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Hana Cooper, Seattle University, undergraduate student, “The Voices Left Out: Women and the King-Crane Commission”

Abstract: My paper focuses on the King-Crane Commission, a group sent to the Middle East from the United States by Woodrow Wilson after the end of World War I. These men surveyed the population of the Ottoman Empire regarding their post-imperial land and political objectives, compiling their responses into a report known as the King-Crane Report; unfortunately, however, the report was suppressed upon the Commission’s return to the United States, not being published or even acknowledged by Wilson until after the mandate system had already been established in former Ottoman territory. While my larger thesis project argues that the entire process of giving Ottoman subjects hope only to suppress their voices was a major betrayal on the part of the U.S., this paper examines some of the shortcomings in the report itself, namely how the voices of major groups in the region were excluded from it. The Commission failed to incorporate women, Iraqis, and other groups in their findings or recommendations, a fact which exposes critical flaws in their methodology. These omissions call into question not only the failure of the Commission to achieve results, but how much good their recommendations might have done, had the report not been suppressed.

The Voices Left Out: Women and the King-Crane Commission

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In June 1919, Woodrow Wilson sent Henry Churchill King, president of Oberlin College, and Charles Richard Crane, a wealthy American businessman, to survey the populations of Turkey, Greater Syria (modern-day Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine), and Mesopotamia (Iraq) regarding their political and territorial objectives after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The Commission gathered information about how these populations wanted their territory divided, which states they wanted assistance from, their preferred system of government, opinions on the Zionist program, potential leaders, and general sentiments regarding the Entente powers.[1] Although opinions were not unanimous, clear majority opinions were present in the petitions presented to the Commission, and unsurprisingly, all of these desires pointed away from the mandate system proposed by the League of Nations, in which Britain and France would control most former Ottoman territory. However, the results were never put into effect. Upon the report's completion, it was suppressed in the U.S. national archives for three years, conveniently while the mandate system was being reified. The report was published in 1922, first by Editor and Publisher, and then by the New York Times, which broadcasted it to a larger audience.[2]

The suppression of the King-Crane Report led to myriad problems, and although it can certainly be argued that its publication might not have done much to help the people of Greater Syria to gain independence and other political goals, it is also evident that not publishing the report was an act of betrayal on the part of the United States, in which this nation decided its own geopolitical status and relations with powerful states was more important than the values of self determination and justice that sitting president Woodrow Wilson prolifically expressed. While I delve much more deeply into the suppression/betrayal and address the many strengths of the King-Crane Report in my larger project on the affective impacts of the Commission, in this presentation I would like to address the shortcomings of the report itself. While the King-Crane

Report was an excellent document in terms of understanding the political objectives of Syrian men, the report leaves out the voices of many other key groups in the region, most notably women. The portrayal (or rather, lack of portrayal) of these groups shows a disconnect between the King-Crane Report and reality, for it does not take into consideration the impact that these groups had on society. These exclusions were a critical error, which, although it does not completely discount the work that King and Crane did to try to project Syrian voices to the Western diplomatic stage, shows that serious improvements needed to be made to the Commission's methodology in order to achieve a more accurate overview of Syrian society as well as more helpful recommendations for Syria's future.

Though it is true that not all groups were fairly represented by the King-Crane Report, there are some majority opinions (55%+ of the petitions) which we can assume would still hold if representation were to be broadened. In general, the majority of the residents of Greater Syria wanted independence, an end to the Zionist program, and a democratic kingdom led by Emir Faysal. While they did not want a mandate, many favored American assistance, or assistance from the British as a second choice; this assistance would still allow for sovereignty in former Ottoman territory and would only come through specific requests by the people living there, and would only address the issues that they themselves believed needed to be addressed (rather than having those providing the assistance decide what they needed without seriously consulting the people it would actually impact).[3] Generally, they wanted help in developing technology, the economy, and a solid education system, and they were open to getting this assistance from Western powers so long as the former Ottoman territories and peoples were not exploited in the process. Petitions from Iraq, Turkey, Armenia, and Cicilia came in as well, but these were a

minority, as King and Crane had only managed to travel to Greater Syria and two cities in Turkey.

