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Bajalan, Djene. "Kurdish responses to imperial decline: The Kurdish movement and the end of Ottoman rule in the Balkans (1878 to 1913)." *Kurdish Studies* 7, no. 1 (2019): 51-71.

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Article History: First Submitted: 6 January 2019, Accepted: 19 February 2019
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/ks.v7i1.481>

Kurdish responses to imperial decline: The Kurdish movement and the end of Ottoman rule in the Balkans (1878 to 1913)

Djene Rhys Bajalan [±]

Abstract

Focusing on the period between 1878 and 1913, this paper seeks to add to the growing literature highlighting the complexities of identity in the late Ottoman period through an examination of the attitudes of Kurdish political activists towards the specific question of the dissolution of Ottoman rule on the Balkan Peninsula. More precisely, it will be argued that, although it is impossible to identify a single Kurdish response to Ottoman troubles in the Balkans, a survey of contemporaneous publications indicates that many leading Kurdish public figures of the period, including those active within the nascent Kurdish movement, regarded Ottoman imperial collapse as a profoundly negative political development.

Keywords: Kurds; Crete; Balkans; Nationalism; Ottoman Empire; the Balkan Wars.

ABSTRACT IN KURMANJÎ

Bersivên kurdan bo paşketina împeratoriye: Tevgera kurdî û dawîya desthilata Osmanî li Balkanan (1878-1913)

Ev gotar berê xwe dide nivîsînê her zêdetir ên li ser tevliheviya nasnameyê di serdema dawî ya Osmaniyan de bi rêya tehlilkirina helwestên çalakvanên siyasî yên kurd li hember pîrsa hilweşîna desthilata Osmanî li Balkanan, bi taybetî di qonaxa ji 1878 heta 1913an. Bi gotineke deqîqtir, gotar wê hîzrê dide pêş ku herçend xeyrî mumkîn e ku yek bersiveke kurdan ya bi tenê bê destnîşankirin ji bo kêşeyên Osmaniyan li herêma Balkanan, nîrxandineke weşanên hevçerx diyar dike ku gelek kesayetên naskirî yên kurd, ewên ku di tevgera nûzayî ya kurdî de çalak bûn ji di nav de, hilweşîna împeratoriya Osmanî wek geşedaneke gelek negatîf didîtin.

ABSTRACT IN SORANÎ

Bersivî Kurd bo pukanewey împirator: Cullanewey Kurdî û kotayî hûkimrranîy 'Usmanî le Balkan (1878-1913)

Be terkîz kirdine ser mawey nêwan 1878 ta 1913, em babete hewlî dedat îzafeyek bixate ser ew edebiyate rû le ziyadbuwey ke tîşk dexate ser alloziy şunas le kota qona xî 'Usmanîda le rêgey pişkinîni hellwestî çalakwane siyasîye kurdîyekan le hember pîrsêkî diyarîkiraw ke ewîş hellweşandinewey hûkmî 'Usmanîyekan le durgey Ballkane. Wirdtir billêyn, argumêntî ewe dekirêt ke herçende destnîşankirdinî yek bersivî Kurdî derheq be kêşekanî 'Usmanîyekan le Balkan esteme, rûmallkirdinî billawkirawekanî ew serdeme amajey ewe dedat ke zorêk le kesayetiye giştîye diyarekanî kurdî ew kat, be waneşewe ke lenaw bizûtnewe kurdîye sawakeda çalak bûn, heresî împiratoriye yî 'Usmanîyan be allugorêkî siyasîy nerênîy qull dadena.

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ABSTRACT IN ZAZAKI

Rijîyayîşê Împeratorîye rê cewabê kurdan: Balkanan de peynîya hukmê Osmanîyan de tevgerê kurdan (1878 – 1913)

Bi giraniya serranê mabênê 1878 û 1913î, na meqale kena ke dewrê Osmanîyan ê peyênî de edebîyato ke derheqê kompleksîteyanê nasnameyan ê Balkanan de aver şono, ey ser o kemerêke rono. Tede derheqê persê wedariyayîşê hukmê Osmanîyan ê nêmgirawa Balkanî de qenaetê çalakîkeranê siyasetmedaranê kurdan ê wextî analîz benê. Hîna biteferuat, îdia beno ke herçiqas ke mumkîn nîyo ke derheqê problemanê Osmanîyan ê Balkanî de tena yew cewabê kurdan bêro teşxîskerdene, anciya cigêrayîşê weşanê ê demî musneno ke xeylê şexsiyetanê kurdan ê namdaran yê ê wextî, çalakîkerê tevgerê neteweperwerîya kurdan ya teziye zî tede, parçebîyayîşê Împeratorîya Osmanîyan sey averşîyayîşêko siyasiyo xirabin diyêne.

Introduction

Today in order to [maintain] the territorial integrity and continued political life of our [Ottoman] state, whatever degree of need exists to keep Rumelia in hand, the region of Kurdistan feels the same degree of seriousness and need.

Abdurrahman Bedirhan, *Kürdistan*, 1901¹

In recent years, the history of the late Ottoman Empire and the role of nationalism in its eventual demise has undergone considerable revisions. In the past, growing “nationalist” sentiment amongst the various subject peoples of the Ottoman Turks was often highlighted as one of the primary factors behind imperial collapse. This tendency is perhaps understandable considering the prevalence of nationalistic historical writing, which often presents the late Ottoman period as a prelude to a series of distinct national histories. Indeed, for some historians the central question of late Ottoman history was not the empire’s demise but the fact “that it survived as long as it did” (Ahmad, 2005: 5). In contrast, newer studies have sought to nuance our understanding of the relationship between the growing significance of the national question (or perhaps more accurately national *questions*) in Ottoman affairs and imperial collapse (Reynolds, 2011a; Der Matossian, 2014). This revisionist *élan* is particularly evident in studies that have focused on the predominantly Muslim peoples of the Ottoman Empire (Kayalı, 1997; Gawrych, 2006; Bozarslan, 2016; Provence, 2017). Consequently a more complex historical narrative has emerged, one which recognises that, although the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the appearance of movements seeking to represent the interests of one or other of the empire’s “national” communities, growing national consciousness did not *necessarily* imply a rejection of the Ottoman order. It is within the context of these broader historiographical

¹ Abdurrahman Bedirhan, “Hamidiye Süvari Alayları” *Kürdistan* (14th September 1901). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author’s own.

debates that this article seeks to examine the Kurdish response to imperial decline and, more precisely, the degeneration of the Ottoman Empire's hold on its European territories. Chronologically, it focusses on the tumultuous period between the end of the Russo-Ottoman War in 1878 and the conclusion of the Second Balkan War in the summer of 1913, a period which coincided with the development of the first modern forms of Kurdish political activism.

