



The Routledge Handbook of the Crimean War

Edited by Candan Badem

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Cover: Council of War, Lord Raglan, Ömer Pasha and Marshal Pélissier.
Photo by Roger Fenton, 1855.

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ORIGINS OF THE “KURDISH QUESTION”?

The Revolt of Yezdanşêr (1854–1855)

Metin Atmaca

During the Ottoman-Russian conflict of 1853–1856 many Kurdish tribes were involved in the war as irregular cavalry on both sides. In the battle of Başgedikler in December 1853, there were around 16,000 Kurdish irregulars attached to the Ottoman army. The Ottomans were defeated in this battle and the Russians used the opportunity to convince the Kurds to stand on their side or at least not to fight against them. On the Russian side, Colonel Mihail Loris-Melikov was responsible for relations with Kurds. In March 1854 he met Ahmet Agha, the leader of the Zilan tribe, and in November of the same year he visited Kasım Han, an influential Kurdish leader who held the rank of *kapucubaşı* in the Ottoman bureaucracy. Russian authorities also bestowed upon the latter the equivalent rank of lieutenant and allocated him a salary in order to attract him to the Russian side.¹ Such attempts by the Russian authorities seemed very effective, as in the battle of Kürekdere in August 1854 there were only 500 Kurdish irregulars in the Ottoman army. After this second battle, Kurdish forces no longer confronted the Russian army.

During the war Russian army had two Russian Kurdish irregular cavalry units, numbering 500 each.² Both states were suspicious of the loyalty of Kurds as the Kurdish tribes followed their own interests instead of the two competing empires. Russian and Ottoman authorities tried to attract the Kurdish tribes to their side through bribes and promises even though the Kurdish tribes ransacked, whenever they seized the opportunity, their own military units. Both states had limited success in their pursuit as the Kurds already lost their faith in them. Therefore, the majority of the Kurds abstained from the war.

One of the most interesting persons during this period was Yezdanşêr of Cizre (Jezire). He was the last member of the Azizan family of Bohtan emirate remaining in Kurdistan after the forceful removal of all hereditary Kurdish leaders from their native lands before 1850. He was appointed as deputy governor of Cizre for a short period but was later dismissed and sent to Mosul. Thus, he decided to rebel at the first occasion, which occurred during the Crimean War when he had the chance to gather people around his cause, while ostensibly mustering forces for the Ottoman army against Russia. He succeeded to attract more than 20,000 men. The rebels were very diverse, including Muslim and Yezidi Kurds, Armenians and Nestorians.

This chapter will focus on the causes and results of Yezdanşêr's revolt. Besides unfolding the details of the revolt, it will show what role the Ottomans, Russians, French and British played during and after the rebellion. Yezdanşêr revolt is important because for the first time European states were interested in Kurds as a strategic partner in the field. British and French diplomats

became actively involved in the revolt by extending diplomatic protection to Yezdanşêr and his entourage. As the Ottoman Empire financially became dependent on European powers because of the war, the latter had now more leverage in matters related to provinces like Kurdistan. During and after the revolt, Russian, British and the Ottoman officials prepared detailed reports on the Kurds. Some of these reports were the first of its kind on Kurds and initiated more interest among European and Russian Orientalists over the social, cultural and political life of Kurds. Mehmed Hurşid Pasha, the secretary of the Ottoman delegation in the Ottoman-Iranian boundary commission, wrote a detailed account of his observations on the Kurdish tribes located along the border.³ Similarly, Russian military intelligence agent Pyotr I. Averyanov, who worked some time at the Russian consulate-general in Erzurum, wrote several reports and published a book on Kurds in 1900.⁴ The British officials on the ground, such as Her Majesty's Consul in Mosul, Christian Rassam, also sent detailed reports to Lord Stratford, the British ambassador in Istanbul.⁵ A report sent to the Sublime Porte by the governor of the *sancak* (district) of Zaho shows that local Ottoman officials believed that "since it (Kurdistan) has been incorporated (into the Ottoman Empire) no one has witnessed or heard of such union of Kurds as one heart and one body and of such unequalled violent battle".⁶