Of the 442 delegations King and Crane recorded, eight were women's delegations. The majority of these eight delegations followed the pattern of "nation first, women after," and focused their petitions on statehood and protesting the mandate system rather than push forward their demands for women's rights. Two of the petitions, one from women in Turkey and another from Muslim women in Beirut, did not explicitly mention women's rights at all, but only included them implicitly in their emphasis on education and its vitality to the nation.[4] Both focused more on nationalist goals than anything else. According to Anbara Salam Khalidi, the petition from the Muslim women of Beirut intentionally "did not differ in essential respects from the demands of the other nationalists."[5] However, Ibtihaje Kaddourah, a feminist leader from Beirut, sent in a detailed petition about the status of women in Syria. She highlighted the importance of educating specifically women and girls, and how any educational assistance given to newly independent nations must include provisions explicitly meant to give women access to equal educational resources to men.[6] She still keeps to the major nationalist goal of an independent and united Greater Syria, but makes sure to use this goal as a frame for advances in women's rights.

As we can see from women's petitions to the King-Crane Commission, women involved in Middle Eastern feminist movements typically had to walk a fine line of challenging gender norms in their own society while also fighting against colonialism and Western encroachment.[7] Hence, while the image they projected to the West seemed often to take the form of "nation first, women after," especially when they were advocating for national rights and/or combatting colonialism, their struggle was a lot more complicated.[8] They often used their participation in

nationalist movements as a way of proving that they were just as worthy of rights, most prominently the right to a good education, as men. Women presented themselves as "working 'alongside men' to 'save the nation' and protect it from external threats" in order to gain social and political capital.[9] They involved themselves in nationalist movements partially to combat colonialism, but more significantly to show the men they organized alongside with that they were legitimate political actors. Becoming nationalists was not only a way to achieve collective, national liberation, but also to secure women's rights and a place in the newly liberated state. When one pays enough attention to the Arab feminist movements of the early 1900s, it is also evident that a lot of the work they were doing also essentially involved proving to Western colonizers that the women's rights situation in the Middle East, while surfacing in different ways, was not all that much worse than it was in the West; this rhetoric was necessary in the many cases where Westerners used women's position in the Middle East as a justification for colonial exploitation.[10]

Despite their lack of representation in the King-Crane Report, women played a critical role in Syrian society, before, during, and after World War I. As Ibtihaje Kaddourah writes, women "have learned to feel during these past years that we are a part of the country and that the country is a part of us."[11] One notable example of women's activism happened during the famine which washed over the Ottoman Empire during the war— a famine worsened by the French, who would later take mandates for Syria and Lebanon, blocking ports through which food shipments would have come.[12] In Beirut and Damascus, elite women collected and distributed supplies to vulnerable populations during the famine. In addition, women of both upper and lower classes "staged risky demonstrations against the Ottoman government to demand bread."[13] Although largely ignored in the nation's public memory, these women came together for the collective

good of their communities, providing yet another example of Syrian organizing and challenging the Orientalist narrative that Greater Syria was not yet ready for full independence. But in addition to shifting the narrative around Syria as a whole, these women proved that state-building should not be an exclusively male enterprise.

In addition to doing work for the larger community, women were also advocating for their own rights. Across the Middle East, feminist movements were rapidly gaining traction; some notable leaders included Anbara Salam Khalidi, Ibtihaje Kaddourah, Salma Sayigh, Julia Tu'ma Dimishqiyya, and Huda Sha'rawi.[14] Starting with charity and aid work and then eventually moving towards goals more specific to women (e.g. women's involvement in politics, women's education),[15] these pioneers of feminism showed that they were a force to be reckoned with. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the first women's journals, such as *al-Fatah* (*The Young Woman*) and *Fatat Lubnan* (*Girl of Lebanon*) were founded, allowing women to spread their ideas in writing throughout the region; it should be noted here, however, that publishing and reading these journals was limited to literate women who had prior access to schooling— yet another reason that many feminist movements focused on women's education as one of their primary goals.[16] To further this goal, women formed intellectual societies and founded schools for girls, which were controlled neither by the male-dominated government nor colonial missionary groups.[17] Several women educated in these institutions went on to found and/or participate in women's movements of their own, which continued to fight for increased access to women's education, as well as voting rights, increased freedom of movement, women's involvement in government and public policy, and several other issues.