At first glance, examining the reactions of the Kurds to the decline of the Ottoman Empire in Europe might seem a somewhat bizarre undertaking. Although the majority of the Middle East's Kurdish population resided within the Ottoman Empire, their historic homeland Kurdistan² lay at the opposite end of the Ottoman imperium, far to the east on the border with Persia. Yet, the gradual disintegration of the Ottoman's once vast European domain and the concurrent establishment of a series of Christian nation-states were developments with implications far beyond South Eastern Europe. Indeed, the changing political order on the Balkan peninsula and the fate of the Ottoman "sickman of Europe" emerged as one of the central questions of nineteenth-century Great Power diplomacy. As might be expected, the gradual collapse of Ottoman rule in South Eastern Europe, a process which culminated in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, was a subject that also excited great interest amongst members of the Ottoman intellectual and political elite (Anderson, 1966; Kent, 1996; Çiçek; 2010). This included a growing number of public figures of Kurdish origins.

Of course, the Kurdish response to imperial collapse was by no means uniform. Although between 1878 and 1913 Kurdish elites increasingly envisaged the Kurdish community as a "nation", the political implications of this realisation varied greatly. Indeed, it is necessary to emphasise that the Kurdish movement in the late Ottoman period was neither homogeneous in terms of its ideological outlook nor in an organisational sense. There were certainly those who regarded the Kurds' future as lying in an autonomous or even independent Kurdish nation-state, such as the religious scholar and poet, Hacı Kadir-i Koyî, and the Russophile Kurdish aristocrat, Abdürrezzak Bedirhan. However, other Kurdish public figures took a different stance, seeking to advance Kurdish national

² The term "Kurdistan" here is used as shorthand for those Ottoman provinces in Eastern Anatolia and Mesopotamia with considerable Kurdish populations. It does not imply that the region was exclusively inhabited by Kurds. Those regions claimed by Kurdish nationalists as constituting "Greater Kurdistan" overlap with lands claimed by Armenian nationalists as part of "Armenia". Within the Ottoman context, the term Kurdistan was used as a provincial designation between 1847 and 1867 (*Eyalet-i Kürdistan*). However, the province did not include all Kurdish-populated areas. A considerable Kurdish population resided further to the south in the Ottoman province of Mosul, as well as in areas further to the east under Iranian sovereignty. Nevertheless, the term "Kurdistan" (*Kürdistan*) as well as "Ottoman Kurdistan" (*Kürdistan-ı Osmani*) and "Iranian Kurdistan" (*Kürdistan-ı Acemi*) were used in Ottoman political and administrative discourse as a broader geo-ethnic toponym describing the areas of Kurdish settlement. See Akpınar and Bozkurt (2011).

interests within the framework of the Ottoman system (Klein, 1996; Özoğlu, 2004; Bajalan, 2016). This included those at the forefront of an emergent Kurdish political activism in the Ottoman Empire, such as the founders of the first Kurdish newspaper *Kürdistan* (Kurdistan), published between 1898 and 1902, as well as those involved in Kurdish associations such as *Kürd Teaviin ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (The Kurdish Society for Mutual Aid and Progress, KSMP), active between 1908 and 1909, and the *Kürd Talebe-Hêvî Cemiyeti* (Kurdish Students' Hope Society, KSHS) active between 1912 and 1914. Consequently, it will be argued here that, through a review of *Kürdistan*, as well as the publications produced by the KSMP and KSHS, it becomes apparent that a small but influential section of the Kurdish intellectual elite, one at the vanguard of Kurdish activism, regarded the breakdown of Ottoman rule in the Balkans not as an opportunity but as a calamity of great magnitude.

Kurdish nationalists and imperial decline

The dissolution of the Ottomans' Balkan empire pre-dates the first glimmerings of Kurdish nationalism in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. Indeed, rebellions, inter-communal violence, and European intervention were recurrent themes in Ottoman affairs throughout the century. The outcome, as already noted, was the gradual replacement of Ottoman rule with a series of distinct nation-states, the first of which was Greece which won formal independence in 1829. The path to self-rule for other peoples in the region was somewhat slower, often passing through a stage of autonomy before full independence.

In this regard, the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878 was of particular importance with respect to the fate of the Balkans.³ The Ottoman defeat, confirmed in the Treaty of Berlin (1878), forced the empire to concede the formal independence of Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania. The treaty also created Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia as autonomous provinces under Ottoman suzerainty as well as handing the administration of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Cyprus to Austria-Hungary and Great Britain respectively. Although primarily focused on Europe, the treaty also had direct implications for the Kurds. Russia annexed three strategically important eastern provinces, Batumi, Ardahan and Kars, while Iran was awarded the Kurdish-populated border district of Qotur (in present-day West Azerbaijan province). In addition, the treaty included an article which provided an international guarantee to

³ Following rebellions in Bosnia and Bulgaria as well as a series of failed negotiations, Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire in April 1877. This was followed by offensives in both the Balkans and Eastern Anatolia. Despite dogged Ottoman resistance, most notably at the fortress of Plevna in modern-day Bulgaria, Ottoman forces were soundly defeated. In March 1878, Russia imposed the harsh treaty of San Stefano on the Ottomans. However, following objections from Great Britain, the treaty was scrapped in favor of a new less onerous peace agreement, the Treaty of Berlin, signed in July 1878. See Barry (2012) as well as the volume edited by Yavuz and Sluglett (2011).

protect the region's Armenian population from "Kurdish and Circassian" tribesmen.⁴

