

# Kurdish nationalists and non-nationalist Kurds: rethinking minority nationalism and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1909

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**ABSTRACT.** Recent scholarship has begun to nuance the idea of Ottoman decline, but few works have attempted to see nationalism outside of the dominant decline paradigm. By addressing the emergence of Kurdish nationalism in the late Ottoman period, this paper questions the idea that imperial disintegration and nationalism were inherently intertwined; and challenges not only the mutually causal relationship that has been emphasised in literature to date, but also the shape that the ‘nationalist movement’ took. Using archival sources, the Kurdish-Ottoman press, travel literature and secondary sources in various languages, the present paper will illustrate how the so-called Kurdish nationalist movement’ was actually several different movements, each with a differing vision of the political entity its participants hoped to create or protect through their activities. The idea of Kurdish nationalism, or Kurdism, may have been present in the minds of these activists, but the notion of what it meant was by no means uniform. Different groups imbued the concept with their own meanings and agendas. This study demonstrates that most ‘nationalists’ among the Kurds continued to envision themselves as members of the multi-national Ottoman state, the temptingly powerful rise of nationalism in their day notwithstanding. The suggestion has important implications for students and scholars of nationalist movements among other non-dominant groups, not only in the Ottoman Empire but in contemporaneous empires such as the Habsburg, and in later states like Iraq, Rwanda and Sudan. The present study further questions the received wisdom that multi-ethnic entities are a recipe for disaster. It proposes that a joint effort to rethink what we know about minority nationalism may involve not only a reconceptualisation of the very terms we use, but perhaps an accompanying shift in approach too.

## **Introduction**

Given recent and current conflicts in such places as the Balkans, Rwanda, Iraq and Sudan, it is tempting to observe that units containing more than one

'nationality' are destined to break apart once non-dominant ethnic groups become dissatisfied with, or merely aware of, their inferior position vis-a-vis the dominant group within a defined border, or once they realise the 'artificiality' of those borders. Our view of the present continues to colour our perception of the past, in spite of interventions by diverse social scientists that depict a past when diverse ethnic and religious groups lived side by side in relative peace. The conundrum faced by the student of Ottoman history, for instance, is how recent scholarly interventions have nuanced the idea that imperial collapse was long in the making and disproved the notion that separate groups in the empire were 'natural' enemies on one hand, while continuing to cite nationalism as a powerful force in bringing the empire to an end on the other. Fresh efforts to rethink not only the contours but also the very discourse and methodologies used to study Ottoman history have brought us a long way. They challenge the previously hegemonic myths of origins, decline, politics and communal relations by urging us to consider the historicity of events in question, which had long been eclipsed by Orientalist, Eurocentric approaches favouring some variant of modernisation theory.<sup>1</sup> In fact, in terms of inter-group relations many works now devote themselves to emphasising the relative harmony between various ethnic and religious elements through much of the empire's history, or at least to describing disharmony as historical rather than natural.<sup>2</sup> However, this rosy picture often collapses when the end of the empire is considered, and we seem unable to part with the powerful teleological narrative of nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

This paper seeks to contribute to the discussion of nationalism on two interrelated levels. First, in response to the problem posed above, I hope to nuance the idea that imperial disintegration and nationalism were *inherently* intertwined, and by extension, that a separate and nationalist state was the dominant goal of ethnic leaders. Inspired by Balibar (1991a, 1991b), our first step is to recognise that forms other than the nation-state, let alone the *nationalist* state, were possible even as the twentieth century saw their rapid multiplication. My study of the Kurds in the late Ottoman period confirms this point in its demonstration of how even most 'nationalists' among them continued to envision themselves as members of the multi-national Ottoman state, the temptingly powerful rise of nationalism in their day notwithstanding. My suggestion has important implications for students and scholars of nationalist movements among other non-dominant groups not only in the Ottoman Empire, but in contemporaneous empires such as the Habsburg,<sup>4</sup> and in later states like Iraq, Rwanda and Sudan.

Second, my suggestion leads us to take a theoretical cue from a component of Hroch's (1993: 6) analysis of nationalism among non-dominant groups that appears to be overlooked: what if we need a new vocabulary for discussing national movements? What if the term 'nationalism *stricto sensu*', as Hroch puts it, does not really apply to some of what we call 'nationalism', and in fact leads to 'serious confusion'? In following Hroch's suggestion that we find a new way of talking about nationalism, the Kurdish case considered here opens

our eyes to the possibility that national movements among non-dominant groups in multi-ethnic states can be fully committed to their own movement while continuing to envision their fates as intertwined with other, even dominant, groups. This observation may be helpful not only to students of history, but also to those of us who have watched horrifying events unfold in places like the Balkans and Rwanda, and now Iraq and Sudan, to name a few. After all, the tragedies in these lands seem to authenticate the notion that multi-ethnic entities cannot be anything but a recipe for disaster. The present study questions this received wisdom, and proposes that a joint effort to rethink what we know about minority nationalism may involve not only a reconceptualisation of the very terms we use, but perhaps an accompanying shift in approach too.

