KURDISH SELF-DETERMINATION, TURKISH ANXIETY: THE MAKING OF THE REPUBLICAN RAISON D'ÉTAT

XWEÇARENIVÎSA KURDAN Û ENDÎŞEYA TIRKAN: ÇÊBÛNA AQLÊ DEWLETÊ YÊ CUMHURIYETÊ

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ABSTRACT:

How did the First World War (1914-1918) and its aftermath shape and transform the Kurdish political activism and Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East? How did the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) and its clauses offering the Kurds an opportunity for self-determination influence the Turkish nationalism and the worldview of the founding fathers of the Republic? In the light of these questions, this article seeks to understand and explain the inter-dependent relationship between the Kurdish aspirations for self-determination and the making of the modern Turkish state and the Republican mindset in the early twentieth century. In so doing, the global market of ideas and the transnational historical context (e.g. debates over Wilsonian self-determination and nationhood, centralization vs. decentralization) will be taken into account as well as the ruptures and continuties in the Ottoman-Turkish state tradition against the state-seeking nationalisms. Understanding this historical context influenced by the transnational and local societal and political forces would shed light to unpacking the state-minority relations in Turkey in general and the modern Kurdish question in the Middle East in particular.

Keywords: Kurdish Nationalism, Turkish Nationalism, Self-Determination, World War I, Ontological Security.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise and spread of nations, nation-states and nationalisms in world politics mostly occurred between the late 16th and early 20th centuries. This ideational and institutional shift in the international order also meant the gradual fall of dynasties, kingdoms and empires. Increasing practices of territorial sovereignty and centralizing political authorities since the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and the Enlightenment ideas such as liberty, toleration, fraternity, will of the people and constitutional order laid some of the intellectual origins of 'national' communities and institutional origins of 'national' states. Industrialization and print capitalism along with the spread of vernacular languages definitely helped the spread of the new 'nationalist' paradigm around the world (Smith, 2010). Such historical transformation has arguably been also the modern history of genocides, ethnic cleansings, forced migrations and nationalist violence across the world in the name of making the political and national unit congruent (Gellner, 1983).

The transformation of the Ottoman Empire into different nation-states in the early 20th century was no exception. It was far from a peaceful disintegration. In this process of different ethnonational groups seeking their self-determination, only the Kurds missed a significant opportunity towards having their own political authority or state. While the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 recognized the potential self-determination rights of the Kurds, this was not realized. Instead, in the post-World War I order in the Middle East, the Kurds turned into minorities spread across Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. The roots of the contemporary Kurdish question in the Middle East were seeded in this immediate post-World War I period and still continues to this date as a question of self-determination. The 2017 failed independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan has been one reflection of such desire for self-determination (O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019).

While there was no international support for independence of Iraqi Kurds, Turkey fiercely opposed and challenged the independence attempts due to the century-long fear and anxiety of Kurdish self-determination within Turkey as well. Thus, the political rhetoric and psychological state of Turkey against the Kurdish independence referendum in 2017 reflects the deep-seated anxiety embedded within the Republican *raison d'état* that had to overcome the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 which promoted the idea of Kurdish self-determination.

Hence, the origins of this fear and anxiety with regards to the Kurdish self-determination can be traced back to the early 20th century, particularly the transition process from Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey after World War I where domestic and international dynamics shaped the boundaries of legitimacy for national self-determination and contestation over defining the identity of nations. The founding fathers of the Turkish Republic—already experienced the rapid disintegration of the Empire in the Balkans and the Middle East—could not tolerate the further disintegration of Anatolia, which became the last bastion of Turkish sovereignty. Thus, the question of Kurdish self-determination, internationally recognized with the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, turned into one of the most significant ontological insecurities of modern Turkey.

How did the First World War (1914-1918) and its aftermath shape and transform the Kurdish political activism and Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East? How did the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) offering the Kurds an opportunity for self-determination influence the Turkish nationalism and the worldview of the founding fathers of the Republic? In the

light of these questions, this article seeks to discuss the inter-dependent relationship between the Kurdish aspirations for self-determination and the making of the Turkish Republican raison d'état in the early twentieth century.

In so doing, the global market of ideas and the transnational historical context (e.g. debates over Wilsonian self-determination and nationhood; debates over assimilation, multiculturalism and nation-building, centralization and decentralization) will be taken into account as well as the ruptures and continuities in the Ottoman-Turkish state tradition against the state-seeking nationalisms. Understanding this historical context influenced by the transnational and local societal and political forces would shed light to unpacking the state-minority relations in Turkey in general and the modern Kurdish question in the Middle East in particular.

2. THE AURA AND PSYCHE IN THE LATE OTTOMAN POLITY

The political culture and institutions of the Ottoman Empire were indigenous but not fully independent from the broader international system. The gradual rise of a new inter-state system mostly based on European modernity put the Ottoman state under a heavy challenge of reform and transformation in the late 18th and early 19th century. New rules and norms surrounding constitutionalism, liberalism and nationalism in Europe inevitably entailed a new political order and social contract in the Ottoman establishment as well. In order to successfully adopt and practice these new norms and principles, new governing institutions surrounding the state were extremely necessary such as a centralized administration for efficient legal and financial organization and a centralized security apparatus for the monopoly of legitimate use of violence. Additionally, the legitimatization of these new institutional arrangements had to be done based on a new political identity with a shared language of existence and belonging that would set the mental/territorial boundaries of 'insiders' and 'outsiders', 'us' vs. 'them'.