The historiography on the Yezdanşêr revolt focuses more on the political implementations of the dominant powers and ignores the causes behind the revolt. Some Turkish historians perceive the Yezdanşêr revolt as part of a series of revolts by Kurdish emirs in the first half of the 19th century. Ottoman officials of the period in their correspondence with the Porte compared Yezdanşêr's rebellion with Bedirhan's revolt of 1847. Tuncay Ögün's monograph on Yezdanşêr's revolt is the most comprehensive work as yet, drawing mostly from Ottoman primary sources. Thus, it reflects the dominant discourse of the Ottoman officialdom.⁷ Studies on Kurdish revolts, including those on Bedirhan's revolt, usually choose not to include it in their master list or they keep the account short when it is mentioned.⁸ Kurdish historiography rather tries to ignore the revolt, probably because of Yezdanşêr's opposition to Bedirhan Bey. Muhammed Emin Zeki Beg, a well-known Kurdish historian who lived in Iraqi Kurdistan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, allocated only few sentences to Yezdanşêr and emphasized that he was a "rival" to Bedirhan and "betrayed" him during his struggle for independence.⁹ Few works on the history of Kurdish revolts give detailed information on Yezdanşêr's revolt. One of these works is Sinan Hakan's archive based and rather descriptive account of Kurdish revolts in the 19th century. Hakan does not mention the competition between Yezdanşêr and Bedirhan, focusing only on the revolt itself.¹⁰ Candan Badem employed Ottoman, Russian and British sources to contextualize the revolt within the Crimean War.¹¹ On the other hand, Soviet scholars approached the revolt from a Marxist perspective. Kurdish historian Celilê Celil, for instance, defined the revolt as "a struggle of the oppressed people" and Yezdanşêr as a leader who "brought together the Yezidis, Assyrians, Arabs, Greeks, Armenians and other people" despite their religious differences.¹² Two other studies produced in Soviet Russia by Halfin and Lazarev et al. see Yezdanşêr's revolt as a movement for independence and a period of transition from feudal separatism towards a national Kurdish movement.¹³

Yezdanşêr was known to only a handful of people before he revolted in November 1854. After the revolt he drew the attention of the Ottoman, Russian, British and French officials on himself and Kurdistan because of the Crimean War. Besides the war conditions, Yezdanşêr's revolt was important because of its broad-based participation. Therefore, in addition to Ottoman reports and correspondence of the incident, Russian and British officials in the region described the revolt extensively in their reports. The people of Kurdistan rebelled mostly because the state attempted to implement the new regulations introduced as part of the Tanzimat reforms. Besides appointment of new administrators from the centre to their region, new tax and military

obligations also led the people to revolt. Yezdanşêr and other Kurdish notables were also affected tremendously by these new regulations. Beyond these reasons Yezdanşêr’s family background and the intra-family struggle for the power played an important part in this revolt. Providing some details on this background before detailing the revolt itself will help us to understand the motive behind Yezdanşêr’s reason to revolt.

Before the revolt

During the first half of the 19th century the emirates of Baban, Soran, Behdinan, Hakkari, Bitlis, Müküs and Bohtan were dominating the political scene of the Ottoman Kurdistan. After the energetic Bedirhan Bey began to lead the Bohtan emirate, centred in Cizre, in 1820, he started to expand territories of his emirate from Diyarbekir to Van, and Mosul, as well as towards the Iranian border at the expense of other emirates.¹⁴ As part of his ambitions to include more territories under his rule, Bedirhan for a while collaborated with the Ottoman forces in order to defeat some of the Kurdish emirates. With his alliance he was also able to evade punishment during the punitive action of the Ottomans against the emir of Rawanduz in 1836.