Using archival sources, the Kurdish-Ottoman press and secondary sources in several languages, I will illustrate how the so-called 'Kurdish nationalist movement' was neither unified nor linear. Rather, it was several movements instigated by diverse actors, who embraced different visions of the kind of social and political entity they hoped to create in the early twentieth century. While one can speak of a Kurdish nationalist movement in the late Ottoman period, the notion of 'Kurdish nationalism', or, more appropriately, 'Kurdism', was tinted with varying shades of meaning for different groups. This is best illustrated through an analysis of the Kurdish organisations that existed in the late Ottoman period. For the founders and members of Kurdish 'clubs' in the capital, many of whom were influenced by trends in European sociology, nationalism was seen as a means for Ottomans in general to become strong through the education and modernisation of each of their constituent elements. For affiliates of these clubs in the provinces, however, 'Kurdishness' carried a different meaning; in these clubs members organised themselves to protect the 'rights of the Kurds'. Rights here meant the vast privileges enjoyed by tribal chiefs under the patronage of Sultan Abdülhamid II, which were threatened with the Young Turk Revolution of 1908; and not what has come to be considered minority rights relating to autonomy or cultural preservation.<sup>5</sup>

Although the final years of the empire's existence – the years immediately following World War I – are among the richest in terms of the story of early Kurdish nationalism, this paper will investigate the lesser-studied period of 1908–09, the years directly following the Young Turk Revolution and the reinstatement of the Ottoman Constitution. Although the focus of the present study is narrow in terms of its temporal scope, it is an important one for reassessing the character of early Kurdish nationalism. This is because a critical examination of the first Kurdish nationalist club of 1908–09, *Kürd Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (the Kurdish Society of Mutual Aid and Progress, hereafter *KTTC*), and of the agendas of its provincial branch membership demonstrates that the provincial constituents were part of a very different movement from that of their counterparts in the capital. While the vocabulary adopted by the provincial branch members was 'Kurdist', their vision was not

nationalist. I will argue below that although the two movements (Kurdish nationalist and what I tentatively call 'non-nationalist Kurdism'), did find some common ground in the years immediately preceding and especially following World War I, they emerged and merged as one of several *responses* to the threatened state and final break-up of the Ottoman Empire. The movements were neither a cause nor a preordained result of the empire's break-up. Indeed, even for the more overtly nationalist of the two movements, nationalism did not necessarily conflict with the preservation of the empire. Hence, this paper not only adds to recent efforts to nuance the real story of early Kurdish nationalism,<sup>6</sup> it also confronts the assumed teleological connection between nationalism and the 'inevitable' end of the Ottoman Empire, and contributes to the larger discussion on minority nationalism in light of Hroch's suggestion that we may need to recast our discussions of such phenomena.

### **Kurdish nationalism, non-nationalist Kurdism, and the Kurdish Society of Mutual Aid and Progress, 1908–09**

In 1908–09, nearly two decades of political activity by the umbrella organisation broadly known as the 'Young Turk' movement achieved one of its two major goals: the reinstatement of the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 (which had been shelved for three decades), and the dethronement of Sultan Abdülhamid II.<sup>7</sup> The Young Turk Revolution heralded numerous important changes for the peoples of the Ottoman Empire, such as the revival of the Ottoman Constitution, which led to campaigns, elections and new kinds of politics. It has also often been credited with helping to advance the novel political activity of nationalism. Scholars working on different parts of the empire have drawn numerous connections between the events of 1908–09 and the rise of national and regional identities, and nationalist movements. In her study of Libya, for example, Anderson (1991: 225) makes the broader connection that 'much of the Ottoman elite was prompted by events between the Young Turk revolution and the end of World War I to reexamine and readjust their political identities, and many abandoned the Ottomanist and pan-Islamic sentiments they had earlier embraced in favor of Turkish, Arab, or regional loyalties'. An examination of Kurdish politics, particularly the 'Kurdish clubs' established during this period, confirms the relevance of Anderson's statement for segments of Kurdish society as well, albeit with a caveat, which will be spelled out presently.

Following the regime change heralded by the events of 1908–09, leading Kurdish intellectuals and notables established a small number of political clubs and committees in the empire's capital and provincial centres. Although they may not have been the first specifically Kurdish organisations in existence<sup>8</sup> or even reflective of the first buds of nationalist ideas,<sup>9</sup> these clubs are important as the earliest *significant* evidence of Kurdish political

organisation within the empire's limits, and also because of their prominence in histories of early Kurdish nationalism.

The first and perhaps most important Kurdish organisation that was formed after the events of 1908–09 was the Kurdish Society for Mutual Aid and Progress (*KTTC*). It was founded not in geographical Kurdistan, but in Istanbul, by Kurdish intellectuals and notables who were largely resident in the empire's capital. Many of these individuals belonged to old dynastic Kurdish families, whose 'statelets' had been dismantled by the central Ottoman government earlier in the nineteenth century, and who had been living in 'exile' in the capital ever since.<sup>10</sup> The club sponsored the publication of the eponymous journal, *Kürd Teavün ve Terakki Gazetesi* (*Kurdish Journal of Mutual Aid and Progress*, hereafter *KTTC*), and also set up an educational organisation, *Kürd Neşr-i Maarif Cemiyeti* (Kurdish Society for the Diffusion of Learning), which is said to have established a school for Kurdish children in the capital.<sup>11</sup>

Articles published in the journal by what became known as 'the Kurdish club' in Istanbul showed interest in a number of themes, most of which concerned the position of the Kurds in the empire and in the modern world, but also larger Ottoman issues. Indeed, the goals of the *KTTC*, as stated in the first issue of the journal, included defending the Constitution; raising the levels of education in Kurdish society and fulfilling other 'modern needs' of the Kurds; and promoting friendship among all Ottoman groups, particularly among Kurds and Armenians.<sup>12</sup> Other, individually authored articles rarely strayed from these stated purposes in their discussions, and included an array of subjects ranging from the development of the Kurdish language as a medium of instruction in schools, to the activities of the Ottoman parliament. In fact, writers were particularly interested in protecting the territorial integrity of the empire, sentiments that emerged clearly in their discussions of political turmoil in other parts of the empire, namely Crete and the Balkans. They also emphasised the importance of the Kurdish element in the Ottoman context, and argued that the education, modernisation and protection of the freedoms of the Kurdish people were important not just for Kurdish society, but for the good of the empire overall.<sup>13</sup>

In reviewing the contents of these articles it seems fair to concur with M. E. Bozarslan's (1998: 22) assessment of the journal as a reflection of the two political tendencies among the Kurdish intellectuals who published it: an emphasis on freedom and a commitment to the constitutional regime, and unity within the larger framework of the Ottoman State with special emphasis on the advancement of Kurdish civilisation and Kurdish freedom. Yet, we must reassess the notions of 'Kurdish freedom' and 'Kurdish rights', which have been portrayed as key tenets of the Kurdish nationalist movement, as we submit events in the Kurdish-inhabited provinces to greater scrutiny. Such scrutiny and analysis will show how some activities and associations that have to date been considered 'Kurdish nationalist' were something other than what our current vocabulary on nationalism has allowed for: they constituted a

different kind of social and political movement, undertaken by once-privileged Kurdish chiefs who found their power bases threatened by the early policies of the new regime.