In the emerging new world order and the inter-state system, such European values, norms, and institutions were predominantly becoming the center of gravity and 'the standard of civilization'. The more distant any states would be from these standards, the more would they be regarded as 'outsiders' and 'objects' with limited or no recognition as equal members of the inter-state system and the world of civilization. As the revolutionary transformations in Europe increased the economic capacities and military capabilities of the great powers such as France and Britain, the self-confidence of their ruling elites and their increasing belief in the moral superiority to 'civilize others' justified their worldwide colonial adventures and the so-called humanitarian interventions (Rodogno, 2012).

Until the turn of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire was mostly an empire of success and victory with self-confidence in its own of authentic institutions and moral-religious conscience. The Empire had its own autonomy and self-standing in world affairs with no imminent necessity to be recognized and validated by others. Internally, the decentralized nature of governance in vast territories (such as the rule of ayans) and the confessional autonomy of non-Muslim millets (*millet-i Rum, millet-i Ermeni, millet-i Yahudi*) loosely kept the state and society together without disrupting the relative peace of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious social order (Yaycioglu, 2016).[1] According to Ka-

1 - Mehmet Ö. Alkan states that there were 13 millets officially recognized by the Ottoman Empire including Assyrians,

ren Barkey, Ottoman pluralism was an organizational necessity for "an interference-free and coercion-free imperial space" (Barkey, 2012, p. 24). This doesn't necessarily refer to a state of romanticized *Pax-Ottomana* since the Ottoman rule was always contested and co-opted but the politicization and sectarianization of identities became an unprecedented challenge for the Empire with the age of European modernity in the 19th century.

The gradual rise and globalization of European modernity along with its new institutions, norms and values caught the Ottomans mostly unprepared and unguarded. The new world order in the making shook the self-confidence and positive self-image of the Ottomans and cornered them into a defensive position as more of an object of history rather than a subject of it. Ottoman Empire was gradually turning into a periphery of Europe after Istanbul's long-standing position as one of the centers of policy-making in world affairs. Thus, the overarching challenge in the late Ottoman polity was to catch up with the modernity and civilization defined by the European centers of power, either by directly adopting their system of values and ideas or vernacularizing modernity in an Ottoman-Islamic way. As Carter V. Findley argues, this challenge and paradox shows significant continuity in modern Turkey and continues to shape modern Turkish polity's encounter with Europeans and the European Union (Findley, 2011).

The challenge for the late Ottoman ruling elites was twofold. First was physical/territorial in the sense that territorial integrity of the empire was constantly under pressure with the incursion of European ideas of popular sovereignty among the non-Muslim communities (Greek independence in 1829, Bulgarian autonomy in 1878, Romania in 1881, Serbia in 1882, Albanian independence in 1912) (Ilicak, 2011). While internal sovereignty was deteriorating by anti-state uprisings, external sovereignty of the Empire was significantly weakened by the European political and economic interventions. This doesn't necessarily mean that the Ottoman state was weak per se but it was a late-comer in retaining the radical changes in its own surroundings in particular and world affairs in general.

Second challenge was ontological/psychological in the sense that the Empire and the ruling polity were losing their sense of order and continuity which triggered an unstable mental state. International Relations scholars call this mental state 'ontological (in)security' based on sociologist Anthony Giddens' study on modernity and self-identity (Mitzen, 2006). States entail ontological security as much as physical security. Any disruptions in the routines, continuities, and flow of everyday experiences trigger anxiety and fear and weaken the positive view of self. The self-image of the Empire was officially based on *Devlet-i Aliyye* (the Sublime State) and the self-perception was a World Empire (*Cihan İmparatorluğu*). By the turn of the 19th century, this self-confidence was declining vis-à-vis European powers and the Ottoman Empire was experiencing a significant legitimacy crisis both internally and externally. The Ottoman Empire was becoming a periphery of Europe with limited internal and external sovereignty. In the face of hegemonic European modernity and its state system, Ottoman Empire was turning into an object of history rather than subject of it. The so-called 'Eastern Question' in the late Ottoman Empire where European powers were concerned about the possible consequences of the Ottoman disintegration was the ramification of Ottomans' age of anxiety and fear of state death.

Nestorians, and Chaldean Catholics (p. 99); see Mehmet Ö. Alkan (2014). "Devletin kendi ifadesiyle "kökü içeride" tehlike olarak azınlıklar:Rumlar, Ermeniler, Yahudiler ve Kürtler" *Birikim, 297: 97-104*.

If one unpacks the essence of reforms and transformations in the late Ottoman Empire, the concern for physical survival and ontological security can be easily revealed. On the one hand, the military-organizational reforms during *Nizam-ı Cedid* (New Order) under the Sultan Selim III. (1789-1807) and institutional reforms of state restructuring during the Tanzimat (1839-1876) sought to address physical/territorial anxieties. On the other hand, the search for an overarching identity for the Empire (Ottomanism, Islamism, Turkism) pursued to address the ontological insecurities of the state and the ruling elites. In that sense, the Tanzimat era Ottomanism, Abdulhamid II's Islamism (1876-1908), and the Committee of Union and Progress (known as Unionists or the Young Turks) entertaining the idea of Turkish nationalism all had a similar logic: that is, addressing the physical and ontological insecurities of the state (Al, 2019a). This doesn't mean that these shifting ruling elites had similar worldviews and ideologies. They definitely had different political projects but all these different projects meant to serve a similar purpose: surviving the state and overcoming the European stigmatization by finding a sovereign identity and a positive self-image.

