensive date orchards generally owned by wealthy locals.²¹ In addition to the income generated by agriculture, fishing trade was also a substantial source of livelihood for people living in areas close to rivers such as the Tigris, the Euphrates and Shatt al-Arab.²²

In the beginning of the 20th century, Ottomans maintained their position as an agrarian state and Iraq, particularly Basra region, was not an exception. According to data from 1914, agriculture in Iraq was around 68% of the region's total income.²³ Within this context, dates were the main agricultural production grown in the region. In this period, the bank areas of the Shatt al-Arab river extending from Al-Faw to

¹⁹ **Birinci Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi: Irak-İran Cephesi**, p. 50.

²⁰ **Birinci Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi: Irak-İran Cephesi**, p. 36.

²¹ The ownership of date palm orchards in Basra was such a major form of income that owners were referred to as "Basha al-Tamr/Pashas of the dates". Dorothy Van Ess, **Pioneers in the Arab World**, W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., Michigan 1974, p. 56.

²² As a result of the tidal movement, fish were caught in the region easily and in huge numbers. Kurt, "Ortadoğu'da Bir İstikrarsızlık Unsuru: Şattü'l-Arap Sorunu", p. 11.

²³ Tevfik Çavdar, **Türkiye Ekonomisinin Tarihi 1900-1960: Yirminci Yüzyıl Türkiye İktisat Tarihi**, İmge Kitabevi, Ankara 2003, p. 102.

Qurna were uninterruptedly full of date palm orchards.²⁴ In addition to the consumption of the fruit, each part of the date palm was put to use in different forms in the region. Boats and other watercrafts²⁵, household furniture such as cupboards, tables and chairs; and household goods such as trays were made from date palm branches. In the same way that wood and timber was obtained from date palms, the fiber of the trees was also put to use. The fruit of the date palms was not only consumed as a means of nutrition, but also used in making *pekmez* (molasses), *rakı* (anise-flavored alcoholic drink) and vinegar. Even the date stones were not wasted, but were ground and used as a food source for animals in the region.²⁶ Rice was another kind of product that bore significant commercial value and this was grown in the prominent agricultural areas in the provinces such as Basra, Muntafiq and Amara.²⁷ Although wheat and barley were also grown in the province, their quantity merely met the demand of the region.²⁸

²⁴ Sulayman Faydi, **Muallafat mukhtarrah**, Dar al-Saqi, Beirut 1998. p. 322. In this region, there were around 300 different kinds of dates, the most important agricultural and trade produce of Basra. For a complete list of the kinds of dates produced in Basra see: Süleyman Feyzi, **Ibid**, p. 327-333.

²⁵ These boats were called *kaffa*. The watercraft used to transport animals and merchandise along the rivers in the region were made from date palm branches and coated with coal tar, and were extremely durable. **Seyahat: İstanbul, Samsun, Diyarbekir tarihiyle Bağdad ve Basra'ya ve Oradan Haleb ve İskenderun tarihiyle İstanbul'a Kadar Seyahati Mutazammın Mektuplardan Müteşekkildir**, Şirket-i Mürettibiye Matbaası (A. Asaduryan), İstanbul 1311, p. 114, 138.

²⁶ **Ibid**, p. 115.

²⁷ Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, **Four Centuries of Modern Iraq**, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1925, p. 6.