Istanbul was not the only locale in the empire to host a new Kurdish club following the events of 1908–09. Indeed, Kurdish clubs popped up in numerous towns in Kurdistan, including Bitlis, Diyarbekir, Erzurum, Mosul, Muş and Van shortly after the *KTTC* was established in the capital. These clubs have erroneously been considered as straightforward ‘branches’ of the Istanbul *KTTC*, whose members espoused views and agendas similar to those of the ‘parent club’ in the capital.<sup>14</sup> Certainly there was some branch affiliation; however, the impetus to organise was not necessarily nationalist for all, or even most, members.

The British Consul’s report on the inauguration of the Diyarbekir club is telling in this regard: according to the report, the opening of the Kurdish Club of Diyarbekir began at the main mosque and proceeded ‘with great pomp and ceremony’, with a procession of dervishes bearing religious banners throughout the city. Speeches were made by prominent individuals, including the provincial governor, with a crowd of some 13,000 in attendance.<sup>15</sup> But although the name of the club reflected a particular (read by some as national) identity – Kurdish – the discourse at the ceremony had little to do with nationalism of any kind. Rather, it was a statement against the new constitutional regime, which local Kurdish chiefs regarded as threatening. Indeed, at the end of the ceremony, a document protesting against the Constitution and favouring the application of Islamic law was reported to have been signed by some 3,000 of those in attendance. The dragoman (local guide/interpreter) at Diyarbekir also conveyed to the Consul the disaffection with which the Kurds of Diyarbekir regarded the new regime. The Consul feared that if these views were widely disseminated by Kurdish leaders, they would gain the support of the Kurdish masses. Although the local Kurdish club stated its intentions to uphold the wishes of its parent club, the Consul believed that the general tendency of the movement did not ‘seem to comply with such an attitude’. His report also reiterated his ‘general impression’ that the Kurdish club of Diyarbekir would be much stronger than the local club of the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), which represented the new regime.<sup>16</sup>

Consular reports such as these (indeed there were many) reveal that the Great Powers were afraid of provincial rebellions of any kind, particularly in Armenian areas. When considered in conjunction with Kurdish and Ottoman publications of the period, these reports also show that the Diyarbekir ‘branch’ of the *KTTC* was not necessarily a nationalist club, even though it bore the name of its parent club. Nor was it a religious alliance, although the vocabulary of the inauguration ceremony was rich in religious symbols and discourse. Rather, as I will elaborate below, the Diyarbekir Kurdish club, like many of its counterparts in other provincial cities, attracted members from among the disaffected Kurdish *aghas* (tribal chiefs/notables), who were

disgruntled with the new regime not merely for ideological reasons, but for material (mainly economic) reasons too. It was this alienation that prompted them to organise in the provinces.

The central Istanbul-based Kurdish club, the *KTTC*, seems, on the other hand, to have been not simply an opportunity for Kurdish intellectuals and notables to express their growing nationalist sentiments in the new era of freedom, but rather an attempt by the Kurdish elite resident in the capital to co-opt and control the direction of such sentiments in the Kurdish provinces. This, as I will illustrate below, was done for a dual purpose: firstly, Kurdish intellectuals who supported the new regime felt it was important to extend the reins of the new government to the provinces and to encourage locals to support it; secondly, it was of supreme value to them to find a way of convincing the new regime to view the Kurds in a favorable light. After nearly three decades of Hamidian rule, with its well-known 'affirmative action'<sup>17</sup> policies for select Kurdish tribes and their chiefs, members of the new regime and many Ottomans at large tended to view 'the Kurds' as a single, indeed problematic and backward entity. The discourse of the Kurdish intellectuals was designed to counter this negative image.<sup>18</sup>

As mentioned above, the founding of the provincial 'Kurdish clubs' was connected to the activity of the disaffected Kurdish chieftains in response to policies proposed and implemented by the new regime. It may also have been the partial result of attempts by the Kurdish elite in Istanbul to control the direction of such political activity in the provinces, which would come to be regarded by 1910 as 'a Kurdish movement'. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the full history behind the disaffection that prompted this movement, but it is necessary to provide a context for the political activities of provincial Kurds after 1908.

News that the Ottoman Constitution had been reinstated was greeted with joy by many groups across the empire; it was also looked upon with ambivalence, if not outright suspicion, by others. Kurdish chiefs whose power had grown enormously during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) counted themselves among those who were undecided about or overtly hostile to the new order.<sup>19</sup> Officials in the new regime, after all, seemed intent on reversing many trends that had taken shape over the previous decades of Hamidian rule, particularly the patronage networks that centered around loyalty to the Sultan and his trusted advisors. The Hamidiye Light Cavalry, a Kurdish tribal militia that Sultan Abdülhamid II and his close advisors formed in 1890, was one institution that had long been regarded as exemplifying the worst kinds of abuses committed by the Hamidian regime. A wide range of Ottomans, including Armenian and Kurdish peasants and non-Hamidiye Kurdish tribes, as well as Ottoman officials and army officers, resented the power and privilege that Hamidiye chiefs had amassed since the tribal cavalry was established. The state-sponsored Hamidiye chiefs were connected with numerous criminal activities in the region including murder, raids and land-grabbing. Although the majority of these activities were not

ordered by the state, the government often turned a blind eye, and as such, they went largely unpunished and unrectified.<sup>20</sup>