For instance, in the grand scheme of things, one can argue that the CUP decision to enter World War I on the side of Germany (as well as Austria-Hungary) in October 1914 (against Britain, France and Russia) was perhaps a psychological decision as much as a strategic/material one in order to overcome the protracted sense of loss and defeatedness, the feeling of weakness and insecurities, anxieties of stigmatization and concerns for recognition in the international system since the early 19th century (Aksakal, 2008).

As the internal and external context evolved, the remedy for finding physical and ontological security for the state evolved in parallel as well. For instance, when most of the non-Muslim Balkan territories were lost in the wars of 1912-1913, Ottomanism as a remedy began to lose ground.[2] Since most of the ruling Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) cadres came from the Balkans, their sense of loss, trauma and defeat later shaped their strategic and ideological choices (Reynolds, 2016; Zürcher, 2010). When Arabs as 'Muslim brothers' began to sought secession and independence during and after World War I, Islamism as a solution was weakened. Finally, when various Kurdish political organizations and tribes sought autonomy and secession during the making of the Republic (1919-1938), Turkish nationalism and its project of forced Turkification became the only viable way forward in the minds of the state elites. This toolbox of ideologies and ideas in the mental map of the Ottoman-Turkish ruling elites did not necessarily evolved in a linear way since these ideas were not completely mutually exclusive and they had ebbs and flows depending on the social and political milieu (Al, 2016). The choices to pick from the toolbox of ideas and the market of ideologies were mostly driven with instrumentalist logic to preserve what was left of the Empire and consolidate and mobilize the remaining population around the state.

The final defeat and perhaps the most catastrophic one for the Ottomans was the First World War. At the end of the war, the Ottoman Empire was de facto deceased. The last sultan in Istanbul (Mehmed VI or Mehmed Vahdettin reigned from 1918 until 1922)

2 - The catastrophic result of weakening Ottomanism was the forced deportation and ethnic cleansing committed against the Armenians in Eastern Anatolia in 1915 in the hands of the Young Turks or known as the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). Security and survival of the state in the midst of World War I and the fear of Russian-Armenian alliance against the Ottoman government provided a pretext for such decision. See Ugur Umit Ungor. 2011. *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950. New York: Oxford University Press.*

had a very limited or no sovereignty amidst the British, French and Italian occupation. Only Anatolian peninsula remained as the main homeland where the vast territories of the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans were lost along the way. Yet, articles in the Treaty of Sèvres signed (not ratified) in August 1920 even proposed the partition of what was left: Armenia in Eastern Anatolia, potential Kurdistan in Southeastern Anatolia including the Mosul province, Greek control of Izmir in Western Anatolia (Danforth, 2015). The Istanbul government (under the rule of Grand Vizier Damad Ferid Pasha) was not in a position to resist or negotiate (Özoğlu, 2011). It was Mustafa Kemal Pasha (an ex-CUP member and a military hero of Gallipoli defense in 1915) and his Anatolian resistance movement (1919-1922) who pushed back the terms of Treaty of Sèvres and achieved to replace it with Treaty of Lausanne signed in July 1923 that officially recognized the modern borders of the Republic of Turkey. Territorial claims of Greek and Armenian presence in Anatolia were officially expelled. Yet, the last challenge for Mustafa Kemal and his young Republic to overcome remained: i.e. Kurdish nationalism and discussions over autonomy and independence. Despite Lausanne, the anxiety over the survival of the state was not over.

3. DYNAMICS OF THE NASCENT KURDISH NATIONALISM IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Kurds, approximately reaching to more than 30 million people today across Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria without their own independent state, have been one of the most significant political losers of the transition from the age of empires into the stage of nation-states at the end of World War I.[3] Except the Kurds, many groups (Arabs, Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbians etc.) under the rule of the Ottoman Empire were able to achieve their political sovereignties based on the 'nationality' principle which became the most defining feature of the state system in the international order throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This doesn't necessarily mean that these groups all had a crystallized understanding of what their national characters were or the masses had a refined consciousness of national self-being. Rather many nationalist ethos were *a posteriori* rather than *a priori*, constructed as a consequence of state and nation-building processes. Michael Reynolds aptly argues that "nationalism, understood as the mobilization of groups based on ethnicity for the purpose of asserting a claim to political sovereignty, was at least as much a consequence as a cause of imperial collapse." (Reynolds, 2011, p. 9). Even so, the forms and contents of many national identities throughout the 20th century have been contested, fluid and ever-changing within the shifting geopolitical contexts.

World War I and the trembling Ottoman Empire in fact provided a significant opportunity space for different ethnic communities to make their imagined nationhood and political unit be congruent (Gellner, 1983). Since the principle of national self-determination became the source of political sovereignty and legitimacy in the interstate system by the early 20th century, different communities hyped to be recognized as 'separate nations,' so they could be eligible for their own political sovereignty and be legally accepted by the international community. While the state-holders sought to define their 'nations' in a way not to lose any of their previously recognized territories, state-seekers

3 - See Council on Foreign Relations' infographic on the Kurds, https://www.cfr.org/interactives/time-kurds#!/time-kurds

sought to promote themselves as 'nations' eligible for self-determination in a way to gain a territory of their own (Tilly, 1994).