The Ottoman defeat in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878 thus provides important context for the first glimmerings of Kurdish nationalism. Although prior to the 1870s separatist nationalism was primarily restricted to Ottoman Christians, the scale of the Ottoman defeat caused some amongst the Ottoman Muslim population to question the future viability of the empire. For instance, in 1878 Albanian patriots established the League of Prizren which developed into a movement for Albanian independence, although it was ultimately suppressed by the Ottoman government in the early 1880s. Significantly, this nationalism was primarily a reaction to Ottoman diplomatic failures at Berlin as well as to Greek, Montenegrin, and Serbian efforts to partition the Albanian homeland rather than any pervading sense of Ottoman-Turkish "oppression" (Skendi, 1953; Gawrych, 2006: 38-71). In a similar vein, the early 1880s witnessed an unsuccessful Kurdish uprising, led by Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nehri, which sought to challenge both Ottoman and Iranian authority over Kurdistan. Although the nationalist credentials of this revolt have been a topic of significant scholarly debate, recent studies on the subject, based on a more extensive review of Ottoman and Kurdish sources, have suggested that the Sheikh's rebellion also contained a nationalist element as his objective seems to have been to create a unified Kurdish state encompassing both Ottoman and Iranian Kurdistan (Ateş, 2014; Soleimani, 2016).

Ultimately, although the Sheikh Ubeydullah revolt did not mark the beginning of a sustained nationalist resistance to Ottoman rule, it did signal the beginning of a new phase in Ottoman Kurdish politics, one that was increasingly shaped by the notion that the Kurds constituted a "nation". However, the gradual growth of Kurdish national consciousness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century did not result in the formation of a unified political movement nor did it imply a unified attitude towards the fate of the Ottoman Empire. From its very beginning, the Kurdish movement contained within it both a separatist-nationalist wing as well as what might be termed an "accommodationalist" wing, namely those who sought to advance Kurdish interests within the framework of the Ottoman polity.

In the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, the regime of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909) adopted policies that sought both to emphasise the Islamic characteristics and heritage of the empire as well as to actively favour powerful

⁴ Article LXI of the Treaty of Berlin stated: "The Sublime Porte undertakes to carry out, without further delay, the improvements and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians, and to guarantee their security against the Circassians and Kurds. It will periodically make known the steps taken to this effect to the Powers, who will superintend their application." See Hurewitz (1975: 414).

Kurdish interests both within the imperial bureaucracy and at a provincial level (Duguid, 1973; Kodaman, 1987; Çetinsaya, 1999; Klein, 2011). To a certain degree, these policies were a success in that they served to foster connections between Kurdish elites and the Ottoman state, personified by the sultan himself. Moreover, the Hamidian regime, drawing parallels with the situation in the Balkans, was also keen to assert the “Kurdish” character of its eastern provinces⁵ in the face of a rising tide of nationalism and political agitation amongst the Kurds’ predominately Christian neighbours, the Armenians.⁶ Indeed, British diplomat Sir Charles Eliot, an astute commentator on Ottoman affairs, observed that “all maps marking any district as Armenistan are confiscated...” and that, despite the fact that “in many parts of Asia Minor the population is mixed... the Turks prefer to call such districts Kurdistan.” His conclusions concerning Ottoman suspicions were quite accurate. “Foreigners...”, he noted, “were talking of Armenia as they had once talked of Bulgaria. The Turks thought that there was a clear intention to break up what remained of the Ottoman Empire and found an Armenian kingdom” (Eliot, 1900: 383-384 & 401).

Thus, schemes such as the *Hamidiye* light cavalry, a militia established in 1890 which recruited primarily from amongst the Kurdish tribes, served both to secure the loyalty of Kurdish tribal leaders as well as to counterbalance growing Armenian militancy. Indeed, the sultan was willing to indulge a significant degree of lawlessness amongst loyal tribes, standing by in the mid-1890s as Kurds, including those enrolled in the *Hamidiye*, engaged in a series of pogroms and land seizures primarily directed against the region’s Armenian community (Klein, 2011; Astourian, 2011).

The sultan’s patronage and indulgence of powerful Kurdish interests earned him, at least in some quarters, the title of *Bavê Kurdan* (“Father of the Kurds”) (van Bruinessen, 1992: 186). However, not all Kurds looked on the regime positively. One such critic was Hacı Kadir-i Koyi (1815-1897), a poet educated

⁵ Sultan Abdülhamid II drew explicit parallels between Ottoman territorial decline and the fate of Kurdistan. In a memorandum from the palace to the office of the Grand Vizier, he noted that: “Of a certain locality, whose inhabitants are predominantly Kurdish, and whose name came to be known as Kurdistan since ancient times, some malignant mouths have been talking of it as Armenia. Though these ill intentions are cast with the purpose of creating an Armenia, just the way used in earlier formations of the Danube, i.e., a certain principle was established to determine [certain] boundaries; the locality known as Kurdistan is there today, and the Muslim folk inhabiting it are incomparably more numerous than Armenians. Consequently, it is not at all right to change the name of this locality to Armenia, and furthermore, it is not at all possible to draw boundaries that would include all Armenian localities, under the heading ‘provinces inhabited by Armenians.’” First Chamberlain to Prime Ministry (1 August 1890) reproduced in Ökte (1989).

⁶ As early as 1878, the Armenian patriarch, Nerses Varjabedian, had approached the Great Powers in Berlin in order to secure Armenian autonomy in the east and, over the ensuing decades, a number of nationalistic Armenian organisations emerged, including the *Hunchakian* (The Bell) and *Dashnaktsutyun* (The Armenian Revolutionary Federation). Although initially their activities were limited, they gradually developed the capability to wage a low-level guerrilla war against Ottoman authorities.

in the madrasas of Southern Kurdistan and who later served as a tutor to perhaps the most influential Kurdish family of the late Ottoman period, the Bedirhans.⁷ Koyi's poetry is noteworthy as it constitutes an early manifestation of Kurdish political nationalism, namely an articulation of the desire for a Kurdish nation-state (Kurdo, 1985: 18-19; Hakim, 2000: 22-23). Significantly, in a poem entitled *Xakê Cizîra û Bohtan* (The Land of Cizre and Bohtan), a reference to the former fiefdom of the Bedirhans, he writes:

Just yesterday the people of Sudan stood up like lions,
Now they are independent, the envy of all the world,
Bulgarians and Serbs and Greeks, also Armenians and Montenegrins,
All five do not number as many as the Babans,⁸
Each one is independent, all and each are states,
Possessors of army and banners, general staffs and field staffs,
It is their right, the Armenians; they are with good deeds,
They are not like us, making claim on each other with swords,
For the science of war and industry, for the bonding of the nation,
They send both their young and old to Europe (Koyi, 2004: 85-86).