So, when the new regime took the reins of government in 1908, it first dismissed Zeki Pasha, the close confidante of the Sultan who commanded the Kurdish militia (and who had been its key patron and protector),<sup>21</sup> and then proceeded to crack down on the activities of Hamidiye chiefs and other Kurdish 'brigands' in the region. In its efforts to show that it was committed to promoting equality and the rule of law for all Ottomans, officials in the new regime proceeded to arrest many Hamidiye chiefs, some of whom were from the most powerful Hamidiye tribes.<sup>22</sup> News of these arrests, and of expeditions to confiscate weapons from Kurdish tribes, were published in the official Ottoman gazette, *Takvim-i Vekayi*, as the government sought to publicly demonstrate its dedication to instilling law and order in the Kurdish provinces.<sup>23</sup> The new regime spoke of disbanding the Hamidiye cavalry, thereby causing great anxiety to those who used the militia as a vehicle for power and privilege. Plans to fully disband the militia were followed in the regime's early years by proposals to increase the restrictions placed on the liberties of Hamidiye chiefs. Hamidiye chiefs particularly resented the new regulations' provisions for the return of their government-issue rifles, and the stipulation that members of the tribal cavalry would now be held accountable for civil offences in civil courts and would face military tribunals only for military crimes. Previously, they had only been answerable to military courts, on the rare occasion that they were actually tried. Expeditions against the Kurds of Dersim, who were not in the Hamidiye, were also planned and underway.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the new regime undertook an active campaign to evict Kurdish chieftains from the lands they had usurped over the preceding years from Armenian peasants, and to force them to return the lands to their rightful owners.<sup>25</sup>

In response to these crackdowns, disaffected chiefs who had been waiting anxiously to see what the new regime had in store for them began to organise in opposition to the new government. Meetings of disgruntled chiefs seem to have begun soon after the crackdowns were instigated.<sup>26</sup> The same month as the first reported gathering, the British Consul at Van stated that a 'Kurdish Club' had been formed in Van as a branch of the club in Istanbul. Its principal members were reported to be 'Kurdish *aghas* of bad character – Hussein Pasha, Emin Pasha, Mustafa Bey, and Kop Mehmed Bey of the Hayderanli [a powerful Hamidiye tribe] . . . Most of the Van members are tithe farmers . . . and others, who fear for their illicit gains under the new regime, and have a certain following among the "bashi-bozuk [irregular troops/thugs]" class in Van'. Although they were not yet formidable, and their efforts to intimidate the provincial governor had so far been fruitless, under certain circumstances 'they might be an element of danger'. The consul further believed their existence to be 'a sort of counter-blast to the violence of the [Armenian] Tashnakists, whose talk about "vengeance" has roused Kurdish apprehensions'.<sup>27</sup> A month later, the inauguration of the Diyarbekir branch of the



*KTTC* (described above) took place, and similar clubs were established in other provincial towns, where they attracted a wide following from the disaffected segment of Kurdish society.<sup>28</sup>

In light of such events, these Kurdish clubs should not be seen simply as branches of the Istanbul club, which had more of an ethno-nationalist, albeit strongly Ottomanist, outlook. They were committees of protest against the new 'persecutions' Kurdish chiefs faced, these being attempts by the government to bring the region more firmly under control, to dismantle the patronage networks that had been cultivated in the Hamidian period, and to reverse the disadvantage to local peasants, non-Hamidiye tribes, and local governors who could not rule effectively. Members of the provincial branches of the *KTTC* did, however, use the vocabulary of 'Kurdism' in their protests. They argued that they were being singled out for punishment, and hence their discourse about protecting the 'rights of the Kurds' was more a protest against this punishment; whereas for members of the main branch in Istanbul, it was a call for education, the development of the Kurdish language, and less so for administrative autonomy – the things we normally associate with nationalism. Unlike many of the Kurdish intellectuals in the capital who supported the CUP (at least for the first few years it was in power), members of the Kurdish clubs in the provinces sought a return to the status quo before the Constitution. Their calls to 'return to the Sharia' were symbolic of this aspiration.<sup>29</sup>

The clubs in the provinces served as a forum for protest, but also as bet-hedging – a theme that would grow increasingly prominent in the story of Kurdish nationalism in the late Ottoman period.<sup>30</sup> In addition to providing a channel through which Kurdish chiefs could meet with others who were similarly alienated, these clubs, through their affiliation with the central committee in Istanbul, allowed members and affiliates access to their journals. Several Hamidiye and other Kurdish chiefs submitted letters to the editor which revealed their message of protest on the one hand, and contained their professions of loyalty to the new regime on the other – a classic bet-hedging strategy. The letters were often designed to repudiate certain allegations against the authors, and to convince the new regime not to prosecute or punish them by denying guilt of the crimes with which they were charged, and by declaring their allegiance to the Constitution and the new regime.<sup>31</sup> Similar appeals were also submitted to *Takvim-i Vekayi*.<sup>32</sup>

In their pronouncements of loyalty to the new regime, Kurdish chiefs in the provinces were not so different from their counterparts at the central club. Indeed, it seems that the key to the clubs' agenda was the effort to convince the new regime of the loyalty of the Kurds as a group. Although there had been a good number of Kurdish intellectuals affiliated with the CUP for years prior to its coming to power, it is evident that there was a strong contingent in the new regime who viewed with suspicion a group they identified as 'the Kurds'. This wariness stemmed from their observation of Kurdish allegiance to the Sultan against whom their opposition was focussed – allegiance which

was built up through the years of Sultan Abdülhamid II's 'affirmative action' policy among Kurdish chiefs, as described above. Also, under European pressure to right the wrongs committed against Armenians, with which plenty of Kurdish chiefs had been associated, the new regime targeted the provinces inhabited by Kurds and Armenians for significant reforms. In spite of the fact that there were numerous educated Kurds in their own (Young Turk) movement, the general stereotype that 'the Kurds' were a backward, ignorant group that needed to be controlled and civilised was widespread. Kurdish intellectuals wanted to dispel these notions, and worked hard to do so in their journals. But the opening ceremonies of their club in Istanbul, which was held not long after the reinstatement of the Constitution, revealed their concerns and showed how they planned to address them.