Kurds can be considered as the late-comers in the race to be recognized as a 'separate nation' and thus be eligible for political sovereignty in the form of autonomy or independence. While the institution of Ottoman Caliphate as the center of Ummah appealed to many ordinary Kurds in the rural peripheries, their deteriorating relationship with the Armenians in Eastern Anatolia since the late 19th century mostly defined their identity consciousness in the form of Anatolian Muslims vs. Armenians. Sultan Abdulhamid II's mobilization of various Kurdish tribes under the institution of Hamidiye regiments (1891-1908) as the security valve against Armenians and Russians was part of the Muslim solidarity or contract (Klein, 2011; Ünlü, 2018). Mustafa Kemal also used this Kurdish psyche strategically in his Anatolian resistance against the Greek, British and French occupation.[4] Armenians and Greeks were framed as 'common others' of Muslim Turks and Muslim Kurds and the struggle was marketed in the name of liberating the Caliphate from foreign invaders (Özoğlu, 2011). Ethnicization of Kurdish political consciousness and the politicization of Kurdish ethnicity among the masses gained significant traction after the Caliphate was abolished in 1924 and the glorification of Turkishness as the monolithic identity of the state by the new Republican regime in the 1920s and 1930s. The Sheikh Said rebellion in 1925 was one of the most organized challenges for the young Republic and perhaps the first significant signal for a series of mass Kurdish uprisings in the years to come. Yet, this doesn't mean that ideas and organizations of Kurdish nationalism was absent before the foundation of the Republic in 1923. Nationalisms are rarely *creatio ex nihilo*.

As in Anthony Smith's *ethnosymbolism*, nations and nationalisms are built on pre-existing cultural and symbolic artefacts where kinships, religious practices, myths, values and memories play significant role in the survival of ethnic communities across generations (Smith, 1986, 2015). In the case of the Kurds, Sharaf Khan's (the *mir* of Bidlis, b.1543-d.1603) *Sharafname* written in 1596 dealing with particular characteristics of Kurdish community such as their language, tribal relations and dynasties; the literary Kurdish writings of Meleyê Ehmedê Cezîrî from Medresa Sor of Cizre (the capital of Bohtan emirate) (Bruinessen, 1999); Kurdish poet and literary writer Ehmede Xani's love story of *Mem û Zîn* written in 1692; the first Kurdish newspaper (named *Kurdistan* and published in Cairo by Mikdat Mithat Bedirhan) in 1898 provided an important symbolic and cultural background as the building blocks of modern Kurdish political identity in the 20th century (Bozarslan, 2008, p. 336; Hassanpour, 2003).

Kurdistan and Kurdish emirates were mostly a buffer zone between the Iranian and Ottoman Empires (Ateş, 2013). As the proliferation of European modernity imposed a new governance mechanism surrounding administrative centralization, the Ottoman ruling elites in the early 19th century had to restructure the imperial state by curbing peripheral power networks (see my discussion above). The autonomous Kurdish emirates such as the Baban and Botan were also targets of Ottoman centralization between 1834 and 1847 (Atmaca, 2019). Although the Kurdish emirates were crushed by the mid-19th century, the Sublime Porte was far from establishing authority and dominance over Kurdistan and the Kurds. Instead, the power vacuum left from the emirates was mostly

4 - See Mango (1999) for the relationship between Mustafa Kemal and the Kurds. Andrew Mango. "Atatürk and the Kurds." *Middle Eastern Studies 35, no. 4 (1999): 1-25.*

filled by the religious networks (such as Naqshbandi Sufi orders) and notable Kurdish sheikhs who were traditionally respected and listened figures of Kurdistan (Al, 2019b, p. 123). Despite increasing role of the sheikhs, Ottoman central government also allied with different tribal chiefs as well (Akin, 2020).These sheikhs could prevent the tribal rivalries and conflicts in Kurdistan. One should also note that Kurds predominantly adhered (and even today) to the Shafi`i madhhab while the Ottoman Empire officially followed Hanafi school of thought in *fiqh (Bruinessen, 1999)*. Thus, Kurdish madrasas had their autonomy from official Islamic teaching of the state as well. This also created a refuge for the Kurdish language and identity to nurture in the periphery. Ruling Kurdistan from Istanbul was never an easy task. Co-optation was usually the main instrument.

In 1880, the Sheikh Ubeydullah rebellion (against Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire) constituted a critical juncture in the history of Kurdistan. Many leading scholars of Kurdish historiography trace the origins of Kurdish nationalism (i.e. seeking statehood or autonomy solely for the Kurds) in this rebellion (Bruinessen, 2000; Jwaideh, 2006; R. Olson, 1991; Vali, 2014). More revisionist approaches argue that the Sheikh Ubeydullah rebellion was a more complicated phenomenon than a simple Kurdish nationalism. According to Sabri Ates, "it is obvious that the revolt had nationalist undertones, but "nationalism" was not the medium which brought the participants together." (Ateş, 2014, p. 794). He argues that collective sectarian threat perception (i.e. Shi'a suppression of Sunni Kurds), Ottoman and Iranian centralizations, the politicization of Armenian question and the increasing European interventions in the name of Christians all contributed to the mobilization of various participants under the Sheikh Ubeydullah. Thus, it would be misleading to reduce this rebellion into clash of monolithic identities of Kurds, Turks and Persians (Ateş, 2014, p. 794). For Hakan Özoğlu, Kurdish nationalism emerged as an outcome of collapsing Ottoman Empire only after World War I, so he is critical to the view that Kurdish nationalism was present before World War I, including the Sheikh Ubeydullah rebellion in the late 19th century (Özoğlu, 2001). Yet, scholars still agree that the Sheikh Ubeydullah was one of the significant back stages in the making of modern Kurdish political identity as political power in Kurdistan shifted from *mirs* to sheikhs.