²⁸ **Sâlnâme-i Vilâyet-i Basra**, Basra Vilayeti Matbaası, Basra 1318, def'a 4, p. 204. In addition, according to statistics from 1907, the taxes collected from grain farming in the state of Iraq constituted 88% of all the collected revenues. Donald Quataert, "19. Yüzyıla Genel Bakış: İslahatlar Devri, 1812-1914", **Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Ekonomik ve Sosyal Tarihi**, c. II, Eren Yayınları, İstanbul 2004, p. 962; Ali Bey, **Dicle'de Kelek ile Bir Yolculuk Seyahat Jurnalı: İstanbul'dan Bağdad'a ve Hindistan'a**, Büke Yayıncılık, İstanbul 2003, p. 101. In fact, between the years 1908-1913, grain exports in the Basra province reach a yearly figure of between 36.000-231.000 tons. John P. Hewett, **Some Impressions of Mesopotamia in 1919**, His Majesty's Stationery Office, London 1920, p. 4. Some writers suggest that a greater consumption of the grain within the region rather than exporting the grain was due to the Ottoman-English conflict, and the local economic policies of the Ottoman state that was trying to win this conflict. Hala Fattah, "The Politics of the Grain Trade in Iraq (1840-1917)", **New Perspectives on Turkey**, vol. V-VI, (1991), p. 159-165.

Agricultural produce grown in the region varied according to the districts. However, the main produce of Basra, known for its vast date palm orchards extending along the Shatt al-Arab river, was dates.²⁹ In addition, the farming of other various fruits and vegetables was also common in the Basra district.³⁰ In the northern part of the Basra region, mainly populated by tribes, crops such as wheat and barley were grown in the winter³¹ while mainly rice, and products such as corn, maize and lentils were also grown in the summer though on a smaller scale.³² Although rice constituted the main produce obtained from the Muntafiq province, wheat and barley were also grown frequently in the area³³ while Amara was known for its rice production which also boosted the region's trade.³⁴

While a portion of this produce was intended for local consumption, some parts were exported to other regions. In this context, dates constituted the province's main exported commodity. In the same way, the date palms grown in the large date palm orchards particularly in the Basra province were grown for local consumption.³⁵ Also, a significant percentage met the European demand for dates.³⁶ Rice was also

²⁹ Mehmed Hurşid Paşa, *Ibid*, p. 4.

³⁰ *Sâlnâme-i Vilâyet-i Basra*, sene 1318, def'a 4, p. 205; *Seyahat: İstanbul, Samsun, Diyarbakir tarihiyle Bağdad ve Basra'ya ve Oradan Haleb ve İskenderun tarihiyle İstanbul'a Kadar Seyahati Mutazammın Mektuplardan Müteşekkildir*, p. 152; *The Persian Gulf Pilot; The Persian Gulf, The Gulf of Umman and Markan Coast*, vol. V, p. 214; Süleyman Nutki, *Basra Körfezi Rehberi*, Matbaa-ı Bahriye, Dersaadet 1317, p. 491.

³¹ P. Haider, "Land Problems of Iraq", *The London School of Economics Unpublished PhD Thesis*, Cambridge 1942, p. 227.

³² Haider, *Ibid*, p. 231; Süleyman Beyoğlu, *İki Devir Bir İnsan: Ahmet Faik Günday ve Hatıratı*, Bengi Yayınları, İstanbul 2011, p. 170.

³³ *Sâlnâme-i Vilâyet-i Basra*, sene 1318, def'a 4, p. 210.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 215. For a detailed list of the tax farms and produce grown on these farms in the center of Basra and in Amara owned by the Ottoman Treasury in the period of Abdülhamid II, but which were later transferred over to State Treasury, see Selda Sert, "Bir Toprak Rejimi Olarak Emlâk-ı Hümâyûn: Basra Örneği (1876-1909)", *Marmara Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Yakınçağ Tarihi ABD Unpublished Masters Thesis*, İstanbul 2006, pp. 67-83.

³⁵ Basra was also shipping to other parts of the Ottoman Empire and the capital. *Seyahat: İstanbul, Samsun, Diyarbakir tarihiyle Bağdad ve Basra'ya ve Oradan. Haleb ve İskenderun Tarihiyle İstanbul'a Kadar Seyahati Mutazammın Mektuplardan Müteşekkildir*, p. 151.