At the initial meeting, held at the Ayasofya mosque in Istanbul, these worries featured prominently among the resolutions adopted by attendees. They wished to jettison the 'calumnious allegations of the journal *Feyz-i Hurriyet* [*sic*] against the loyal Kurdish population' and to make it known through press releases that it was 'only the *aghas* who [were] responsible for the misfortune of the Kurdish country and the vexations from which their Christian compatriots suffer'. They also made it clear that they would not elect to the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies those Kurdish notables known for violence, and they planned a letter-writing campaign in this regard.<sup>33</sup> At another early meeting, which was held at a *café de lecture* in Istanbul's Vezneciler neighborhood, speeches were made in which the Kurds present took an oath to 'fight to their last drop of blood to uphold the tenets of the Constitution which guarantee the security and peace of their dear homeland, goodwill and the progress of all Ottomans'. They affirmed that 'they had no idea, no intention of going against either the Constitution, nor of hindering the patriotic interests of the CUP'. They further vowed to restore the traditional bonds of friendship that existed between Kurds and Armenians, which, they maintained, had been shattered by bad government under the previous administration.<sup>34</sup>

It is difficult to state with absolute certainty whether or not the leaders of the *KTTC* in Istanbul set up branch clubs in order to control the direction of discontent brewing among their provincial compatriots; however, it certainly seems likely that such a mission played some role in the affiliation of the central and branch clubs, given statements made at the initial gatherings of the central club. What is more evident is the fact that the CUP employed leading Kurdish figures who were key members of the central club, to bolster its punitive actions against Kurdish chiefs in the provinces through campaigns of persuasion. The central committee of the CUP selected Sheikh Abdulkadir, an influential Kurdish chief from Şemsdînan who was also a founding member of the *KTTC*, to travel to Kurdistan as an emissary. His mission was to attract the support of provincial Kurds to the new regime. Although he had not been resident in Kurdistan for years, Sheikh Abdulkadir continued to be held 'in great repute' by all the Kurdish chiefs in the region and to wield

considerable influence among them.<sup>35</sup> As planned, in October 1909, Sheikh Abdulkadir arrived in Van, where he joined the provincial governor in planning a series of lectures on the Constitution, and on 'counsels of obedience' to the new regime, that he would give to the regional Kurdish chiefs in attendance.<sup>36</sup> The two-week 'conference' was widely attended not only by regional Kurdish chiefs, but also by influential Armenians. At its conclusion, the group produced a document that contained formal pledges by Kurds to 'live in friendship with their Armenian brothers, to work for the union of all elements, and to help the Government to punish wrong-doers', as well as an agreement to hand over the following spring Armenian lands now in their possession.<sup>37</sup> 'Rebellious' chiefs in Dersim were also taken into custody and given similar 'necessary advice' about displaying obedience toward the new regime,<sup>38</sup> and the influential Kurdish intellectual, Said-i Kurdî, also travelled in the region counselling numerous tribes about the benefits of the Constitution.<sup>39</sup>

These efforts brought several formal declarations of loyalty to the Constitution and the new government by various Kurdish chiefs. However, it did not stop them from agitating for a return to the status quo before the regime change. Even after a Law on Associations was passed late in 1909, under which the Kurdish clubs (among others) were ordered to be closed, the provincial branches continued to function clandestinely. Although it is beyond the period under review, it is important to mention that by 1910 observers remarked that a 'Kurdish movement' in the provinces was alive and growing.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, if there was a 'Kurdish movement' at this time, it was not the nationalist movement of the educated Kurds in Istanbul that was a threat to the empire. After all, for this group, whose voice was still quite marginal, nationalism mainly meant strengthening the Kurdish element of the Ottoman body through education and modernisation, and concomitantly strengthening the Ottoman empire through the enrichment (intellectual and material) of its member groups and diverse regions. The discourse of these Kurdish intellectuals continued at this time to emphasise that the Kurds were an integral element of the Ottoman Empire, a point they would maintain until after World War I. Only after the empire's fall seemed imminent did this claim grow weaker, turning increasingly into bet-hedging on the part of the educated Kurdish elite, as will be discussed briefly in the 'Epilogue' below. It was the non-nationalist 'Kurdish' movement of the provinces that troubled the authorities more than any Kurdish nationalism espoused by educated Kurds in the capital. CUP officials believed, as did their Hamidian predecessors, that the provincial Kurds were too important an element to ignore. At a critical time when the empire faced domestic and particularly external threats, Ottoman authorities sought to maintain the loyalty and affection of its Kurdish population. The Kurds were especially important as they were the dominant community in lands co-habited by Armenians, which the central Ottoman government had seen for decades as a region that was susceptible to

domestic and foreign intrigues. Indeed, as Russian interest in this territory grew, so too did the importance of the Kurds.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, the crackdowns eased up, and it became clear that the Kurdish chiefs were not going to be pressed hard, and perhaps most importantly, they saw that they were not going to be forced to return any usurped lands they had taken from Armenian (and also Kurdish) peasants, something that had been a most pressing concern for them.