In the early 20th century before World War I, the Young Turk revolution in 1908 against the Sultan Abdulhamid II and the reestablishment of the constitutional rule after 30 years (since 1878) created a liberal and pluralistic political and cultural environment in the Ottoman polity. Different ethnic and religious groups established variety of cultural organizations and political platforms. *Kürd Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Kurdish Mutual Aid and Progress Society) was established in 1908. The organization's president was Sayyid Abdulkadir (Sheikh Ubeydullah's son) and members included the Kurdish notable families such as the Bedirhan family. The organization also published *Kürd Teavün ve Terakki Gazetesi* as the second Kurdish newspaper after *Kurdistan*. This organization was mostly urban-cultural entity in Istanbul with respect to *ittihad-ı anasır* (unity of elements or Ottomanism; similar to the idea of *E pluribus unum*). Anti-Ottoman Kurdish nationalism was not strong at this time. The tendency was "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 civilization and Kurdish freedom."(Klein, 2007). One of the reasons for the emphasis on Kurdish civilization was to overcome what Ussama Makdisi calls 'Ottoman Orientalism'(Makdisi, 2002). If Istanbul was 'the Orient' within the discourse of European modernity, Arab and Kurdish peripheries were 'the Orient' for the Sublime Porte. Thus, one reason on

the emphasis on Kurdish civilization was to overcome 'the Ottoman Orientalism.' *Hevi* (Kurdish for Hope) was another similar organization founded in 1912. Before World War I, such organizations and intellectual discussions within were pro-Kurdish but mostly not necessarily anti-Ottoman.[5]

4. POST-WORLD WAR I, THE FAILED OTTOMAN STATE, AND 'THE WILSONIAN MOMENT'

As I discussed in the first section of the chapter, World War I came in as 'an opportunity' for the Ottoman Empire, a state that struggled with a great anxiety since the early 19th century over its internal and external standing with regards to the emerging interstate system based on European modernity (particularly centralization, secularization, nationalization, marketization). Self-esteem and positive self-image of the Ottoman state was in crisis against the efficiently emerging European political, economic and military institutions and practices. Archaic governing practices (decentralization, dynastic rule, autonomous military factions etc.) and the traditional social contract mechanisms (i.e. the millet system) over the multi-ethnic and religious demography lagged the Ottoman Empire behind Europe. Political and socio-economic reforms, institutional restructuring and military transformation throughout the 19th century all aimed to catch up with European powers and ultimately overcome the ontological (in)security and decay of the state (especially based on Ibn Khaldun's political thought) (Reynolds, 2016). In this sense, World War I was 'an opportunity' to regain the self-esteem and self-confidence of the state internally and externally. The war did not work as the Ottoman Empire wished; ontological (in)security and anxiety led to the catastrophic ethnic cleansing of Armenians in 1915; and the empire became 'a failed state' with almost no sovereignty. While the Istanbul government under Damad Ferit Pasha was not resistant against the British and French post-war impositions, the ex-CUP cadres under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Pasha planted the first seeds of War of Independence by 1919 in Anatolia against British, French, Greek and Armenian incursions.

Perhaps the most significant international political principle in the post-World War I era was the notion of national self-determination as articulated in the prominent 'Fourteen Points' by the US President Woodrow Wilson in January 1918 (Manela, 2017). The 12th point refers to the potential autonomy to the nations under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.[6] This favorable international moment led to the foundation of Kurdish organizations with ideas of self-determination. *Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti* (Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan) founded in Istanbul in late 1918, entertained the idea of Kurdish self-determination despite the presence of pro-Ottoman voices (Bajalan, 2019). Sayyid Abdulkadir (b.1851-d.1925) was again the president and members included influential

5 - For a more nuanced analysis of Kurdish organizations during the CUP era before World War I, see Djene Rhys Bajalan (2016) Princes, Pashas and Patriots: The Kurdish Intelligentsia, the Ottoman Empire and the National Question (1908–1914), *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 43:2, 140-157. Bajalan argues that ethno-national consciousness was on the rise during this time but Kurdish intelligentsia did not perceive Kurds as 'oppressed nation' in the empire. Bajalan mentions Abdürrezzak Bedirhan as an exception, a former Ottoman diplomat in Russia, who entertained the idea of Kurdish independence with the help of Russians.*

6 - "*The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees.*" https://www.loc.gov/collections/world-war-i-rotogravures/articles-and-essays/events-and-statistics/wilsons-fourteen-points/

families such as the Bedirhan and Babanzade families. *Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti* with the initiatives of Mehmed Serif Pasha (the son of former Ottoman foreign minister Kurdish Said Pasha) promoted the idea of Kurdish self-determination in the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. As a result, the first international recognition of Kurdistan was achieved under the Treaty of Sèvres (August 1920) signed between the Ottoman government in Istanbul and the Allied powers. Section III of the Treaty was about Kurdistan. In Article 62, it is stated that:

> *"A Commission sitting at Constantinople and composed of three members appointed by the British, French and Italian Governments respectively shall draft within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia, as defined in Article 27, II (2) and (3)"*[7]

Article 64 stated:

> *"If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas."*[8]

On the one hand, the diplomatic recognition of Kurdistan was a success for the pro-Kurdish intelligentsia. Yet, there were few disappointments and failures. First, the Kurdish territories recognized by the Treaty excluded areas such as Van, Muş, Bidlis and they were included under the Armenian territory. Thus, this upset the Kurds and the Armenian-Kurdish dispute over territorial claim-making was still high. Mustafa Kemal's Anatolian movement later capitalized on the Kurdish tribes' concerns over being under the rule of future Armenian state and was able to gain support by many Kurds in the War of Independence.