³⁶ For figures of date exports between 1868-1913, see Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers*, Princeton University, Princeton 1978, p. 241.

another export item of great importance. Despite the increase in trade to Europe from the Basra province, when the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, agriculture in the province did not become a plantation economy throughout the Ottoman administration and the plantation was not concentrated on a single type of produce.³⁷ Following the opening of the Suez Canal, the role of Europe, particularly England and consequently India in the import and export trade of the Basra province gradually increased.³⁸

The rivers of the region were of great importance in terms of meeting the water needs of people as well as agricultural needs. The fundamental water resource

³⁷ Some writers claimed that following Iraq's integration with the European economy, a dependent structure emerged which produced for the world's markets. Samira Haj, **The Making of Iraq, 1900-1963: Capital, Power, and Ideology**, State University of New York, Albany 1997, p. 9. Although there may be claims that in addition to local consumption, a market concentrated production also became more widespread as a result of this integration process which began in the 1870's, it is somewhat difficult to suggest that a range of products was generated to meet the demands of the international markets as in the case of Egypt. In addition to the integration with the European markets and the spread of plantation on new plots of land, there was also an increase in grain and date production in Iraq and particularly in Basra, and the international market demand for these products simply incited an increase in the already existing production. Haj, **Ibid**, p. 23. For export figures and products produced before and after 1870 see: Roger Owen, **The Middle East in the World Economy 1800-1914**, I. B. Tauris, London 1993, p. 182, 275; Hala Fattah, **The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq Arabia and the Gulf 1745-1900**, State University of New York, Albany 1997, p. 158; Mohammad Salman Hasan, "Foreign Trade in the Economic Development of Modern Iraq: 1869-1939", **University of Oxford St. Antony's College Unpublished PhD Thesis**, Oxford 1958, p. 42-61. Additionally, the growth in agriculture led the tribes and particularly the sheiks of the leading tribes to divert from stock farming to agricultural production, thus transferring to a system where leaders of tribes became the owners of large territories. Haj, **Ibid**, p. 23.

³⁸ Yakub Serkis, "al-Basra: Tejaretuha Kubayla Sadr al-karn al-tasi ashar wa Badahu", **Mebahisü'l-Irakiyye**, vol. II, Sharika al-Ticara, Bagdad 1955, p. 275; Zaki Saleh, **Britain and Iraq: A Study in British Foreign Affairs**, Books and Books, London 1995, p. 138-139. As a result, while England maintained almost half of the imports of Iraq, a quarter of its exports were also made to this country. When taking into consideration India's share together with this country, it is possible to say that England's share was two thirds of Iraq's total imports, while its exports was almost half the total exports. Fattah, **Ibid**, p. 157; David Fraser, **The Short Cut to India: The Record of a Journey Along the Route of the Baghdad Railway**, W. Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh and London 1909, p. 260-261; Gökhan Çetinsaya, "The Ottoman View of British Presence in Iraq and the Gulf: The Era of Abdulhamid II", **Middle Eastern Studies**, vol. XXXIX/2, p. 194. In parallel with this data, while England's shipping trade in the Port of Basra was 240.000 tons between 1910-1913, the shipping trade of its closest competitor Germany was only 38.000 tons. Owen, **Ibid**, p. 275-276. In addition to Germany, India and England, exports were also made from Basra to the USA. Yakub Serkis, **Ibid**, p. 276; Davut Hut, "19. Yüzyılın İkinci Yarısında Basra Gümrüğü", **Türk Kültürü İncelemeleri Dergisi**, vol. III (2000), p. 131-132.