### **Epilogue (1910–25)**

Although the new regime appeared to be appeasing the powerful Kurdish tribal element in the provinces, Kurdish chiefs remained ambivalent about the CUP during the years preceding World War I. However, as the empire faced what seemed to be the insurmountable challenges of war (first the Balkan Wars, and then the looming World War I), ideas of Kurdish nationalism spread among them. Thus the movement, which was really two (and indeed more) movements, began to find more common ground, or at least to share the vocabulary of nationalism. By the end of the war, the break-up of the remaining empire seemed imminent. Kurdish nationalism emerged as one possible future political arrangement for the Kurds, neither as a cause nor a direct result of imperial disintegration, but rather, as one of several *responses* to it, and particularly to its state-building aftermath.<sup>42</sup> Specific events brought a growing number of Kurds to espouse nationalism in some form during the years immediately following World War I. However, it was not until after the creation of Iraq, Turkey and Syria and the anti-Kurdish national policies that leaders of the new states set in motion, that Kurdish nationalism, or Kurdism, departed from bet-hedging and emerged as a movement that was clearly distinct from platforms of Ottomanism and pan-Islamism.<sup>43</sup>

### **Conclusions**

It would be wrong to say that Kurdish nationalism did not exist in the late Ottoman period; and it would be even more inaccurate to assert that Ottoman Kurds did not have a Kurdish identity that existed either separate from, or in tandem with, their other tribal, religious or Ottoman identities. However, the social and political movements that pushed the Kurdish element of their identity to the fore were not necessarily in conflict with movements based on other identities, such as Ottomanism, at least not until much later in the game when states that housed Kurds often turned to chauvinist/nationalist policies with regard to their minorities. Indeed, many Kurdish nationalists continued to be Ottomanists until after World War I. Their brand of Kurdish nationalism was not a threat to the empire, but rather, one of several responses to the *threatened state* of the empire. As for their provincial counterparts, who also brought out the Kurdish element of their identity in

their own movement, a nationalist agenda was far from developed. Their activities and affiliation with the provincial Kurdish clubs were a movement of protest against a regime that threatened the power and privilege they had enjoyed under Sultan Abdülhamid II. They rallied against the new regime's policies that impinged on the 'freedom of the Kurds', and believed that the new regime was targeting them for 'persecution'. In this they were not entirely mistaken, as the CUP in power did seek to undo the patron–client networks that the previous regime had cultivated with the Kurds. However, the provincial 'Kurdists' were not after a political arrangement that necessarily favored a distinct Kurdish entity. They would have been satisfied with a return to the *status quo ante* CUP.

Indeed, the central committee of the *KTTC* may have envisioned the provincial branch clubs as a way to control and channel the social movement emerging in the provinces among disgruntled Kurdish chiefs. In this they were acting in support of the new regime, not against it. Their own discourse and activities indicate that although they sought to elevate Kurdish identity and were increasingly wary of the growing strength of Turkish nationalism, they did not envision their movement as one intended to threaten the empire. Rather, they were attempting to preserve the territorial integrity of the empire, while ensuring that the social, political and educational needs of the Kurds were recognised by the Ottoman government. A study of the provincial branches of the *KTTC* casts doubt on any assumptions about the unity of a Kurdish nationalist movement and the common visions of its various members. And a consideration of the so-called Kurdish nationalist movement in the period under review also calls into question the teleological connection between nationalism and the end of empire. Where it was embraced, Kurdish nationalism was not necessarily a threat to the empire, and indeed, for many nationalists, it was actually a discourse of support for the empire.

What the present case study confirms is Hroch's intimation that our current vocabulary for discussing nationalism, particularly minority movements in multi-ethnic states/empires, needs to be nuanced to account for the complexities of such movements. This is particularly important for the case described here, in which some groups that identify themselves as nationalist are in reality pushing for a more inclusive, non-nationalist state that embraces the multiple groups in its borders. What the Kurdish-Ottoman case demonstrates is that ethnic/national movements among non-dominant groups in multi-ethnic states were not necessarily separatist, or even nationalist in the strict sense of the term. Instead, the groups we have called 'nationalist' often hoped to live in peace alongside other 'national' groups, while other ostensibly nationalist elements were merely framing their own political and economic complaints in the new idiom of nationalism.

The tentative vocabulary I have derived from my findings – Kurdish nationalists and non-nationalist Kurdists – is only one step, and perhaps an inadequate and awkward one, towards remedying the problem of terminology outlined by Hroch, a problem that seems deepest when issues of minority

nationalism come into play. Further comparative studies are certainly necessary to arrive at a more satisfactory understanding of minority 'nationalisms'. After all, the problem of terminology indicates that we have not fully grasped the complexities of minority movements in multi-ethnic entities. Doing so might put us on a better path not only to understanding the past, but also to resolving present-day disputes in which common wisdom holds that multi-ethnic states are recipes for disaster, or that minority nationalist movements generally intend to work against the territorial integrity of the state in question. A clearer understanding of the complexities of minority nationalisms, and perhaps a new conceptualisation of the vocabulary used to discern such movements, might together alleviate the fear experienced by states when they witness what appears to be a nationalist movement inside their borders. It can also help peacekeepers assist these powers in recognising the inclusive, and indeed historical elements in a recipe for peace, rather than caving in to states' assumptions that they need to be national(ist) to be strong, and must crush ethnic movements within their borders through assimilation, denial or force. If we can rework our discourse and very approach to nationalism among non-dominant groups, we may not only be able to rethink the past, but also provide for a better future, particularly in states where minority nationalism has been associated with violent ethnic conflict.

## Notes

1 Inspiring new approaches have been offered by too many to list here. A few important examples include Adanir and Faroqhi (2002), Goffman (2002), Todorova (1996) and particularly Abou-El-Haj (2000, 2005).

2 See, for example, Greene (2000), Kafadar (1995) and Lowry (2003).

3 See, for example, Davison (1977) and Karpat (1988). A few recent exceptions are noteworthy: see the unpublished papers of Petrov, Poutouridou and Yosmaoğlu (2003), who joined me on the American Historical Association panel, 'Imperial Disintegration and Nation-Building: the Case of the Ottoman Empire'. Also invaluable were the comments offered by Rifa'at 'Ali Abou-El-Haj and Donald Quataert, the panel's commentator and chair, respectively.