Second, there was an intra-Kurdish division and split with regards to independence. While Sayyid Abdulkadir coming from a more religious-conservative background and a member of the Ottoman parliament since 1908 publicly voiced Kurdish autonomy under the Ottoman rule, circles led by Emin Ali Bedirhan (b.1851-d.1926, the son of *Mir* Bedirhan of Bohtan emirate) openly supported Kurdish independence. Emin Ali Bedirhan later founded *Kürt Teşkilat-ı İçtimaiye Cemiyeti* (Kurdish Society of Social Organization) in 1920 with other influential Kurds such as Cemilpaşazade Ekrem and the Babanzade family members. However, according to Hakan Özoğlu, there was a power and authority rivalry between Sayyid Abdulkadir (Şemdinan family) and former emirate families (the Bedirhans and Babanzades).[9] So the Kurdish split was also about historical rivalries in Kurdistan since the 19th century rather than a debate over independence.

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7 - Acccessed at https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Section_I,_Articles_1_-_260

8 - Accessed at https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Section_I,_Articles_1_-_260 ; for the original map of the Treaty, see https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/images/1/14/TreatyOfSevresMapOfTurkey.gif

9 - Hakan Özoğlu . *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries (SUNY Press, 2007), p. 84; for historical figures in Kurdish political history, see Yalcin Cakmak and Tuncay Sur (eds). Kürt Tarihi ve Siyasetinden Portreler. (Iletisim, 2018).*

Third, the future of Mosul vilayet and its surrounding Kurdish provinces in Mesopotamia remained unresolved and the final decision was left to the League of Nations. This also disappointed the Kurds. Although Mosul was included in the National Pact territory of Mustafa Kemal's movement (which boosted the Kurdish support for Mustafa Kemal), the Republic was unable to keep it which later upset the Kurds again.

Overall, the Treaty of Sèvres (August 1920) was never adopted and superseded by the Treaty of Lausanne (July 1923) with no recognition of the Kurds as a result of Mustafa Kemal's military and diplomatic successes in the War of Independence. Yet, the trauma over Sèvres very much continued to shape the anatomy of the Turkish Republic founded in October 1923.

5. SECURITISATION OF THE KURDS AND THE REPUBLICAN 'CIVILIZING MISSION'?

The military and political leadership of Mustafa Kemal ended the rule of Ottoman Sultanate in 1922 and the Caliphate in 1924. Although the regime type of the state changed, ontological insecurities embedded within the Ottoman-Turkish internal mechanisms of sovereignty[10] and external recognition as an equal member of Western civilization since the 19th century very much continued to shape the Republican *raison d'état*. Fears and anxieties over the survival of the state, concerns about efficient centralization, issue of secularization and the quest for the identity of *Gemeinschaft* were all inherited by the Republic as well. In general, this was an anxiety over a new life and a new identity that the Ottoman-Turkish ruling elites had been trying to adopt in the face of an occupying European modernity. This traumatic process of change from a multi-ethnic and multi-religious imperial setting toward a homogenous national state occurred with murderous ethnic cleansings, genocidal acts, population exchanges, forced deportations and assimilations as the tools of modern social engineering. This is what Michael Mann calls 'the dark side of democracy' (i.e. rule by the people) or perhaps the dark side of modernity where majority rule based on a monolithic national identity tyrannized the minorities ('the others') throughout the twentieth century (Mann, 2004). This darkness of modernity turned more violent and more catastrophic when two rival ethnic groups laid claim to the same territory.

The Treaty of Sèvres (August 1920) reflected these rival territorial claims in the Ottoman Anatolia (Armenia, Kurdistan, Greece, Turkey) which led to the emergence of contested collective memories in the contemporary era. The Treaty of Lausanne (July 1923) and the foundation of Turkish Republic (October 1923) eliminated the Armenian question in Eastern Anatolia and the Greek question in Western Anatolia. The remaining challenge for completing the full transition from imperial to national phase was the elimination of Kurdish identity along with the claims for Kurdish autonomy and independence in modern Turkey. This challenge remains unresolved today.