In short, he looked to the Christian nations of the Balkans as well as Armenians as a source of inspiration, calling on the Kurds to follow their example by taking control of their own affairs and charting out their own destiny as an independent nation.

Hacı Kadir-i Koyi's nationalism was somewhat of an outlier during the Hamidian period and, as we shall see, even those who admired Koyi's work, such as the founders of *Kürdistan*, Mikdat Midhat Bedirhan and Abdurrahman Bedirhan, rejected the separatist aspect of his message. This is perhaps understandable considering the pro-Kurdish tilt of Sultan Abdülhamid II's Eastern policy. Moreover, despite its inauspicious beginning, the Hamidian regime was largely able to fend off further territorial decline. There were certainly setbacks. In 1881, European pressure forced the empire to cede Thessaly to Greece and, four years later, in 1885, the Ottoman government was unable to halt the unification of Eastern Rumelia with Bulgaria. Indeed, despite

⁷ The Bedirhans were, until the mid-nineteenth century, the hereditary rulers of the Cizre-Bohtan emirate, one of a number of Kurdish principalities that had been subject to the Ottoman throne since the early sixteenth century. Although more properly known as the Azizan, the family takes its name from Bedirhan Bey who had sought (unsuccessfully) to resist Ottoman centralisation efforts in the 1840s. Bedirhan Bey was ultimately defeated and removed from office in 1846. He was subsequently exiled to Crete before being allowed to move to Damascus where he died in 1868. Despite his exile, Bedirhan was treated with great respect and his sons were integrated into the imperial elite.

⁸ The Babans were the former ruling clan of the eponymous principality centred on the city of Suleimani. Although the Babans' rule ended in 1851, like the Bedirhans, the family remained a prestigious and influential family within the broader Ottoman elite.

scoring an impressive military victory over Greece in 1897, in a war that had been precipitated by ongoing Greek agitation on the island of Crete, European intervention forced the Ottomans to grant the island autonomy. Nevertheless, the regime was able to ward off European efforts to intervene in the internal affairs of Ottoman Macedonia.

Ultimately, Sultan Abdülhamid II's autocratic regime was brought to an end by a military uprising that resulted in the restoration of the Ottoman Constitution of 1876, which the sultan had suspended barely a year after he had consented to its promulgation. Yet, despite the hopes of the revolutionaries, the pace of Ottoman territorial decline in the Balkans quickened following the July 1908 Constitutional Revolution. Within months of the revolution and the restoration of constitutional rule, the Ottoman government faced major diplomatic setbacks with Austria-Hungary's formal annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina on 4 October 1908, followed a day later by the Bulgarian declaration of independence. At the same time, the new administration in Istanbul had to contend with attempts by the Greek-dominated autonomous administration in Crete to enact a union with Greece. However, worse was to come. While the Ottomans were attempting to stave off the Italian invasion of Tripolitania (1911) as well as bring to an end a rebellion in Albania, the Balkan League, an alliance made up of Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Romania, struck. The First Balkan War (1912-1913) proved disastrous for the Ottomans, who were ejected from Albania, Macedonia, and much of Thrace, territorial losses that were confirmed at the Treaty of London signed in May 1913. In the summer of 1913, the Ottomans were able to take advantage of Bulgaria's surprise attack on its former allies to retake the one-time Ottoman capital of Edirne, which had fallen to the Bulgarians in March 1913. Nevertheless, despite this important symbolic victory, the Balkan Wars had reduced Ottoman Europe to a small enclave around the imperial capital. Moreover, it precipitated a wave of Muslim refugees fleeing territories conquered by the Balkan League, a humanitarian catastrophe that only served to heighten tensions within what remained of the Ottoman imperium (Çetinkaya, 2015).

From the Kurdish perspective, the years between the 1908 Constitutional Revolution and the end of the Second Balkan War in August 1913 also witnessed the emergence of a more significant nationalist challenge to Ottoman rule in the Kurdish-inhabited east. While educated elements of Kurdish society generally favoured the reestablishment of constitutional rule in 1908, the reaction amongst provincial elites, in particular those tribal and religious leaders who had benefited from Sultan Abdulhamid II's patronage, was less enthusiastic. Discontent regarding the intentions of the constitutionalist regime was only heightened by government efforts to centralise provincial administration and to reign in the unruliness of the Kurdish tribes, something the *ancien régime* had conspicuously failed to do (Klein, 2007).

The apparent decrepitude of the Ottoman polity only served to amplify growing Kurdish discontent. Arshak Safrastian, a native of Van in the employ of the British consular service, observed Ottoman difficulties in Europe helped fuel disorder amongst the tribes with “robberies in isolated valleys and out-of-the-way districts and raiding... [increasing] in proportion to the Turkish defeats in the Balkans” (Safrastian, 1948: 72). At the same time, the magnitude of Ottoman defeats in the First Balkan War also led some Kurdish activists to contemplate a post-Ottoman political order. For example, in March 1913, shortly before his death, Hüseyin Pasha Bedirhani⁹ informed the British Vice-Consul in Diyarbakır that, should the Ottoman Empire be subject to partition because of its defeats in the Balkans, he would seek to ensure the establishment of an independent Kurdistan.¹⁰