After a while, he went out of the “circle of obedience”¹⁵ and created his own Kurdish alliance with some Kurdish emirs, Nurullah Bey of Hakkari and Han Mahmud of Müküs, against other Kurdish emirs and Nestorians.¹⁶ As part of this new alliance Bedirhan created his own army made of Kurdish tribal forces as well as Yezidi population. According to some historians, he struck coins and had his name read in Friday sermons, both signs of sovereignty in the political Islamic tradition.¹⁷ Although an authoritarian leader, he was praised by the Western visitors for keeping safe the territories under his rule and being just towards his subjects.¹⁸

Visitors to the Bohtan emirate knew Bedirhan Bey well but European diplomats in the capital and provincial centres began to hear about him more often after he attacked the Christian minority of Nestorians in Hakkari in the 1840s. This move was also going to create a pretext for his removal by the Ottomans. Provoked by fear of losing power to the Nestorian leader Mar Shimun and being removed by his Western missionary allies, Nurullah Bey asked Bedirhan to support him in his military expedition to Hakkari. Considering this move as an opportunity to incorporate Hakkari into his territories, Bedirhan immediately moved against the Nestorians in July 1843 with a force made of thousands and massacred many of the people. The Ottomans perceived the Kurds and the Nestorians as unruly and saw Bedirhan’s move as an opportunity to weaken both groups. Thus the Ottoman local officials turned a blind eye on this expedition and did not discourage Bedirhan despite they were aware of his plan. A second attack on the Christian community took place in 1846. Upon this last attack Britain and France put pressure on the Sublime Porte to react and punish him, an opportunity that the Ottomans had been waiting for in order to remove Bedirhan and his allies from the region. An Ottoman army of thousands of men and led by Osman Pasha moved against Bedirhan but could not defeat him at first. Only after Yezdanşêr, son of Bedirhan’s cousin, decided to cooperate with the governor of Mosul with his men, that the Ottoman army was able to occupy Cizre and defeat Bedirhan.¹⁹ With this move Yezdanşêr for the first time appeared in the political scene of Kurdistan since his father Mîr Seyfeddin was removed from power by Bedirhan and he had been kept under close surveillance by the latter.²⁰ Yezdanşêr (known as İzzeddin Şîr Bey in Ottoman sources) was probably in his late teenage years when he decided to choose the Ottoman side.²¹

Before Yezdanşêr became rebellious, he opted to support the Ottoman forces for several reasons. First, he held a grudge against Bedirhan because the latter collaborated with Ottoman authorities against Yezdanşêr’s father Mîr Seyfeddin and took his place. For a long time Bedirhan kept Mîr Seyfeddin under close control, together with Yezdanşêr and his brother Mansur Bey.

He needed Mîr Seyfeddin nearby as the Mîr was still influential in the emirate and among the tribes.²² Once Mîr Seyfeddin passed away in 1846, Bedirhan removed his relatives from power. At the time, Yezdanşêr and Mansur were residing in Qesrê Gelî castle, an hour away from Cizre. They were financially deprived by Bedirhan as all of their valuables were seized by him. After Mîr Seyfeddin's death probably Yezdanşêr felt unsafe with his uncle and decided to work against him with the Ottoman forces. Therefore, he sent one of his men to Müşir Osman Pasha, the head of the Anatolian army, and offered collaboration with him against Bedirhan when the army was gathered in Diyarbekir.²³ He put his brother Mansur in charge of Qesrê Gelî with 100 men and took refuge with the governor of Mosul. Yezdanşêr was considered as the legitimate leader by many Kurds located in Cizre, Bohtan and Hacıbehram. With his departure Bedirhan lost Yezdanşêr's military support and his family's legacy that he enjoyed. After this move Yezdanşêr provided the details of Bedirhan's plan to the Ottoman side, and this resulted in defeat of the former.²⁴