The 1921 Alevi-Kurdish Koçgiri rebellion in association with *Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti*

10 - By internal sovereignty, I mean the Weberian notion of modern state. Max Weber defines the modern state as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." Weber, Max (1946). "Politics as a Vocation." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, translated by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Oxford University Press. p. 78.*

was a significant sign that the partial Kurdish-Turkish solidarity in Mustafa Kemal's War of Independence in Anatolia was not going to be long-lasting.[11] The 1925 Sunni Kurdish rebellion of Sheikh Said was a reaction to both secular (abolition of Caliphate in 1924) and the Turkification character of the Republic (R. W. Olson, 1991). Baris Ünlü frames this early Republican era as the end of 'the Muslim contract' between the Turks and the Kurds and the beginning of the 'Turkishness contract' where any identity claims other than Turkishness were securitized (Ünlü, 2016). It should also be noted that some Kurdish leaders were uneasy against Mustafa Kemal about the status of Mosul, seen as southern Kurdistan. Although the National Pact (*Misak-ı Milli*) adopted in 1920 included Mosul as a territory to be liberated by the Kurdish-Turkish alliance in the War of Independence, the Republic was unable to resolve the Mosul question and it became part of the British mandate Iraq in 1926 (Sluglett, n.d.).

The Agri (also known as Ararat) rebellion in 1930 (early phases in 1927) led by a former Ottoman military officer Ihsan Nuri Pasha in association with Xoybun organization in the leadership of Bedirhan family (Celadet, Sureyya, Kamuran) and the Dersim rebellion of 1937-38 continued to haunt the early Republican era. The Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms were growing symbiotically during this time period (R. Olson, 2000). While the former aimed the preservation of the state and its Turkish character, the latter sought power-sharing mechanisms within the Republic or full separation.

For the founding and ruling elites of the Republic—who were eager to finalize the Westernization question since the late Ottoman era—the Kurdish question meant variety of issues including imperialist plots (British-Kurdish dialogues), tribalism (tribes seen as unruly structures), cultural and economic backwardness ('uncivilized' Kurds), and religious fanaticism (Kurds as *mürteci*). Sheikhs and aghas were seen as alternative sites of governance outside of the state and these sites were challenges for the monopoly of state sovereignty. This was also a continuation of Ottoman-Turkish orientalism towards the communities at the periphery (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008). Yet, these alternative sites of governance were also coalesced with social spaces where the Kurdish political claim-making was exercised (Yeğen, 1996, p. 225). Therefore, secularization also meant centralization; centralization meant assimilation; and overall the Republican 'civilizing mission' meant Turkification of the Kurds and the complete elimination of Kurdish self-government potential. Though, the nation-building process of the Republic was more comprehensive than just the assimilation of the Kurds (Al, 2015). In the grand scheme of things, the Republican elites sought to construct 'a new citizen', i.e. Muslim but secular, Turk but European.

In his memoirs, Kazim Karabekir (1882-1948)—the military general of the Eastern Front at the end of World War I and during the War of Independence—provides the general framework of how the founding Republican elites perceived the Kurds and what to do about them in the new regime (Ozerengin, 2019). Karabekir sees the Armenian and Kurdish territorial claim-makings in Eastern Anatolia as intertwined threats but he mentions Kurds as 'a lesser evil' or 'a lesser threat' than Armenians. He argues that Kurds

11 - For the historical account of the rebellion, see Olson, Robert and Horace Rumbold. "The Koçgiri Kurdish Rebellion in 1921 and the Draft law for a Proposed Autonomy of Kurdistan." *Oriente Moderno 8 (69), no. 1/6 (1989): 41-56. For a more nuanced analysis that includes social aspects of the rebellion, see Dilek Kızıldağ Soileau (2017). Koçgiri İsyanı: Sosyo-Tarihsel Bir Analiz. (Istanbul: Iletisim). According to Soileau, Sunni Kurds were less interested in this rebellion as the Alevi Kurds were less interested in the Sheikh Said rebellion in 1925.*

should be told that Kurdish independence would be sabotaged by Armenians along with foreign powers where Kurds would be assimilated into Armenians.[12] He underlines the importance of winning the hearts and minds of the Kurds but when necessary, any punishment measures should be practiced as deterrence.[13] There is a deep mistrust with regards to the Kurds in Karabekir's notes.[14] He also suspects the conscription and the training of the Kurds under Turkish military.[15] Simply, the Kurds should be 'tamed' and 'civilized' (ıslah) but not to be fully trusted.

Before 1923, the semi-official newspaper of the Anatolian movement and later the Republic, *Hakimiyet-i Milliye* (named *Ulus* after 1934), mentioned the Kurds and Turks as the essential communities of Anatolia where Anatolia was depicted as the mother of both (Asker and Yıldız, 2011, p. 20).

Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti and Mehmed Şerif Pasha claiming to represent the Kurds in the Paris Peace Conference (1919) was heavily criticized in *Hakimiyet-i Milliye* and some letters sent by Kurdish tribal leaders disclaiming the representation of Mehmed Şerif Pasha were published in the newspaper in March 1920. In the early 1920s, the newspaper –considering the Kurdish question—also tended to frame the Wilsonian self-determination in power-sharing mechanisms under one democratic and civic state rather than separation (Asker and Yıldız, 2011, p. 20). Along similar lines, Mustafa Kemal mentions the possibility of autonomy (*muhtariyet / ozerklik*) for the Kurds in one of his interviews in January 1923 in Izmit province and argues that it would be hard to draw new borders for the Kurds because they were already intertwined with the Turks. Thus, for Mustafa Kemal, new borders for the Kurds would mean the destruction of the Turks and Turkey.[16]

'The Muslim contract' between the Turks and Kurds was particularly weakened after the abolition of the Caliphate, religious orders and dervish lodges in 1924 since these were the socio-political spheres where Kurdish identity and language were exercised on a daily basis. As the Sheikh Said rebellion came into being under these conditions in 1925, the securitization of the Kurds and the Kurdish religious orders (e.g. Sunni Naqshbandi order) seen as reactionary and backed by the British (amidst the Mosul debates) crystallized in the hearts and minds of the ruling Republican elites. The Law on the Maintenance of Order (*Takrir-i Sükûn Kanunu*) enacted on March 4th, 1925 and the Independence Courts crushed the rebellion and other oppositional public spheres in the Republic.