of the region was the river of Shatt al-Arab. It provides fresh drinkable water to the local population. During autumn, the low tide renders the water bitter taste in the downstream however the river could always provide potable water in the sections of high stream.³⁹ Mohammarah, which was one of the main resources of potable water, had been contaminated by refinery waste. The water resources in Mohammarah were way cleaner and cooler than the water of Shatt al-Arab. During the course of summer, the difference of temperature between the water of Mohammarah and elsewhere in the region was 16 degrees of Celsius.⁴⁰ As the area depends on agriculture for most of its income, ebb and tide movements provide enormous benefits for the irrigation of lands.⁴¹ The agricultural lands could be easily irrigated twice a day thanks to the ebb and tide movements. On the other hand, easier accessibility of irrigation channels to the agricultural lands turn out to be a hazard to the same lands at times of contamination of Shatt al-Arab due to the oil seepage. The lands around Dawasir with vast areas of date plants, where the oil pollution was first emerged, were especially crucial in the local economy of the region.⁴² Number of farmers and *fellahs* has been employed in these vast cultivable lands.⁴³

III. Debut of Oil Pollution: The Incident of Mohammarah (1913-1914)

At the outset of the oil transportation loaded from Abadan, Ottoman Empire had to deal with petroleum based environmental pollution for the first time in its entire history. On February 1913, the Vilayet of Basra reported to Sublime Porte (Babiali) on the environmental pollution in Dawasir and its immediate around, caused by Anglo-Persian Oil Company's oil drilling in the village of Braim, located in Abadan,

³⁹ Derviş Paşa, *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ **The Persian Gulf Pilot: The Persian Gulf, The Gulf of Umman and Makran Coast**, 5. Edition, Archive Edition: London 1989, p. 217.

⁴¹ The irrigated lands spread out within large area ranging from Qurna to Basra along the both shores of Shatt al-Arab with the natural assistance of ebb and tide movements. In addition to that, the agricultural lands along the river of Bahmanshir and partial sections of the river of Karun could be also irrigated through the narrow channels which utilize the flood tide. Hurşid Paşa, **Seyahatname-i Hudûd**, Simurg, İstanbul 1997, p. 7.

⁴² Hurşid Paşa, *ibid.*, 210.

⁴³ **BOA, Dahiliye Nezareti Kalem-i Mahsus (DH.KMS) 25/14, Lef 4. 13 Mart 1329.** One of the prominent figures of the region, Sayyid Talib Paşa also drew attention to the utmost importance of the Dawasir for the whole Iraq. **BOA, DH.KMS 25/14., Lef 3. 12 Mart 1329.**

five miles offshore of Mohammarah.⁴⁴ The governor of Basra, Ali Rıza Bey, drew Sublime Porte's attention to the environmentally harmful effects of oil drilling for the local population. The public health of thousands of people was in jeopardy due to the oil seepages in Shatt al-Arab. The governor warned the central government that not only safety of drinking water but also cultivable lands for date palm at stake.⁴⁵ Governor's report alerted Sublime Porte to the possibility of severe environmental pollution. Thus, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Public Works sought to implement emergency measures to address the issue.⁴⁶

To address the critical level of environmental pollution in the region, there was exchange of series of correspondence between the Ottoman Ministries of Internal Affairs and Public Works. Based on that, they drew attention to the fact that the pollution originated outside of Ottoman borders and hence they stress the necessity of evaluating the issue on the basis of international law since Shatt al-Arab⁴⁷ forms the boundary line between Ottoman Iraq and Qajar Iran. Therefore, the issue was assigned to the Ministry of External Affairs for further evaluation whether the Shatt al-Arab river can be utilized by either party to harm the neighboring country. Upon the confirmation of the Ministry of External Affairs, there was a plan of locating a commission, comprised of one engineer, two health officers and one agricultural officer, for the purpose of reaching the terms of settlement in the resolution of the environmental issue.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ **Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri (BOA), Hariciye Nezareti Siyasi Evrakı (HR.SYS)** 94/20, Lef 66. 13 Haziran 1327.

⁴⁵ **BOA, Dahiliye Nezareti İdâre-i Umûmiye (DH. İD)** 168/5, Lef 3. 12 Mart 1329.

⁴⁶ **BOA, Ticaret ve Nafia İdaresi (T.NFİ)** 1403/3, Lef 2. 12 Mart 1329.