The potential breakup of the Ottoman Empire in Europe also encouraged more radical Kurdish activists, most notably a group which coalesced under the leadership of another member of the extended Bedirhan clan, Abdürrezzak Bedirhan. Unlike many of his compatriots, including members of his own family, Abdürrezzak Bedirhan rejected any compromise with the Ottoman authorities, instead seeking to establish an independent Kurdish state with the support of the empire’s old enemy, Russia. Abdürrezzak Bedirhan’s career as an anti-Ottoman agitator in the years leading up to the First World War has been explored in detail elsewhere (Bedirhan, 2000; Reynolds, 2011b). Between 1911 and 1914, he was involved in several plots to subvert Ottoman rule over Kurdistan, including the Bitlis Revolt in the spring of 1914, one of the largest instances of anti-Ottoman unrest in the region since the Sheikh Ubeydullah Revolt of the 1880s.¹¹

Consequently, Abdürrezzak Bedirhan was keen to use Ottoman military defeats in the Balkans to his advantage. In a propaganda pamphlet issued in the autumn of 1913, he proclaimed that, following the Ottoman Empire’s defeats in the Balkans and North Africa, the European Great Powers were contemplating the partition of the empire’s Asiatic territories. As evidence of this, he highlighted the reform package agreed to by the Ottoman government regarding the

⁹ Hüseyin Pasha Bedirhani (1859/1860-1913) was a son of Bedirhan Bey. He was born on the island of Crete and later served in the Ottoman military during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78. Following the end of the war, he was involved in an attempt to orchestrate a Kurdish rebellion, alongside his brother, Osman Pasha. Sultan Abdülhamid II’s government subsequently exiled him to Syria where he served as a district prefect (*kaşmakam*). Following the 1908 Constitutional Revolution, he returned to Kurdistan and became increasingly opposed to the “Young Turk” regime. See Malmisani (2000: 154-170).

¹⁰ PRO FO 195/2449, Diyarbakır (8 March 1913).

¹¹ The Bitlis Revolt broke out in the Spring of 1914 when Ottoman authorities attempted to arrest Molla Selim, a local Kurdish religious leader and political agitator with connections to Abdürrezzak Bedirhan. Although Abdürrezzak Bedirhan had been attempting to build support for a Kurdish rebellion in the region, Molla Selim’s arrest precipitated the Kurds to rise earlier than expected. The rebellion was crushed in early April and its leader, Molla Selim, was forced to take refuge in the Russian consulate, where he remained until the outbreak of the First World War. See Reynolds (2011a: 78-81).

“Armenian” provinces of the Ottoman Empire, an agreement, which was ultimately ratified in February 1914.¹² He claimed that this European plan for the reorganisation of “six provinces... under the name of Armenia” would result in Armenians being granted “special privileges”. Thus he urged his compatriots to establish “their rights and privileges”, warning that, if they failed to do so, they would be disarmed and unable “to protect their rights against the rich but immoral Armenians”.¹³ Thus, the collapse of Ottoman authority in Europe was presented as a harbinger of a broader imperial collapse, one that would, should the Kurds not take action, favour the Christian Armenians.

Kürdistan and the Cretan question

However, not all elements of the Kurdish population viewed the Balkan nations as exemplars as Koyi had, nor did they perceive the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire as an opportunity, as in the case of Abdürrezzak Bedirhan. Indeed, many of the pioneers of Kurdish activism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century also maintained a deep commitment to the continuation of the Ottoman state. This commitment is perhaps best understood through the material relationship between members of an emergent Kurdish intellectual and professional elite, many of whom were also members of prestigious notable families such as the aforementioned Bedirhan clan. This new “intelligentsia”, a social group often associated with the rise of nationalism, was relatively well integrated into Ottoman society, being educated within the empire’s modernised school system and finding employment within the Ottoman bureaucracy. Moreover, as already noted, during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II, the regime actively favoured members of the Kurdish elite for governmental positions, most notably in the case of the Bedirhans. Indeed, it might be argued that the Bedirhan clan’s ability to play such a prominent role in the early Kurdish movement was, in part, facilitated by the patronage they received from the Ottoman state.¹⁴ Consequently, the Kurdish intelligentsia’s political posture towards the empire’s territorial decline differed from that displayed by figures such as Koyi and Abdürrezzak Bedirhan. This is evident in

¹² Although the Treaty of Berlin (1878) had “internationalised” the Armenian question, divisions amongst the Great Powers stymied the implementation of the relevant clauses in the treaty. However, in the aftermath of the Second Balkan War and under heavy European pressure, the Ottoman government signed into law (8 February 1914) a major reform package concerning the “Armenian” provinces of the empire. Two European officials, a Dutch colonial administrator, Louis C. Westenenk, and a Norwegian officer, Major Nicolai Hoff, were appointed by the Great Powers as inspector-generals of the “Six Provinces” (Erzurum, Van, Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Harput, and Sivas). The agreement was ultimately abrogated following the outbreak of the First World War. See Davison (1948).

¹³ PRO FO 195/2458, Van (14 February 1914).

¹⁴ The Bedirhans’ close relationship with the sultan was widely remarked upon at the time. Sir Charles Eliot observed that: “Here [in Istanbul] they behaved much as they did in the wilds of Asia Minor, holding themselves above all law, and defying the representatives of the Government. If they ever obeyed the orders of anyone less than the Sultan, it was merely from diplomacy and politeness” (Eliot, 1900: 406). For a detailed history of the Bedirhans and their careers in Ottoman politics see Malmisani (2000).

the earliest example of Kurdish journalism, the bi-lingual (Kurdish-Turkish) newspaper *Kürdistan* (Kurdistan), published between 1898 and 1902.

Kurdish nationalists and their sympathisers have long regarded the foundation of *Kürdistan* by two brothers and members of the Bedirhan clan, Mikdat Midhat Bedirhan and Abdurrahman Bedirhan, in 1898 as representative of their “crystallized desire for emancipation” (Blau, 1963: 30). Significantly, *Kürdistan* was founded in exile, being first published in British-administered Egypt and later in Switzerland and Great Britain, and took a hostile editorial line towards the autocratic regime of Sultan Abdülhamid II. However, while the newspaper can certainly be regarded as a manifestation of growing “national consciousness” in a general sense, it was far from being a “nationalist” publication in the sense of advocating the formation of a Kurdish nation-state. Indeed, considering the favour with which the Hamidian regime treated the Kurds (or perhaps more accurately, influential sections of the Kurdish nobility), the notion that this particular manifestation of Kurdish national consciousness developed as a direct response to a pervasive sense of “national oppression” seems unlikely.

