

# The Impact of The Decree of Armenian Apostolic Church (in 1847) on **The imagination of Armenian Nation through Creation of the Image of Kurds as Their “Others.”**

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## **Introduction**

The Ottoman Empire entered into various internal and regional conflicts in the first few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Empire externally was in war with the Russian and Iranian states because of the borders disputes for years and internally it had trouble with the various ethnic, and religious and tribal movements, such as Ibrahim Pasha from Egypt to central Anatolia and with the Kurdish confederation in particular Bedir Khan *Beg revolt*. Empire's all attempts—initially they were based on reforms but later turned into centralization polices—failed to prevent its decline. There are various motivations could be regarded in explanation of the Ottoman Empire's fall and then collapse, but the rise of ethnic and religious nationalism here has a leading role. It first was ethno-religious nationalism of its Balkan subjects resulted in the formation of various states and later nascent of ethnic nationalism within its Muslim subjects—they were struggling for having their own states. The Committee of Union and Progress's seizure of the power

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and investment into the Turkish nationalism far depended the ethnic and religious boundaries between Ottoman Empire and its subjects, that to many scholars were a leading blow to the Empire's political union.

The tension and clashes, on the other hand, was not only [limited] between the Ottoman Empire and its subjects. There was also dispute and conflict within and between various ethnic and religious groups within the Empire boundaries. The tension and to some extent armed clashes between the Kurds and Armenians in this regard deserves leading attention, especially considering the political developments during and after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

The Kurds and Armenians—though were sharing diverse ethnic and religious identities— lived together in the eastern part of the Empire for centuries. These differences did not prevent both nations to share same territories and being in close social, cultural, economic, and political interaction. Lack of physical boundaries between the Kurds and Armenians further allowed being in close social and cultural interaction, and construction of various commonalities.<sup>2</sup>

Ottoman Empire's centralization and nationalization policies and nascent of ethno-religious nationalism, and Empire's tension with the British and Russian empires had begun to influence the relationships between the Kurds and Armenians in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand the Western countries (Britain and France) and Russia's strong desire of establishing political and religious links with the Eastern Christian Communities and their missionary and political activities through Armenians, and on the other hand the local Kurdish confederacies' raising pressure and hegemony in the region and their national claims generated the roots of the tension between the Kurds and Armenians. Development of Kurdish and Armenian nationalism further deepened both nations' ethnic and religious concerns and created a fertile ground for a potential conflict between them. The good neighbors had begun to become their 'others.'

The Kurdish rebellion of Bedir Khan *Beg* in 1945 and Armenian religious leaders and nationalist intellectuals' reactions (such as the publication of the decree of Armenian Apostolic Church)— considering their influence on Kurdish-Armenian relations— here deserve an academic focus, that this article explains. The article more specifically focuses on the Patriarchal decree (*gontak*) of Armenian Apostolic Church "upon the success of Topal Osman Pasha's troops over Kurdish Beys," to analyze the role of Armenian religious leaders and nationalist intellectuals in the imagination of Armenian nation by creating the image of Kurds as their 'others.'

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2 Dzvoinar Derderian, "Shaping Subjectivities and Contesting Power Through The Image of Kurds, 1860's" *The Ottoman East in the Nineteenth Century Societies, Identities, and Politics* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 102.