Bedirhan's revolt was suppressed in 1847 and he was exiled to Istanbul and later to Crete. The defeat of Bedirhan and establishment of state control in the region was perceived by the Porte as one of the most important events of Sultan Abdülmecid's rule. Thus the Porte wanted to crown this important event by establishing a new province named "Kurdistan" (*Eyâlet-i Kürdistan*), including Diyarbekir, Van, Muş, Hakkari, Cizre, Bohtan and Mardin. The establishment of the *eyâlet* of Kurdistan was announced by the official newspaper *Takvîm-i Vekâyi* on 13 December 1847 and stated that "it is proper and apt to the present situation to name this province as the Province of Kurdistan".²⁵ For the Porte the destruction of the Kurdish emirates and replacement of the Kurdish emirs with governors and sub-governors from the centre was the "re-conquest" of Kurdistan. To memorialize this event Sultan Abdülmecid was named as the "conqueror of Kurdistan" by the *Meclis-i Vâlâ* (the Supreme Council) and those officials who helped accomplish this task were awarded with the "medallion of Kurdistan".²⁶ As Hamit Bozarslan states, the emphasis on the "second conquest" by the Ottoman centre shows the weakness of its power basis in the region. Thus the state had a strong desire to appear physically on the ground and establish itself with "new patron-client relations as well as the production of knowledge" among the Kurds and non-Kurdish inhabitants through new tools and methods that Tanzimat offered.²⁷ Governors of the *eyâlet-i Kürdistan* were appointed directly from the centre. Kurdistan existed as an administrative unit for 20 years. During this period it went through several reorganizations, each time its borders were readjusted. After two decades of its existence and more than a dozen of governors in its administration, the province ceased to exist in 1867 and was combined with Mamuret-ül Aziz as the province of Diyarbekir.

In 1849 the governor of the Kurdistan province Esad Muhlis Pasha stated that Yezdanşêr should be appointed as deputy district governor (*mütesellim*) of the *sancak* of Cizre with the rank and title of *ıstabl-ı âmire müdürü* ("head of imperial stable"; equivalent of the military rank of lieutenant colonel) and a salary of 3,500 piastres as a reward of his obedience to the state.²⁸ Yezdanşêr used this title in his correspondence with the Sublime Porte.²⁹ Officially Emin Pasha was appointed as the *kâimmakâm* (district governor) of Cizre but *de facto* Yezdanşêr was going to administer on his behalf. However, this appointment remained symbolic as the state started to look for alternatives to replace Yezdanşêr after the region was pacified. A few months later he was dismissed as he had conflict with local officials. After several letters between Esad Pasha and the Sublime Porte he was sent to Istanbul without his family. The Porte continued to pay him part of his salary and to give the rest to his brother Mansur Bey and his family. While in Istanbul his financial situation deteriorated and he sent a request to the Sublime Porte for help. After a long discussion between governors in Kurdistan and the Porte, in June 1850 he was finally sent to Mosul and forced to reside there with his family.³⁰

As was in the case of Bedirhan, Ottoman sources used negative connotations for Yezdanşêr and his men. For instance in some documents he was named as “Şerreddîn nâm şâkî” (the rebel named the curse on the religion) and “şâkî-i hâin Şerreddîn” (the treacherous bandit the curse on the religion).³¹ His brother Mansur (which means victorious) was also called “na-Mansûr”³² (non-victorious) “birâder-i hâin” (brother of the traitor), “şâkî” (bandit).³³ Together with the leaders of the revolt, their followers, especially the Kurds, were also denigrated in the documents. The frequency of pejorative vocabulary intensified more especially when the Ottomans could not secure the loyalty of local people. Ottoman officials emphasized the “unreliability” of these groups in their reports to the centre. Thus ordinary Kurds were called “ekrâd-ı bednihâd”³⁴ (Kurds with a bad nature), “eşkrîyâ-i ekrâd” (the Kurdish rebels) and “mahlûk-ı ekrâd”³⁵ (Kurdish creatures) in official documents of the period.