In a certain respect, *Kürdistan* can be regarded as a vehicle through which the Bedirhan brothers sought to advance their own familial interests in an attempt to present themselves as the traditional leaders of the Kurdish “nation” and so an appropriate interface between the imperial state and broader Kurdish society. However, it can also be seen as part of the constitutionalist opposition that emerged in response to the sultan’s suspension of the Ottoman Constitution of 1876. Indeed, a number of individuals of Kurdish origin, including *Kürdistan*’s editors, played important roles in the development of the “constitutionalist” opposition to the regime, better known in Europe at the time as the “Young Turks” (Klein, 2017).

Despite this moniker, the “Young Turk” movement was in fact made up of Ottomans from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Moreover, while some elements within the movement did display a propensity towards Turkish nationalist politics, the fundamental goals of the so-called “Young Turks” remained to replace the autocratic regime of the sultan with a system of constitutional monarchy based upon the short-lived 1876 Constitution. This, they believed, would provide a basis for social and political solidarity among all Ottoman subjects, regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds, and thus serve to arrest the empire’s apparent decline (Hanioglu, 1995; 2001). This “Ottomanist” political platform proved extremely attractive to elements amongst the Kurdish community alienated by the Hamidian autocracy. In fact, two Kurds, Abdullah Cevdet and İshak Sücuti, were amongst the founders of the Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*, CUP), the largest and most successful faction of the constitutionalist opposition. Moreover, *Kürdistan* itself was published with the support of the CUP

(Malmîsanîj, 1986: 15). Ergo, it might be thought of as representing a “Kurdist” trend within the broader constitutionalist movement.

Consequently, whilst *Kürdistan* focused on Kurdish affairs, it approached them from a pro-Ottoman perspective. It highlighted the general need for constitutional government and its critiques of Ottoman policies in Kurdistan focused on the actions of the sultan, which in its view, had brought about conflict and mistrust between the Muslim Kurds and the Christian Armenians in the region. Indeed, in discussing the anti-Armenian pogroms of the mid-1890s, Abdurrahman Bedirhan even conceded that: “In the conflict between Kurds and Armenians, I know that Kurds killed many innocent Armenians.”¹⁵

The editorial line of *Kürdistan* towards Christian-Muslim relations is significant. The newspaper’s editors sought to foster cordial relations between the Kurds and Armenians and to this end the Bedirhans achieved a certain degree of success with the Armenian revolutionary press praising the brothers’ efforts (Sarkisian, 1994). For the writers contributing to *Kürdistan*, the solution to Kurdish-Armenian and in a broader sense Muslim-Christian tensions was to be found in inter-communal solidarity or, in Ottoman terms, the “unity of ethnic and religious elements” (*ittihad-i anasar*). As one article succinctly put it: “Whether they are Armenians or Kurds, if they wish to be liberated from these circumstances and these oppressions, they can [only] achieve success through unity and alliance.”¹⁶ In other words, a common form of Ottoman patriotism was to frame such an alliance.

However, while endeavouring to build good relations with the Armenians, *Kürdistan* displayed great sympathy for the plight of Ottoman Muslims residing in regions far from the Kurdish homeland. Indeed, the newspaper took the government to task for what it perceived as a failure in protecting Muslim interests. This sympathy towards the situation of Ottoman Muslims is nowhere more apparent than in the newspaper’s treatment of the Cretan question. To a certain extent, *Kürdistan*’s focus on Crete might partially be understood in familial terms, with Mikdat Midhat Bedirhan being born there during his father’s exile on the island. Still, *Kürdistan* was outspoken in its criticism of the Hamidian regime’s weakness in face of a growing threat to imperial sovereignty over the island presented by Greek nationalism and European intervention.

For example, the paper published an article from Bahriyeli Rıza, a leading member of the constitutionalist opposition in Egypt, in which the author condemned the Hamidian regime for losing “the island of Crete which is the most important part of our homeland.” The article continued by offering a

¹⁵ Abdurrahman Bedirhan, “Hel Yestewî’llezîne Ye’lemûnewe’llezîne la Ye’lemûne” (1 December 1900).

¹⁶ Anonymous, “Kürdler ve Ermeniler” *Kürdistan* (14 December 1900).

narration of events on the island which, while being highly critical of the palace, showed considerable sympathy with broader Ottoman interests. It noted that:

The Greek government sent troops to our borders and attacked. Our commander there reported the state of affairs [to the palace] and asked how to respond. The answer that came was to abstain from any aggressive action until the final order [from the palace] was given. Two or three days passed and there was no word of a final order [from the palace]. However, [in the meantime] the enemy captured a few places on the border. Our soldiers who were prisoners of inaction to the ‘final order’ [from the palace], the patience of those brave and patriotic lions of ours now ran out. Breaking the bonds of the ‘final order’ they attacked the enemies; by showing themselves as being immune to the treacherous and criminal orders of the palace, they prove to the world that they are still the Ottomans of old.¹⁷

Bahriyeli Rıza’s sentiments were echoed in other articles as well. In a Kurdish-language piece published in November 1898, the author mourned the state of the Muslims on the island and censured the government for its inaction. It complained that the European states were supporting Cretan Christians, while the Ottoman administration had left the Muslims to their fate. Indeed, the newspaper used highly emotive language in describing the conditions facing Cretan Muslims, writing:

The circumstances of the Muslims of Crete are extremely bad... Muslims have become ruined and defenceless. Many of their men have been killed. Their wives and children have been violated and left hungry. Their houses have been burned. Infidels took their property and daughters. Their wives become widows to serve infidels.

Significantly, the article concluded by urging Kurds to pay heed to the situation in Crete for “one day this situation may befall you as well! Now, wouldn’t it be a shame for Kurds to see their wives and children in the hands of Russian soldiers!”¹⁸

In summation, in face of direct assaults on Ottoman sovereignty and territorial integrity, from both the European Great Powers and Greek nationalists, *Kürdistan* identified with the Ottoman cause, although it made a distinction between the regime of Sultan Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman polity in a more abstract sense. This perspective was reinforced by the perception that should Christian separatists meet with success in one part of the empire such as Crete, not only would Ottoman Muslim interests be hurt, it could set a precedent for

¹⁷ Bahriyeli Rıza, “İdare-i Maslahat ve İşar-ı Ahir” *Kürdistan* (1st February 1900).