### **Bedir Khan Beg Rebellion: Christian Concerns**

In nineteenth-century, there were many *Mirektî* or *Beyliks* (i.e., principality) in Kurdistan; Baban, Soran, Ardanan, Miks, Botan, Hakkari and these principalities were mostly organized as tribal confederations. Bedir Khan Beg was the leader of Botan principality who gained the support of many tribes in northern and central Kurdistan and, he wanted to centralize the power of other Kurdish principalities. He also gained the support of "two great chieftains of central Kurdistan, Nurullah Beg, the Mir of Hakkari, and Khan Mahmud of Muks, and with a number of minor chieftains of the immediate vicinity as well as from places as far as Mush and Kars."<sup>3</sup> After he established his authority in this territory and gained the support of other Kurdish principalities, he refused to pay the tributes and send military support to The Ottoman State which he was responsible for doing as a governor under the Ottoman control. Refusal to act in line with Ottoman policies (not paying the tributes and providing military support) was a challenge because it was simply the rejection of being under the control of central power. As Martin van Bruinessen suggests, Bedir Khan might be encouraged by Ottoman weakness in the war against Ibrahim Pasha's Egyptian troops, but there is not sufficient information if his primary motivation was an independent Kurdistan or not.<sup>4</sup> Some sources claim that he wanted to achieve independence, while the others claim that he did not refuse the authority of Ottoman Sultan totally.<sup>5</sup> His motivation was to strengthen his power among Kurdish principalities and different ethno-religious communities in Kurdistan; additionally, he had rebellious acts against Ottoman government yet there is not enough proof to claim that his primary motivation was national and his eventual goal was to found an extended Kurdish rule.

Mir Bedir Khan had autonomous claims for the area under his control, yet all people under his reign were not the Kurds. In the period of his reign, there were Eastern Christian communities as Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans were living on the same territory with the Kurds. These communities developed close relationships with the Western states and Russia due to sharing the same religion. At that time, there were many Western missionaries in Kurdistan that had close relations with Christian ethnic communities whose aim was not only religious announcement and support but also, they might be seen as intermediaries who were trying to build political ties between the local communities and their states.

Assyrians were one of the Eastern Christian communities that were dependent on Bedir Khan; after they built their institutions by the support of Western missiona-

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3 Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*, (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1991), 179.

4 *Ibid*, 179.

5 *Ibid*, 180.

ries and felt confident enough to reject Khan's authority by not paying tribute to Bedir Khan. This local power loose weakened the authority of Bedir Khan, and by the massacre of the Assyrian community, he tried to strengthen his power again. Consequently, after the massacre of Assyrians Western states intervened in to this issue, "in order to prevent further Christian massacres."<sup>6</sup> Particularly British and French states pressured on the Ottoman Empire for attacking the emirate of Botan and Kurdish tribal leaders, Mahmud Khan, and Bedir Khan, which resulted in their surrender.<sup>7</sup> During the attack to Kurdish rebels, Armenian Apostolic Church was also calling Eastern Armenians to join the war with the central state against the Kurds. Eventually, Bedir Khan was exiled from Kurdistan with all his family, which brought about a power vacuum in Kurdistan. Ottoman government, in line with its centralization policies, appointed governors from the center to the periphery, but Kurdistan was never centralized<sup>8</sup>; the local power struggles continued between other emirates or tribal leaders, Sheiks as religious community leaders became dominant in the region.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, the relations of local communities did not get better.

In addition to their local power struggle between each other, and Ottoman state's intervention, the conflicts between Christian communities and Muslim Kurds were also deteriorated because of the European imperialism and capitalist market economy.<sup>10</sup> The European states wished to have close relations with Christian communities of the Ottoman Empire to broaden their political influence and also to open new markets for their economies. At the same time, by pressuring Ottoman State in international relations, the Western state could help these communities to have some of their rights. For that reason, the religious leaders and intellectuals of Christian communities were trying to improve relations with Western states since they were well aware that their political influence is essential; their support could bring freedom and power to the people against central state and the other neighbor communities. As in the example of Assyrian and Kurdish clash, the intervention of Western missionaries and powers can lead political disruptions between local people. Nevertheless, leaders and intellectuals of the Eastern Christian communities were still looking for the patronage of great powers. For example, Armenian Orthodox and Catholic churches had relations with the Russia and Western states while the Apostolic church was seeking the patronage of the Ottoman State and shaped its policies parallel to Ottoman centralization policies

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6 Ibid 180,

7 Ibid, 180.

8 Masayuki Ueno, "For The Fatherland and The State': Armenians Negotiate The Tanzimat Reforms" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (2013): 96.

9 Bruinessen, Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan, 181.

10 Michael Eppel, "The Demise of the Kurdish Emirates: The Impact of Ottoman Reforms and International Relations on Kurdistan during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Middle Eastern Studies* 44/2 (2008).