⁴⁷ Shatt al-Arab, as a natural boundary line between Ottoman Iraq and Persian government, was the source of numerous border disputes. The issue came to international fore as a result of the British and Russian intervention in 1823 and 1846, which led to the Agreement of Erzurum for a temporary management of the conflict. Yet, the issue was still source of conflict in the early 20th century, and three agreements were signed not only between Ottoman Empire and Persia but also between Ottoman Empire and Great Britain in 1911, 1913 and 1914 respectively. These agreements sought to regulate the freedom of navigation until the eruption of World War I. For a detailed account, see Burcu Kurt, "Ortadoğu'da Bir İstikrarsızlık Unsuru: Şattü'l-Arap Sorunu", **Marmara Üniversitesi Ortadoğu Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Siyasi Tarih ve Uluslararası İlişkiler ABD, Unpublished Masters Thesis**, Istanbul 2006.

⁴⁸ **BOA, T.NFİ** 1403/3, Lef 3-4. 14 Mart 1329

The environmental pollution originated in Shatt al-Arab has been deliberately brought to the international fore and hence the Office of Legal Counsel (*İstişare Odası*) at the Ministry of External Affairs were assigned to tackle the issue. The reports of the Office involve the various comments of the experts on the international law in regards to the delicate nature of the dispute on the trans-boundary nature of Shatt al-Arab River. One view was in support of the notion that the countries which were located along the trans-boundary river shall have sovereignty over the half of the natural resource, and another view posits that the countries which share the coast of the trans-boundary resource, are equally sanctioned to control the whole resources based on a mutual consent. Despite the contradictory nature of these views, the experts reach a consensus that both parties should eliminate any unilateral action which would imperil the public health or/and well-being of the other party. On the other hand, based on the reports of the Office, Ottoman Empire enjoys more rights on Shatt al-Arab than the Persian Government in the light of the terms of the Erzurum Agreement of 1848. Yet, further unilateral claims on the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire might have incited severe opposition of Persian Government. Therefore, the Office of Legal Counsel suggested that the Ottoman Government should offer to the Persian government to form a collaborative commission and to hold non-belligerent practices in the river. In addition to that the Office stresses on the British presence in the region and suggested to the Ottoman Government to communicate verbally with the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁴⁹ The suggestion of the Office of Legal Counsel rooted in the contention that there has been ongoing negotiations with the Brits in regard to Ottoman-Persian border dispute⁵⁰ and the involvement of the British company in the environmental pollution of the region. Upon the suggestion of the

⁴⁹ **BOA, DH.İD** 168/5, Lef 6. 12 Mart 1329; **BOA, HR.SYS** 96/14, Lef 2. 12 Mart 1329. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has sent the report of Directorate of Information to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. **BOA, HR.SYS** 96-14, Lef 3. 2 Nisan 1329. Then, The Ministry of Internal Affairs has notified the Ministry of Public Works. **BOA, DH.İD** 168/5, Lef 3. 12 Mart 1329.

⁵⁰ Starting from the mid-19th century, due to the discovery of oil, there was a sudden surge in the British presence in Mohammarah, which is located in a strategic location along the river of Shatt al-Arab. At a time when environmental pollution has erupted in the region, there was an ongoing Brit-Ottoman negotiation before the agreement of 1913 to settle Persian-Ottoman border dispute on land and see in the region of Shatt al-Arab. For a detailed account on the British presence, see Kurt, "Ortadoğu'da Bir İstikrarsızlık unsuru: Şattü'l-Arap Sorunu".