¹⁸ Abdurrahman Bedirhan, “Welat-Vatan” *Kürdistan* (4th November 1898).

developments in Kurdistan. Thus, not only was the paper unsympathetic to separatist movements, but it also advocated their suppression going so far as to condemn the Hamidian regime for failing to take active enough measures to counter them.

The Constitutional Revolution, Kurdish civil society, and the end of empire in the Balkans

In many ways, the disposition of *Kürdistan* towards the Cretan question prefigured that of later associations and periodicals. In July 1908, a military rebellion launched by CUP-affiliated officers stationed in the Balkans precipitated the collapse of the Hamidian autocracy. The 1908 Constitutional Revolution was an important landmark in not only the history of the late Ottoman Empire in a general sense, but also in the development and evolution of the Kurdish movement. The restoration of constitutional rule after over thirty years of sultanic despotism opened the way for the emergence of a vibrant civil society. This included a host of organisations seeking to represent the interests of the various ethnic communities residing in the empire, including the Kurds. At the forefront of this new phase of Kurdish activism was a cadre of Kurdish notables, intellectuals, and later, students based in Istanbul, who took the lead in establishing a succession of Kurdish journals and associations.

The first such association was the KSMP established in the imperial capital during the autumn of 1908. The organisation remained active for less than a year, attempting to advance and protect Kurdish interests. Amongst its objectives, outlined in its constitution, were commitments to work towards ending tribal infighting, to propagandise in favour of constitutional government, to encourage education and to promote the material and spiritual well-being of the Kurds. In short, like *Kürdistan*, the KSMP approached the Kurdish question from an Ottomanist perspective. Indeed, the primary difference between the two was their attitudes towards the existing imperial regime. Whereas *Kürdistan* had been critical of the Hamidian regime, the KSMP and its bulletin regarded the new constitutionalist regime in a positive light. Indeed, a number of the KSMP's members maintained close relations with the CUP, including the organisation's president Sheikh Abdülkadir Efendi (the son of Sheikh Ubeydullah), who had been a part of the CUP during years in opposition, and Babanzade İsmail Hakkı Bey, who was elected to the Ottoman parliament as the CUP-backed deputy for Baghdad (Malmîsani, 1999; Ünal, 2008; Kutlay, 2009; Bajalan, 2016).

Consequently, although still displaying considerable interest in the fate of the Ottoman Balkans, the tone adopted by the KSMP's bulletin was more optimistic than that adopted by *Kürdistan* a decade earlier. For example, in an article examining the situation in Ottoman Macedonia, published in its first issue, the author wrote:

Four months ago [i.e. before the revolution] *our* foreign policy (*siyaset-i hariciyemiz*) was a game of European ambitions and interests. We could only secure a position within that clash of interests. Discussions amongst the Great Powers had even begun with regards to separating off, under the name of the “Three Provinces” (*Vilayat-i Selase*), the three provinces of Rumelia, namely the provinces of Salonika, Kosovo, and Manastir (Bitola), and placing them under international observation and an autonomous administration, because of *our* tardiness in doing the necessary things for the interests and needs of the country. Rumelia’s current political situation has... undergone a significant change... [due to the revolution and implementation of the constitution]¹⁹

Clearly, it was believed that such a change would herald a new era for Rumelia as the new government would be more active in implementing necessary reforms. At the same time, the author identified the Kurds, through the use of terms such as “our foreign policy” and “our tardiness”, with the Ottoman state in its entirety.

Unfortunately, from the Ottoman perspective, the revolution did not terminate the empire’s troubles in Europe. The Austrian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Bulgarian declaration of independence were particularly humiliating blows. These two acts triggered a wave of popular protest amongst Ottoman Muslims, which took the form of a boycott of Austrian and Bulgarian goods, orchestrated by the CUP.²⁰ The KSMP wholeheartedly embraced the campaign, commending Istanbul’s Kurdish community for participating in the protest.²¹ The association also supported efforts to prevent Greece from seizing control of the island of Crete. In a “special article” entitled *Girid Meselesi* (The Cretan Question), accompanied by a photograph of the Cretan town of Hanye (Chania), the author pointed out that Bulgaria’s declaration of independence and the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina had “upset this great [Ottoman] nation with the deepest hurtful memories.” However, “this time...”, the author continued:

Greece’s annexation policy towards Crete has awoken holy feelings and righteousness in every upstanding Ottoman. Hence, in order to protest against Greece, a demonstration was held, and everyone took an oath in the name of God, their honour and their conscience that they would sacrifice their lives in this cause [of Muslim Crete].²²

¹⁹ E.A., “Siyasiyat” *Kürd Teaviin ve Terakki Gazetesi* (5 December 1908) [Emphasis added].

²⁰ One of the principal goods the movement boycotted were Austrian-made fezzes, leading to the movement often being known as the “fez boycott”. See Çetinkaya (2010: 47-107).

²¹ See Anonymous, “Tahrir” *Kürd Teaviin ve Terakki Gazetesi* (5 December 1908); Anonymous, “Dahili”, *Kürd Teaviin ve Terakki Gazetesi* (12 December 1908).

²² Anonymous, “Makale-i Mahsuse” *Kürd Teaviin ve Terakki Gazetesi* (9 January 1909).