Preparation for revolt

Unlike his uncle and other Kurdish emirs, Yezdanşêr was not exiled far away from his lands. In 1850, accompanied by his family he was sent to Mosul and while he was there, he did not make any demand to be appointed for an administrative position and he did not or could not attempt to take over the administration of Bohtan. Nevertheless, he did not forget his father’s forceful removal and his own dismissal from power and somehow waited for the right moment to take revenge.³⁶

Not only the Kurdish notables but also ordinary people living in eastern Anatolia and Kurdistan, Kurds, Nestorians, Armenians, Turks and Arabs were also unhappy about the new order (*Tanzimat*) in their region. Taxes and military conscription were two of the biggest problems for the people. The taxes were high and arbitrary, and the military service was almost lifelong.³⁷ Besides, for centuries the locals were ruled by their own leaders (emir, agha, sheikh, etc.) and they knew them more than they did the sultan in Istanbul. The Kurdish tribesmen considered their leaders as primordial and believed that the ancestors of their leaders were going back to history further than the sultan’s family.³⁸ After the Kurdish emirs were removed, the rulers of their town or province were selected by the Sublime Porte from among the people who did not speak their language and had little knowledge about their traditions. Besides these new leaders cared mostly about their own or the empire’s interest instead of the responding to need of local people.

From his dismissal until 1854, Yezdanşêr was rarely remembered by the Ottoman officials. The Ottomans never considered employing him or someone else from Bedirhan family in the administration of the *eyâlet* of Kurdistan. Thus there is no mention of them in official correspondence. Yezdanşêr’s name appeared in the archival documents only when he offered, through governor of Van and Hakkari Mehmed Reşid Pasha, his support to the Ottoman army in the Crimean War. As the Ottoman army was in desperate need of extra forces and Yezdanşêr was capable of gathering armed men thanks to his prestige among the Kurdish tribes, Reşid Pasha immediately accepted his offer.³⁹ Once Reşid Pasha’s order reached Mosul on 13 September 1854, Yezdanşêr was given the duty of mustering 1,500 irregular cavalymen from among Kurdish tribes of Mosul, Cizre and Bohtan. He was supposed to conscript part of these forces from Mosul province, go to Cizre to gather the rest of the forces and finally take them to Van to join the Bayezid unit of Anatolian army.⁴⁰

Some of the local officials, such as the governor of Kurdistan in Diyarbekir, Hamdi Pasha, were critical of Yezdanşêr’s appointment and they still did not trust the Kurdish tribes after the Bedirhan revolt was suppressed. Hamdi Pasha thought that Yezdanşêr might turn this move into a rebellion. Thus, he asked Reşid Pasha to cancel this appointment. However, governor of Van and Hakkari did not listen to such warnings and Yezdanşêr left Mosul with the men he gathered.⁴¹

Hamdi Pasha complained to the Sublime Porte about this event and claimed that Yezdanşêr had been visiting Bohtan since the beginning of 1854 to prepare the region for a rebellion and that he was behind the revolt that took place in November 1854 in Cizre, which was suppressed by the district governor of Zaho.⁴²

During this period all powers used bribery either to prevent the Kurdish notables and tribesmen from revolt or to attract them to their side. The Ottomans usually promised the Kurdish leaders with good positions and as part of it gave titles and salaries. If the revolt took place and the leaders of the revolt were cornered, as a tactic the state would use amnesty to convince the rebels.⁴³ The Russians usually used gifts and rewards to attract the Kurdish notables and tribes. Colonel Loris-Melikov made a list of gifts to the Kurdish leaders in order to convince them to either fight on their side or remain neutral in the war. He handed a diamond ring to Kasım Han, who was the most influential tribal leader in Kars, and gold coins in various amounts to more than two dozens of leaders.⁴⁴ Britain also used gold to convince Yezdanşêr and other Kurdish leaders to give up with their revolt. Rassam handed 400 gold coins to Yezdanşêr during their negotiations in the revolt.⁴⁵