Office of Legal Counsel, on April 1913, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has requested the Ottoman envoys of Tehran and London for the further diplomatic engagement with the governments of Great Britain and Qajar Iran.⁵¹ Upon the suggestion of the Ministry of External Affairs, Ottoman ambassador of Tehran, Emin Bey, sent a written notification to the Ministry of External Affairs of Iran. Then, Persian government responded the notification by contending that local Persian officers and the Sadıku`-s-Saltana who was commissioner on behalf of the British Oil Company, were both warned to eliminate the environmental damages.⁵² Approximately two months later, Ottoman consulate of Tehran has sent a follow-up notification to the Ministry of External Affairs, contending that the environmental pollution in Shatt al-Arab were mainly originated from the sinking of a buoy, which was carrying 60,000 gallon of crude oil. They also reported that the river has already restored to its original condition and there was no longer any ground for complaint.⁵³

In subsequent to the notification of Ottoman Embassy of Tehran, approximately one month later, Ottoman Embassy of London has also informed the Ministry of External Affairs in regard to British efforts to address the issue.⁵⁴ According to his report, the Ministry of British External Affairs has assured the Ottomans of their efforts to minimize the environmental damage in the region of Basra. After the British investigations on the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, Brits claimed that the company has inserted necessary facilities for the disposal of refinery which totally minimized any sorts of oil spills and seepage into the river. According to Brits, oil based environmental pollution has originated from the sunken buoy that had carried a heavy load of crude oil and they reassured the Ottomans of their commitment to the environment friendly oil drilling operations.⁵⁵

Upon the information received from the Ottoman Embassies of Tehran and London, Ottoman government also notified the Vilayet of Basra about the ongoing

⁵¹ **BOA, HR.SYS** 96/14, Lef 4. 22 Mayıs 1912.

⁵² **BOA, HR.SYS** 96/14, Lef 5. Upon the notification of Ottoman Tehran consulate, the Ministry of External Affairs, in June 1913, has informed the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Vilayet of Basra. 29 Mayıs 1329.

⁵³ **BOA, HR.SYS** 744/1-121, Lef 44. 29 Mayıs 1329.

⁵⁴ **BOA, HR.SYS** 96/14, Lef 10. 24 Kanun-ı Evvel 1913.

⁵⁵ **BOA, HR.SYS** 96/14, Lef 7. 19 Kanun-ı Evvel 1329.

developments.⁵⁶ Yet, Ottoman diplomatic engagement with Qajar Iran and Great Britain were pretty slow to address the issue. By the time Ottomans received the reports of their embassies, the environmental pollution had been already removed in the region. Thus, the previous plan on forming a commission, comprised of one engineer, one agricultural officer and two health officers, was dropped out. Due to the eruption of World War I, any possible measure to tackle oil based environmental pollution was totally subordinated. Any plan on the enactment of law to address oil pollution was dismissed in the Ottoman agenda. Therefore, Ottomans missed the chance to come up with progressive environmental legal and administrative regulations to tackle environmental pollution. It would be the legal and administrative burden of the subsequent governments of the region to initiate environment friendly structural changes and to address environmental pollution in the post-Ottoman era of the region.

Conclusion

The more widespread use of petrol, one of the most important consumption products of the present, may be dated to the second half of the 19th century. As the use of petrol became more common in meeting the transportation, industrial and military demands, it became one of most valuable natural minerals. While this may bring prosperity to regions that own petrol resources, petroleum occasionally can also become the means of devastation due to environmental factors caused by the substance.

Oil has given rise to significant financial income as well as to serious environmental pollution in Iraqi lands. The first oil-based environmental pollution has emerged in Dawasir, an extremely vital area in terms of the region's agriculture and water resources. This has led to an immediate alarm amongst authorities regarding the economic productivity of the region and the possibility of endangering public health. However, this is hard to express that the first pollution in Iraq has raised awareness in the Ottoman Empire about oil-based environmental disasters. Undoubtedly the emergence of the Muhammara case on the eve of the World War I has a share in this

⁵⁶ BOA, DH.İD 105-2/46, Lef 1-2. 21 Kanun-ı Evvel 1329-29 Kanun-ı Evvel 1329.

negligence. As a result, Iraq's first oil-based pollution, has not lead to arrangements regarding protection of environment and public health, but to contemporary measures over the issue.

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