4 Comparative research would be fascinating given Michael Mann's (1993: 347) comment that 'Provincial nations and classes had settled in for Habsburg rule – but geopolitics dictated otherwise'. A strikingly similar picture appears in the Ottoman case, as I argue in this essay.

5 To add complexity to the issue, for some Kurdish intellectuals, Kurdishness was a project deliberately set in motion to reclaim a traditional political arrangement for one family using the idiom of nationalism. Consider the activities of the Bedir Khan brothers beginning in 1898 and gaining momentum throughout the following decades to head the Kurdish nationalist movement. For them it was a means of returning some power the family had lost with the destruction of their powerful emirate earlier in the nineteenth century. Part of their nationalist campaign included aspirations (although not overt) to reclaim the emirate their family once ruled over – a return to Kurdish imperial glory at a time of Ottoman imperial disintegration. While this certainly adds another interesting variety of nationalism to those discussed here, it is not within the scope of the present essay to develop this further. Interested readers may consult Klein (1996).

6 I hope to build upon and add to the fascinating discussions and insights in: H. Bozarslan (1996, 1997a, 1997b, 2000), van Bruinessen (2002), Fuccaro (2002), McDowall (2004), Natali

(2005), Özoğlu (2004), Yalçın-Heckmann (1990), Yeğen (1996), as well as the contributions by the authors in Vali (2003), who have collaborated to rethink early Kurdish nationalism.

7 See Hanioglu (1995, 2001) for background on the Young Turk movement.

8 There is vague information about a Kurdish organisation called Kürdistan Azm-i Kavi Cemiyeti, which one Kurdish nationalist recalls in his memoirs as having been founded by Diyarbekirli Fikri Efendi and Kürdizade Ahmet Ramiz Bey in Cairo, which was active from 1900 to 1904 (Kadri Cemil Paşa 1991: 31).

9 Two other activities should be mentioned here. The first is the Sheikh Ubeydullah rebellion of 1879–81, which has been widely considered as the first ‘Kurdish nationalist’ movement (Jwaideh 1960) and (Olson 1989). While it is certainly true that the sheikh employed a nationalist idiom of sorts, it is a bit of a stretch to call it a nationalist movement. Second, there was the publication of the first Kurdish journal, *Kürdistan*, from 1898 to 1902 by two members of the Bedir Khan family – a family that once ruled over a Kurdish principality, and whose members continued to seek some sort of return to their former status. The journal, while certainly important in the story of early Kurdish nationalism, must be viewed with the family’s history in mind, and must also be seen in the context of the Young Turk movement of opposition to Sultan Abdülhamid II (Klein 1996).

10 Two of the three founding members were from these traditional dynastic families, Bedir Khanzade and Babanzade. A third was from a powerful sheikhly family, Şemdinanzade (Celil 2000: 55–71). Others were also from the more traditional Kurdish elite. This would stand in contrast to the provincial membership, which was made up of the new tribal elite formed during the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

11 See the memoir of a former member, Kadri Cemil Paşa (1991: 27–32), for further information on these activities.

12 ‘Cemiyet’in Beyanname’si’, *KTTG*, No. 1 (22 Teşrin-i Sâni, 1324/Dec. 5, 1908), 1, in M. Emîn Bozarslan’s reprints of *KTTG*, (Uppsala: Weşanxana Deng, 1998).

13 See the range of articles in M. Emîn Bozarslan’s reprints of the journal (Uppsala: Weşanxana Deng, 1998).

14 I must include myself among those who wrongly saw these provincial clubs in this light (1996).

15 Heard to Lowther. Beirut, Jan. 3, 1909. Based on a report submitted by Mr Mugerditchian, the Dragoman at Diyarbekir, on Dec. 22, 1908 (PRO: FO 195/2317).

16 Heard to Lowther. Beirut, Jan. 3, 1909. Based on a report submitted by Mr. Mugerditchian, the Dragoman at Diyarbekir, on Dec. 22, 1908 (PRO: FO 195/2317).

17 . . . in the words of Hamit Bozarslan (personal communication, April 2001).

18 Ironically, the discourse of ‘a single Kurdish people’ that was promoted in their publications distinguished between different members of Kurdish society, dividing them into supporters and detractors of the constitutional regime, and detracted, then, from the discourse of unity required of nationalism.

19 The British ambassador reported that although most members of Kurdish provincial society were overjoyed at the news, the ‘numerous ranks of robbers and murderers’ experienced great anxiety with regard to what might happen to them as a result of ‘the mysterious change’, and they chose to remain quiet until they could see how events would develop. The Kurdish *beys* and *aghas* were ‘much annoyed’, as they feared it would put an end to their activities against ‘defenceless Armenians and the subject Kurdish tribes’ (Lowther to Grey. No. 533. *Therapia*, Sept. 1, 1908 [FO 424/216]). The situation in Albania was similar: Albania had a similar social structure and segment of the general population who, like the Kurdish tribes, regarded the sultan as their protector and feared the Young Turk revolution and later the sultan’s downfall, as they believed they would bring a loss of privileges for them (Skendi 1967: 341–4).

20 For more information on the Hamidiye Light Cavalry see Klein (2002).

21 See Shipley to Lowther, No. 47 Confidential. Erzurum, Aug. 21, 1908 (PRO: FO 195/2284) and Srabian to Boppe, No. 66. Erzurum, Aug. 19, 1908 (MAE Nantes: E/131).

22 For example, Abdülkerim Bey of the Miran tribe was one important figure who was arrested (see Dickson to Lowther, Beirut, Jan. 15, 1909 [PRO: FO 195/2317]; ‘Dahilî: Miran Reisi Abdülkerim’, *KTTG* No. 3 (6 Kânûn-i Evvel, 1324 [Dec. 19, 1908]), back cover, reprinted in

M. Emîn Bozarslan, *KTTG*, (Uppsala: Weşanxana Deng, 1998)). A notice in *Takvim-i Vekayi*, the official Ottoman journal, mentions the arrests of other leading figures in the Mîran tribe (No. 272, 2 Temmuz, 1335/July 15, 1909).