## Armenian Reaction of the Kurdish Authority

Armenian Apostolic Church is one of the biggest and most efficient Armenian churches based in Istanbul. It was a center for Ottoman Armenians, but its relations with the provinces, especially with the East were loose.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Armenian Churches, The Apostolic Church did not have any Western supporter, and in order to avoid accusations of other local societies, they refused to receive the support from Russia.<sup>12</sup> The church was mostly seen as a mediator between the Armenian community and the Ottoman State.<sup>13</sup> The church was an authority and representative of the Armenians who live in provinces to submit their official reports to the government. They had good relations with the Ottoman state and relied on the state when Armenians have unfair treatment.<sup>14</sup> Politically, the church was under the influence of the government a lot; it was trying to transmit the ideological of the government to Armenian society at the same time to gain Armenian rights demanding from the government. Power of the Apostolic Church was mostly derived from its elite members and their relations with Muslim officials.<sup>15</sup> The Patriarchate and the elites were sometimes blamed not to be concerned about Eastern Armenians, yet they still had the power of representation; they were leading political development and constructing political discourse.

"In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Armenians were scattered throughout the Ottoman territory. While Istanbul, the cosmopolitan capital of the empire, had the largest single Armenian settlement, the eastern provinces contained the majority of Ottoman Armenians, who shared the region with more numerous Kurdish and Turkish Muslims. Most of Armenians in the empire believed that the eastern provinces are their fatherland (*hayrenik'*) or Armenia (*Hayasdan*)"<sup>16</sup> However, as an effect of Ottomanism ideology, Armenian intellectuals began to argue that Armenians are part of *millet* system, their "fatherland" could also refer to the Ottoman Empire, and they could be equal citizens of the state under the rule of Ottoman Sultanate.

After the quell of Bedir Khan Rebellion, in 1847 Armenian Apostolic Patriarch in Istanbul declared a decree "upon the success of Topal Osman Pasha's troops over the Kurdish Beys." The decree was written by Archbishop Matteos and sent to the all holly churches that were subjected to the Apostolic Patriarchate in Istanbul; that was, the audiences of the decree were Apostolic Armenians. Archbishop

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11 Ueno, "'For The Fatherland and The State': Armenians Negotiate The Tanzimat Reforms," 95.

12 Ibid, 96.

13 Ohannes Kilicdagi, "Social and Political Roles of The Armenian Clergy from The Late Ottoman Era to The Turkish Republic," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 43 (2017): 540.

14 Ueno, "'For The Fatherland and The State': Armenians Negotiate The Tanzimat Reforms," 96.

15 Ibid, 95.

16 Ibid, 94-95.

Matteos believed that Bedir Khan was a tyrant who invaded Armenia and the Kurds were oppressing Armenians, yet the Ottoman sultan was a savior who liberated Armenia and Armenians from the Kurds. Introduction of the decree contains highly nationalist discourse; the writer describes Armenia as a heavenly country and Armenian people as pure, decent humans. Armenia is depicted as “our beloved homeland, the Armenian lands which in the eyes of all nations is a unique gift to the Armenian nation, unique and beautiful lands”<sup>17</sup>. However, according to the decree, Armenia is “oppressed by the hands of savage Kurds for centuries, devastated and turned into a desert” and also “beloved Armenian nation” is under the poverty because of “the beasts that look like humans.”<sup>18</sup> From the perspective of the writer, Armenia and Armenians are gifted and beloved by God yet the Kurds who are “the beasts that look like humans” oppressed them. Moreover, the writer has historical and mythological references to explain the ‘liberation of Armenia from the hands of the Kurds’; he refers to the liberation of Israel from Egyptians and Hayk the Nahabet from Bel, Babylonian tyrant. For the writer, Ottoman Sultan, Abdulmecid is the savior of Armenian nation Kurdish tyrants, and with his help, Armenia will develop and revitalize. Archbishop believes that the Sultan has a special love and care for Armenians; after the defeat of Bedir Khan, the Sultan sends a letter to the Archbishop, and he transmits the Sultan’s order in the decree as well. According to the decree, Sultan says that the victory against Bedir Khan was for the comfort of his subjects who entrusted their ruler and he wants Patriarch to tell the people that he sees and accepts people’s loyalty to him. Archbishop concludes the decree by praising Sultan and wishes God to raise the Armenian nation.