The 1930s Republic—started with the Agri (Ararat) rebellion and continued with the Dersim insurgency in 1937—had a harsher stance, silence and denial with regards to the

12 - *"Kürt İstiklali ve sonra da Kürtler üzerinde bir Ermenistan tesisiyle Kürtlerin imha veya Ermenileştirilmesi bazı devletlerin müthiş bir programı olduğunu icab edenlere anlattım" (p. 12).*

13 - *"Bunları hükümete ısındırmak için ruhlarını ne kadar kazanmak lazım ise, icabında pek sedid surette teczive edileceklerini de bilmeli ve hatta buna dair misaller gözü önünde olmalıdır" (p. 55).*

14 - *"Ancak sevk-i cehaletle, bilhassa para kuvvetiyle herhangi bir cereyana alet olmaları ihtimal dahilinde görülür" (p. 50).*

15 - *"Siyaseten bize aleyhtar oldukça bu talim ve terbiye aleyhimize olacaktır. Çünkü herhangi bir hal karşısında Türk askerinden ve bilhassa top ve makineli, tayyare tesirlerinden korkan Kürtler, talim ve terbiye aldıktan sonra bunlardan korkmayacak ve siyasi entrikalar fiili sahaya geçerse meselenin halli kolay olmayacaktır" (p. 47).*

16 - *"Kürt sorunu, bizim yani Türklerin menfaatine olarak da kesinlikle söz konusu olamaz. Çünkü bildiğiniz gibi bizim milli sınırlarımız içinde bulunan Kürt unsurlar öylesine yerleşmişlerdir ki, pek sınırlı yerlerde yoğun durumundadırlar. Fakat yoğunluklarını kaybede ede ve Türk unsurların içine gire gire öyle bir sınır oluşmuştur ki Kürtlük adına bir sınır çizmek istesek Türklüğü ve Türkiye'yi mahvetmek gerekir... Dolayısıyla başlı başına bir Kürtlük taslamaktansa, bizim Anayasa gereğince zaten bu tür özerklikler oluşacaktır. Öyleyse hangi ilin halkı Kürt ise onlar kendi kendilerini özerk olarak idare edeceklerdir... Ayrı bir sınır çizmeye kalkışmak doğru olmaz." Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Eskişehir-İzmit Konuşmaları (1923), Kaynak Yayınları, İstanbul, 1993, p. 104.*

Kurdish identity. Rebellions were dominantly portrayed as the uprising of the'bandits' (şakiler) against the Turkish revolution (Asker and Yıldız, 2011). The Settlement Law of 1934 was adopted in this era where the ultimate goal was assimilation and homogenization. Şükrü Kaya, Minister of Interior of the time, stated that "this law will create a country speaking with one language, thinking in the same way and sharing the same sentiment." (Ülker, 2008, p. 3). The nation-building process in the 1930s turned significantly nationalist emphasizing the Muslim-Turkish aspect of the Republic. In the official discourse, Kurds were considered as part of the Turanic race along with the Turks and this approach was in fact originally uttered by the CUP cadres in the 1910s (Alkan, 2013; Toprak, 2010).

Overall, the Kurds and the potential Kurdish self-determination officially recognized in the Treaty of Sèvres within the zeitgeist of the Wilsonian principles very much shaped the Republican raison d'etat. The anxiety of losing more territories and consolidating central state authority since the 19th century was inherited by the Republican elites with the unresolved Kurdish question. It was first and foremost a security issue because Kurdish independence was a great possibility in the post-World War I era. Assimilation policies and civilizing mission projects all aimed to eliminate this potential threat of separation. Turkish nationalism developed in a state-preserving form and the path chosen to preserve the existing state left of the Ottomans was homogenizing the demography based on Turkish language and culture although many Kurds fought hard as well to liberate Anatolia from foreign incursions. Modernization reforms targeting the tribes, sheikhs and religious orders indirectly aimed to tame the Kurdish self-rule practices as well. Kurdish nationalism, on the other hand, mostly developed as a state or autonomy-seeking phenomenon. In other words, Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms historically emerged dialectically and symbiotically before and after the Republic and still continue to shape each other today.

6. CONCLUSION

The construction and consolidation of the Republican regime roughly took around thirty years between 1920 and 1950. Yet, the Ottoman-Turkish political development surrounding centralization, secularization, Westernization and the search for a new social glue and a state identity can be traced back to the Tanzimat in the 19th century. The Republic and the modern Turkish state were constructed in direct relation to and contestation with the Kurdish rebellions and insurgencies between 1923 and 1938. Hamit Bozarslan calls this era the period of radicalization and revolts; later comes the period of silence (1938-61); then the period of a problematic renewal (1961-80) and finally the post-1980s as an era of guerilla warfare between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish state (Bozarslan, 2008). Despite ebbs and flows between peace attempts and war-making in the 2000s, the anxiety and ontological insecurity over the Kurdish self-determination and greater Kurdish rights continues to this date after almost a century.

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