In their report, King and Crane rarely mentioned women at all. The words "women" and "ladies" appear only seven times throughout the document, and of these, three are only

describing population demographics. One of the few points that they make about women appears in a footnote, in which they write: “The simple statement that the women of the East left their historic seclusion to appear before a Commission of American men is a revelation of the new role women are playing in the nationalistic movements in the Orient.”[18] We see here that even King and Crane, for whom women were not prominent on their list of concerns, take notice of Syrian women’s achievements, activism, and changing role in society. Women were (obviously) incredibly important in Syrian society and national liberation movements, so the Commission only making a real effort to collect petitions from men in Greater Syria shows that there were serious oversights in their work that could have led to critical errors in their data. While this oversight might not have been as important to their petition tallies, where it does have a lot of weight is in their recommendations for the region. They make no mention of how women would fit into Syrian society once the nation gained independence, nor how U.S. or other assistance might work to uplift women. While they do include provisions on education, a request that was present in all of the women’s petitions, they do not make it explicitly clear where women come into the educational picture. Perhaps their inclusion was implied by King and Crane’s concern that Britain (a potential mandatory power) “did not really believe in universal education and would not provide adequately for it,” or their desire for Turkey to “put beneath all Turkish life a national system of universal education that should lift her entire people,” but it is unclear.[19] In the Turkish statement, the contextualizing passage pays no mind to gender at all, and instead focuses on racial and religious minorities. King and Crane were obviously aware of the fact that racial/religious minority populations needed extra considerations, and indeed many of the Syrian petitions themselves expressed the same concern; however, they did not extend this same consideration to women.

Additionally, while it can be conceded that King and Crane's oversight of women was partially due to the general exclusion of women in politics during the time period in which they were collecting petitions, it is still strange that they did not make more of an effort to include women in their report given some of the language they use throughout it. They make note of several causes which were mentioned in five or fewer petitions (e.g. "For Separate Palestine under British if French have Syrian Mandate"),[20] and talk at length about guarding the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, but they do not include issues specific to women anywhere in the petition tallies or regional recommendations. When they noted that women leaving their "historic seclusion" was a testament to their involvement in society, it logically should have been a clue that they would need to modify their method of collecting petitions and conducting interviews so that they could showcase exactly what women's new role in society was and which issues these women were most focused on.[21] The status of women would be a particularly important point to include because of the colonial/Orientalist discourse surrounding the Ottoman Empire. Orientalist writings had made the position of women in the Ottoman Empire a prominent topic in political discourse surrounding the Middle East— the region was (and remains to be) constantly judged based on how women were treated, even to the extent that colonialist actions were (and are) justified on the basis of "liberating" women.[22] Ibtihaje Kaddourah pointed this out in her letter, saying, "Many Westerners imagine Oriental women as mere playthings or slaves with no knowledge or education, but imagination is not reality… On the contrary, the oriental woman is now taking an active part in all affairs."[23] One would think that, in this context, women organizing not only for their own rights but for the collective rights and independence of their nation would be of more interest to King and Crane than the report suggests.

Perhaps one could argue that the omission of major demographic groups from the King-Crane Report ultimately does not matter because the report was never published. But this is not the point of my argument. Regardless of whether or not their efforts bore any real results, King and Crane went into the Middle East with the full intention of influencing policy in the region after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and they genuinely believed that their report would be a major factor in shaping the future of the post-Ottoman Middle East. Additionally, their report overwhelmingly recommended U.S. mandates and/or assistance, meaning that their preliminary research should have gone deeper into determining what Syrians' post-independence goals were. Further research on this point would have at least ensured that the U.S. was qualified to give the type of aid requested, but ideally it would have kickstarted the planning process before any formal deals were made, so that the United States would be giving Syrians and other former Ottomans the aid/management that would actually benefit them and help them build a thriving state. And with women being roughly 50% of the population, women's voices are absolutely essential to this goal of thriving statehood— one cannot claim to have built a successful state if half its people are being (explicitly or implicitly) excluded from the process of state building.

One of the major problems with the King-Crane Commission is that it was inaccessible to many women, and therefore could not gather enough information to include their point of view. While the eight petitions they received did claim to summarize the viewpoints of the majority of women in the cities they were sent in from, the majority of these petitions were submitted by upper-class women's groups, meaning that women in lower social classes did not really get a voice in this report. Working class men and upper-class women were able to voice their concerns, albeit with limited representation from both groups, but working-class women were completely left out. This was product of the time period in which intersectionality and

representation were not taken into consideration, certainly, but nevertheless it is an oversight which makes one question which other groups King and Crane left out of their report. There are a number of reasons that lower class women were not represented, and just as many potential solutions. One of the major drawbacks of King and Crane's work is that they simply did not spend enough time in the former Ottoman Empire to gather a set of data which truly represented all demographic groups in the region, a fact which becomes even more evident in the lack of data from Turkey and Iraq. Had they spent more time abroad rather than trying to compress all of their surveying work into a month and a half, they could have worked out the flaws in their methodology and gotten more data from the groups who were unable to reach the Commission within the timeframe that they were in the Middle East, and from the regions that the commissioners themselves were not able to spend adequate time in.