The article was followed by the text of a speech given in the name of the KSMP at the demonstration.²³ The KSMP's Ottoman patriotism is unambiguous. Although the organisation was Kurdish-oriented, it identified Kurdish interests with those of the Muslim Ottoman polity as a whole. As Babanzade Ismail Hakkı Bey succinctly put it, the Kurdish identity was “before everything Islamic.”²⁴

Despite the hopes of the revolutionaries that constitutional rule would stabilise the empire, the new regime was faced not only with ongoing troubles in the Balkans, but also growing internal discord. In spring 1909, discontent with the new government and its CUP backers exploded in open revolt. In April, troops stationed in Istanbul mutinied against their officers and with the support of anti-CUP elements, both liberal and conservative, forced the CUP out of the capital city. This “counter-revolution” was soon put down by troops sympathetic to the CUP. However, the liberal phase of the revolution was over. The Ottoman government adopted a host of new laws and regulations restricting the civil liberties of Ottoman subjects. This included the adoption of a “Law on Associations” which, although not banning “national associations” outright, forbade them from engaging with “political questions” (Toprak, 1985: 206-207; Arslan, 2010: 57-70). Consequently, those Kurdish associations founded after 1909, most notably the KSHS, generally sought to remain within the letter of the law. In practice this meant focusing primarily on social and educational issues, while avoiding politically sensitive issues of high politics (Malmîsanij, 2002; Bajalan, 2013).

Nevertheless, the outbreak of the First Balkan War in autumn 1913 was of great significance to imperial politics and impacted deeply upon the Kurds. Numerous individuals of Kurdish origin were drafted into the Ottoman military. Indeed, the government deployed the predominantly Kurdish *Hamidiye* regiments, which had been reconstituted as the “Tribal Light Cavalry” (*Aşîret Hafîf Süvari*) in 1910, to the European front in 1912 (Klein, 2011: 111). In February 1912, former KSMP president and Ottoman Senator, Sheikh Abdülkadir Efendi, even issued a proclamation calling on Kurds to join the Ottoman military.²⁵ Hence the Balkan War, far from being seen as a distant conflict, was one in which many individuals of Kurdish origins actively participated. This is reflected in some of the articles found in the Ottoman Kurdish press. For example, the KSHS publication, *Rojê Kurd* (Kurdish Day), carried an article describing the heroic service rendered by Kurdish soldiers in the Balkan Wars.²⁶ Another article, an obituary for Hüseyin Pasha Bedirhani,

²³ Süleymaniyeli Hüseyin Paşazade Süleyman Beyefendi, “Suret-i Nutuk” *Kürd Tevriin ve Terakki Gazetesi* (9 January 1909).

²⁴ Babanzade İsmail Hakkı, “Kürdler ve Kürdistan” *Kürd Tevriin ve Terakki Gazetesi* (5 December 1908).

²⁵ PRO FO 195/2449, Pera (24 February 1913).

²⁶ Abu Rewşan, “Kürdlüğün Menakib-i Hamasetinden İki Semasi Besalet” *Rojê Kurd* (12 September 1913).

noted with appreciation his (unsuccessful) efforts to raise a 40,000 strong volunteer force from amongst the Kurds to fight in Europe.²⁷ The wives and daughters of Kurdish elites in Istanbul also mobilised to support the war effort. Some wrote more generally about the severe economic and social problems of Muslim refugees fleeing the warzone. However, they also offered a “Kurdish” perspective on events. For example, one Kurdish writer in the journal *Kadınlar Dünyası* (Women’s World), Fato Nali, penned an article on the unfortunate fate of a Kurdish veteran of the war who had, after a period in enemy captivity, suffered severe health problems (Kutlar, 2010: 66-68).

Perhaps one of the most interesting insights into the attitudes of Kurdish intellectuals to the Balkan War can be found in a short pamphlet entitled *Edirne Sukûtnunun İç Yüzü* (The Inside Story of the Fall of Edirne). The piece was published by Celadet Ali and Kamuran Bedirhan and contained a foreword from Dr. Abdullah Cevdet, by this stage a well-respected member of the Ottoman Kurdish community in the capital. It opened in the most dramatic of terms:

From the Balkans smoke and flames arose. Our heads turned and our eyes were struck by the smoke and flames in front of us. The bayonets of the Bulgarians were directed towards Çatalca, [those of the] Serbs towards Üsküp, [those of the] Greeks towards Salonika and [those of the] Montenegrins towards the stones of İşkodra. *We awoke. We suffered 500,000 casualties* [and] one in five died from bullet wounds. 500,000 Rumelians (*Rumelili*) were made refugees... (Bedirhan & Bedirhan, 2009: 20) [Emphasis added].

The introduction continued by laying the blame for the defeat at the feet of not only the government but all Ottomans who had ignored the situation in the Balkans. It concluded by proclaiming: “We appeal to all coreligionist and compatriots who would read these lines of ours. For the love of homeland, in the name of the spirit of belief... may they recite with enmity and revenge in their hearts, ‘the Ottoman order shall remain, and Islam shall endure’” (Bedirhan & Bedirhan, 2009: 24).

The text, completed in July 1913, implicitly took the CUP-led government to task for its conduct in the First Balkan War and, more specifically, its failure to protect the former Ottoman capital of Edirne. Yet, while written in a critical spirit, it was also an unequivocal demonstration of the deeply held commitment to the continuation of the Ottoman polity by elements of the Ottoman Kurdish elite. Indeed, the brothers had a strong personal connection to the war due to the fact that their older brother, Ahmed Süreyya Bedirhan, an Ottoman military officer, had been captured by the Greeks (Kutlar, 2010: 68). In summation, the

²⁷ Rojê Kurd, “Hayat-i Meşahir: Bedirhanî Hüseyin Paşa” *Rojê Kurd* (14 August 1913).

Ottoman Empire's military defeats and the end of its once vast European empire, far from being a source of inspiration, was a development to be mourned.

Conclusion

As outlined in the introduction to this article, it would be a mistake to assume that the collapse of Ottoman rule in Europe elicited a uniform response amongst the Kurds. However, perhaps more significantly, it will also hopefully be evident that the relationship between the nascent Kurdish movement and imperial collapse was not quite as straightforward as might first be expected. While some elements within Ottoman Kurdish society evidently regarded the collapse of Ottoman control in Europe as being a potential opportunity for Kurdish emancipation from "Turkish" rule, others, including most significantly those at the forefront of the Kurdish movement, regarded the Kurds' interests as being inextricably linked to the fate of the Ottoman polity as a whole. This realisation should attune us to the fact that the growth of national consciousness does not automatically translate into demands for a nation-state and the political appeal of being a member of a broader multi-ethnic polity was not as weak as it is often portrayed. It should also call into question the "nationalistic" logic of much historical writing as well as political punditry within the Middle Eastern context.

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