After the news spread around that Yezdanşêr and several other Kurdish leaders were gathering irregular forces and leading them to join the Ottoman army, the Russians sent them letters and asked them to lay aside such plans. Colonel Tsumpfort, commander of the Russian forces in Erivan, in a letter asked Yezdanşêr about the reason he recruited Kurdish forces and advised him to dismiss all the cavalymen that he gathered. He promised that in return for his loyalty Russia would protect his rights of sovereignty on his land.⁴⁶ Strategically Russia tried to make sure that the Kurdish tribes on the frontier were neutral or, whenever possible, pro-Russian.

The revolt

Yezdanşêr gathered around 300 cavalymen and 100 infantrymen from Mosul area. Afterwards, he left for Cizre in the second week of October 1854 and reached there by the end of the same month. The journey on foot between Mosul and Cizre took around 30 hours during that period, but somehow Yezdanşêr arrived at his destination in early November. When he came to Cizre he had more armed men with him than when he departed from Mosul and later several other Kurdish tribes followed him. It seems that he met several Kurdish tribes on the way and asked them to gather in Cizre.⁴⁷ Thus, besides the forces he brought from Mosul, he enlisted an extra thousand men. Hilmi Pasha expected him to leave with his forces for the battlefield in five to ten days. Yezdanşêr stated that the budget provided by the district governors of Mardin and Siirt was not enough to cover the expenses for his men and he would wait until financial means were arranged. Many of the men Yezdanşêr gathered from Kurdish villages were *başıbozuk* (irregular) fugitives from the Ottoman army. Therefore, Hamdi Pasha believed that Yezdanşêr used the financial issue as a pretext to gather more men from Bohtan and other areas with a different intention.⁴⁸ Hamdi Pasha had some reasons to be suspicious about this situation. According to a report from the administrator of the town of Dergül in Siirt, since his arrival at Cizre, Yezdanşêr had been dismissing and punishing the members of the town council and administrators of sub-districts (*nâhiye müdürleri*) and replacing the Ottoman soldiers in the region with his own armed men.⁴⁹ Interestingly several aghas from the same town encouraged Yezdanşêr to take over Cizre, Bohtan and Hacı Behram.⁵⁰ It seems that both the Ottoman officials and the local leaders considered Yezdanşêr as a bargaining chip to use against each other.

Meanwhile Yezdanşêr denied all claims that he had any other intention and he tried to keep attention away from himself. While expressing the maltreatment of the Ottoman local administrators towards him, he asked them to provide further financial support for the recruitment

of new forces.⁵¹ In a letter to Kenan Pasha, the governor of Siirt, he stated that he received only 35,000 piastres for the expenses of his forces. He demanded an extra 200,000 piastres so he could send them off. He would remain in Cizre until he received a response and once his demand was accepted, he would leave the town immediately.⁵² From the very beginning Yezdanşêr used a very careful and diplomatic language. In every letter he denied that he intended to revolt and emphasized his loyalty to the state.

As Yezdanşêr's news spread around, more and more people joined him. In two or three weeks more than 20,000 men from different ethnic and religious groups and classes joined his forces.⁵³ According to some reporters in the region, people were unhappy with the new administration because of extra taxes and unjust treatment.⁵⁴ Especially, Osman Pasha, the governor of Mardin (including Cizre), had a bad reputation for corruption, bribery and oppression. Some of the local notables, religious leaders and ordinary people from Siirt, Elbak, Cizre and Hacibehram made a complaint to the Sublime Porte about Osman Pasha.⁵⁵ Besides the local people, high-level Ottoman officials such as Reşid Pasha of Baghdad also complained about Osman Pasha's and Hamdi Pasha's mismanagement of the region.⁵⁶ Christian Rassam, also joined the chorus and reported that the oppression and cruelty applied by Osman Pasha and his men was one of the major reasons behind the revolt in the mountains of Bohtan and some parts of Kurdistan. He added that the level of oppression reached an unbearable point and pushed people to search for a leader who would save them from this oppression.⁵⁷