Simply put, King and Crane should have done more to include women in their report, whether that be from paying more attention to the petitions that were submitted by women (Ibtihaje Kaddourah's in particular) or finding ways to encourage more women to participate in the surveying process and make this process more accessible to them. Although, given the context of the time period and the numbers of petitions sent in by women, King and Crane's omission of women does make logical sense, it was nevertheless a critical oversight. The report is likely one of the best English-language primary sources on Syrian political leanings in the aftermath of World War I that we have; however, it is also important to note that it is incomplete, and that there are populations whose voices we should be searching for, listening to, and highlighting despite— or even because of— their lack of appearance in the King-Crane Report itself.

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[1] Henry King and Charles Crane, "The King-Crane Report," *World War I Document Archive*, Brigham Young University, last modified 28 May 2009, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_King-Crane_Report

[2] Richard Drake, "La Follette Discovers the Middle East," *The Education of an Anti-Imperialist : Robert la Follette and U. S. Expansion*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/seattleu/reader.action?docID=3445368&ppg=305, 305

[3] "Petition from the Syrian Conference in Damascus, 3 July 1919," 3 July 1919, Record Series 15/13/22, Box 16: King-Crane Commission (May-August 1919), Folder 2, Albert H. Lybyer Papers, 1876-1949, Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin College, http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/cdm/ref/collection/kingcrane/id/2527

[4] "Petition from Turkish Women of Constantinople, 1 August 1919," Record Series 15/13/22, Box 16: King-Crane Commission (May-August 1919), Folder 2: Document File #1, 62-85, Albert H. Lybyer Papers 1876-1949, Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin College, http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/kingcrane/id/2536/rec/5; "Petition from Muslim Women of Beirut, 8 July 1919," Record Series 15/13/22, Box 16: King-Crane Commission (May-August 1919), Folder 3: Document File #2. AHL. 41 Items, Albert H. Lybyer Papers 1876-1949, Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin College, http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/kingcrane/id/1863/rec/24

[5] Anbara Salam Khalidi, *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist*, trans. Tarif Khalidi (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 96

[6] Letter from Ibtihaje Kaddourah to the King-Crane Commission, 5 July 1919, Donald Brodie Papers, Box 1, Folder 3: Related Materials, Donald M. Brodie Miscellaneous Papers, 1919-1941, Donald Brodie Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, digitized by Oberlin College, http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/kingcrane/id/1459, 1

[7] Nawal al-Hassan Golley, "Feminism, Nationalism, and Colonialism," in *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells Her Story* (Austin: University of Texas at Austin Press, 2003), 27

[8] Ellen Fleischmann, "'The Other Awakening': The Emergence of Women's Movements in the Modern Middle East, 1900-1940," *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*, eds. Margaret Meriwether and Judith Tucker (New York: Westview Press, 1999), 92

[9] Ibid., 109

[10] Lila Abu Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?: Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (Sept. 2002): 783-790, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3567256

[11] Kaddourah, "Letter from Ibtihaje Kaddourah to the King-Crane Commission," 2

[12] Melanie Tanielien, "The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon (1914-1918)," PhD diss. (University of California, Berkeley, Fall 2012), https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/etd/ucb/text/Tanielian_berkeley_0028E_12634.pdf, 29

[13] Elizabeth F. Thompson, "World War I: Famine, Memory, and a Shattered Social Order," pp. 19-38 in *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 26.

[14] For a more robust list with descriptions of each woman's major achievements, see Khalidi, *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist*, 117-123

[15] Fleischmann, "The Other 'Awakening,'" 103

[16] Fleischmann, "The Other 'Awakening,'" 101

[17] Ibid., 105-106

[18] King and Crane, "The King-Crane Report"

[19] King and Crane, "The King-Crane Report"

[20] King and Crane, "The King-Crane Report

[21] King and Crane, "The King-Crane Report"

[22] Abu Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"

[23] Kaddourah, "Letter from Ibtihaje Kaddourah to the King-Crane Commission," 1

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