23 See, for example, notices in *Takvim-i Vekayi*, No. 47 (11 Teşrin-i Sâni, 1324/Nov. 24, 1908) and No. 99 (9 Kânûn-i Sâni, 1324/Jan. 22, 1909).

24 See, for example, 'Extract from a dispatch of the American Consul at Kharput, Turkey, to the American Ambassador at Constantinople', Aug. 3, 1908, in Lowther to Grey, No. 505, Istanbul, Aug. 22, 1908 (PRO: FO 424/216).

25 In fact, the land question (also known in some circles as the 'agrarian question') was a key factor in the Kurdish chiefs' movement against the government, and also against their Armenian neighbors. It would continue to play a role in regional violence not only for the Hamidian and Second Constitutional periods, but also during World War I and beyond (see Klein 2002: Ch. 4, and Klein 2007).

26 For example, Ottoman authorities were suspicious of the motives behind the Kurdish chiefs who met at the residence of the Sheikh of Zilan in November, 1908 (see *Takvim-i Vekayi*, No. 41 [4 Teşrin-i Sâni, 1324/Nov. 17, 1908]). They believed that one Hacı Mehmed of the Reşkotan tribe and the Sheikh of Zilan were planning a massacre of Armenians (possibly to discredit the new regime). When police arrived to arrest the sheikh, he told them that the meeting was held not to plan any criminal activity, but rather to advise the Kurdish *aghas* in attendance as to the good of the Constitution and the benefits that it would bring them. Of course the true mission of the meeting will likely never be known, but it should be remembered, as we will see below, that a number of savvy Kurdish chiefs would make great efforts to appear to be loyal to the new regime, while continuing acts of rebellion of various degrees.

27 Dickson to Lowther. No. 31. Van, Nov. 3, 1908 (PRO: FO 195/2284). Italics added.

28 They may also have received the support of disaffected Ottoman officials who resented the changes. At the same time, other local Ottoman officials seemed to support the clubs for the same reason as did the leadership of the Kurdish organisation in the capital: they believed that it could serve as a vehicle through which the provincial Kurdish leadership could be persuaded to acknowledge and accept the Constitution and the new government.

29 The Diyarbekir club was not the only branch to sign a petition in this vein. Reports also mention that members of the Bitlis branch had 'compelled under threats of death the Young Turk officers to sign a telegram addressed to the Cabinet of Tewfik Pasha demanding the full application of the Sheriat' (Safrastian to Shipley. Bitlis, June 8, 1909 [PRO: FO 195/2317]). This event took place before the dethronement of Sultan Abdülhamid II.

30 Bet-hedging refers to a time-honored practice of Kurds and other 'borderland' communities to preserve local autonomy by constantly reassessing and renegotiating their relationships with their neighbors and rulers. The Kurdish practice of 'bet-hedging' may have been a very productive strategy for communal survival in between powerful states rather than simply a counterproductive division in the pursuit of a national state. In a forthcoming publication I plan to explore this concept further.

31 See, for example, letters in *KTTG* 2 (29 Teşrin-i Sani, 1324/Dec. 12, 1908), 18; 8 (19 Kanun-i Sani 1342/Jan. 23, 1909), 68-69 [Bozarslan reprints of *KTTG*].

32 See, for example, letters in *Takvim-i Vekayi*, No. 83 (20 Kanun-i Evvel, 1324/Jan 2, 1909); No. 86 (27 Kanun-i Evvel, 1324/Jan. 9, 1909); No. 87 (28 Kanun-i Evvel, 1324/Jan. 10, 1909); No. 98 (8 Kanun-i Sani 1324/Jan. 21, 1909); and No. 111 (21 Kanun-i Sani, 1324/Jan. 3, 1909).

33 'Les Kurdes', *Stamboul*, Sept. 1908 (MAE Nantes: Kurdes E/131). Translations from French, italics added.

34 Article by Colonel Süleyman for *Stamboul* of Sept. 1908 (MAE Nantes: Kurdes E/131). Translations from French.

35 Morgan to Lowther. No. 17. Van, Oct. 27, 1909 (PRO: FO 195/2318).

36 Morgan to Lowther. No. 17. Van, Oct. 27, 1909 (PRO: FO 195/2318).

37 Morgan to Lowther. No. 18. Van, Nov. 17, 1909 (PRO: FO 195/2318).

38 *Takvim-i Vekayi*, No. 305 (3 Ağustos, 1325/Aug. 16, 1909).



39 Sırma (1998: 210).

40 Various documents in PRO/FO collections 195/2347 and 424/224 from 1910 make such reference.

41 Russian interest in the Kurds was not recent (see Reid 2000: 159). See also Ahmad (1994: 57) and Reynolds (2002). The latter paper is particularly interesting in its attention to how Russia was not only interested in establishing contacts among the Kurds, but actually worked to encourage a Kurdish nationalist movement. My thanks to Mike Reynolds for providing me with a copy of this unpublished paper.

42 Özoğlu (2001: 386) points out that at the end of World War I, Kurdish nationalism, like many other nationalist movements in the Ottoman Empire (notably Arab nationalism), was not a *cause* of imperial disintegration, but rather, a result of it. Özoğlu's challenge to the teleological connection of nationalism and the end of empire is certainly welcome; however, I would prefer to nuance his suggestion by submitting that nationalism was not the *result* of the end of empire, but rather one of many *responses* – it emerged as one of several options considered by Ottoman groups, here Kurds, as the empire stood on its last legs.

43 Of course there were even Kurds who opted to cast their lot in with the Turkish government, a fact that further complicates the story (H. Bozarslan 1990: 1–2).

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