The *Gontak* is an essential example of the discourse against the Kurds. Apostolic intellectuals continued to produce such a discourse in public spaces as schools and their writings; Derderian in his analysis to the periodicals of *Artuzi Vaspu-rakan* and *Artuzik Taronoy* explains that their goals were “redefine boundaries between Kurds and Armenians and reshape ideal Armenian view of Kurds or Kurdishness as the opposite of a normative Armenianness.”<sup>19</sup> Since the similarity between Kurds and Armenians was high, they want to cut the ties and similarities between these two neighbor communities. Also, lifestyles of the Kurds and Armenians were so similar to each other that despite religious differences, their marriage customs and funerals were getting similar.<sup>20</sup> The Armenian intellectuals

17 Avedis Berberyan, Patmutiwn Hayots: Sgsyak I 1772 ame Prkchin minchew Tsamn 1860, (Kostantnupolis: Krishcian, 1871) [reprint Echmiatzin: Mayr Ator Surb Echmiatzin Hratarakchutyun, 2009], 301.

18 Ibid, 301.

19 Derderian, “Shaping Subjectivities and Contesting Power Through The Image of Kurds, 1860s,” 100.

20 Berberyan, Patmutiwn Hayots: Sgsyak I 1772 ame Prkchin minchew Tsamn 1860, 301.

want to prevent this cultural affinity mostly to save the church's authority over the Armenian population. "As this case illustrates, the centralization of both church and state in the Ottoman East meant not only the enforcement of state law in terms of who could collect taxes and how much, but also the increased involvement of the state and church in regulating local relations, customs, and individuals."<sup>21</sup> Derderian, claims that Apostolic intellectuals like Srvandztiants to create "normative notions of Ottoman-Armenian subjectivities" pictured Kurds as barbaric and savage while the state was "just and benevolent".<sup>22</sup> Srvandztiants, from an orientalist perspective, tried to create a picture of progressive center and backward East in his newspaper writings. He was aiming to picture Armenians as loyal, and the state was just and benevolent, but the Kurds were barbarians. The relations of Kurds and Armenians should be cut off to Armenians can be connected to progressive center.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire had many vital issues; most of them were deriving from its subjects' ethnic and religious claims. The nationalist awakening movements were first seen in Balkans, yet, spread all around the empire and reached the people that were living in the eastern part of the empire. The Kurds and Armenians were two of the largest communities in the eastern parts of Empire too were soon influenced by the nationalist ideas. Kurdish Bedir Khan's rebellion in 1845/7 is a sign of early national movement in Kurdistan. However, the only nationalist tensions were not against the central Ottoman state, but there were tensions between the local communities as the Kurds and Armenians. Since one might not talk about unified and homogenous communities, we cannot say that there was a tension between the whole Kurdish and Armenian population. Besides, these two communities despite their ethno-religious differences had many social similarities, yet the power struggle in the eastern part of Empire sometimes caused conflicts between religious and political leaders, intellectuals and some of the local population. In this power struggle, Armenian Apostolic Church and some related intellectuals, with the support of central Ottoman Empire, aimed to centralize the Armenian population of the provinces to the church and the Empire. In the nation-building process, the church and intellectuals wanted to put differences between the Kurds and Armenians to separate Armenians from their neighbors, change their everyday reality, and create a national consciousness. To be able to do this, the church and intellectuals created a barbaric and savage

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21 Derderian, "Shaping Subjectivities and Contesting Power Through The Image of Kurds, 1860's," 102.

22 Ibid, 97.

picture of the Kurds in their discourses as the “others” of Armenians. In the decree of Apostolic Church after the Bedir Khan Rebellion, the Archbishop argues that the land of Armenia is invaded, and the Kurds oppress Armenians, and the Ottoman sultanate is the savior of Armenian *millet*, Armenians should be loyal to the Sultan. In addition, Armenian intellectuals in public spheres and media use the same discourse about the Kurds to make Armenians differ themselves from the Kurds and build their own national identity. This national identity was not separatist, [it] on the contrary, was more central towards Istanbul.

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