It is not clear exactly when Yezdanşêr's revolt started, as he never acknowledged it. Badem states that it should be accepted as the beginning of November 1854 since the Porte cut his salary as of 11 November 1854.⁵⁸ The centre of the revolt was Cizre but it also spread around Mosul, Bohtan, Hakkari, Zaho, Bitlis and Siirt. According to Kenan Pasha, the people in Eruh and Pervari also supported the revolt.⁵⁹ Yezdanşêr first took over the administration of Cizre when he arrived there. In addition, he occupied Bitlis at the beginning of January in 1855. Irregular forces in Bitlis could not stand before Yezdanşêr's 2,000 men and he easily took over the city.⁶⁰ After that he attacked the town of Midyat and plundered it.⁶¹ His sudden success among the Kurds encouraged the Arabs, Nestorians and Armenians to join him. Thus he began to control a vast area from Mosul to Van.⁶²

The revolt caused a significant disruption of the communication between Istanbul and the eastern provinces as well as the postal services between Mosul and Baghdad. Besides, according to Rassam he could not receive any reliable news about the revolt as well as Osman Pasha's preparation for the suppression of the revolt because of the disruption of communication.⁶³ Both the Ottomans and the British were suspecting that Yezdanşêr's supporters took over the postal services and stole some of the correspondence that included details of accusations about him that were forwarded to the Sublime Porte. Yezdanşêr vehemently denied these accusations and stated that "not a single courier animal has been hurt" in the region under his rule. It seems that he had some legitimate reasons for denying accusations about him as the copies of correspondence that were claimed to be seized by him still exist in the British and the Ottoman archives.⁶⁴ Those who plundered the postal services were probably some highway bandits who used the revolt and the lack of security as an opportunity to steal valuable goods from the post.

At the beginning of the revolt the Ottomans and its allies wanted to make peace with Yezdanşêr before using military methods as they desperately needed to employ their forces in the war and keep the region stable. The first attempt was realized by the governor (*mutasarrıf*) of Mosul, Hilmi Pasha, who sent some letters of advice and asked Yezdanşêr to move the forces he gathered to Van.⁶⁵ Similarly Rassam sent him letters and warned him to be careful about having a second thought. He told Yezdanşêr to hit the road to Van immediately and make his complaints to Reşid

Pasha when he arrived there.⁶⁶ Governor of Kurdistan used a more threatening language towards him and told him that the punishment for his “corrupt behavior” would be “unimaginably heavy”.⁶⁷

Suppression of the revolt

As Yezdanşêr ignored warnings and threats, the government decided to prepare a military expedition on him and the rebels. Meanwhile the British consul of Diyarbekir decided on a two-staged plan. At the first stage, negotiations with Yezdanşêr would continue and in the meantime he would be surrounded and pressured by military forces. If this did not work then they would deploy the second stage, which was to confront the rebels directly.⁶⁸ Meanwhile the governor of Kurdistan sent a report on the revolt to the Sublime Porte and added the reports from local officials in order to show the magnitude of the rebel.⁶⁹ A couple of days after the decision was taken in Diyarbekir, Yezdanşêr attacked Zaho and was pushed back by the forces of the governor of Mardin, Osman Pasha.⁷⁰ Right after his defeat in Zaho, Yezdanşêr sent a letter to the governor of Mosul Hilmi Pasha and told him that he demanded from Osman Pasha to send the necessary budget. “Instead”, he added, his “forces were attacked and had no way but marching on Zaho in order to stop these tricks”. In his letter he stated:

When we arrived there the [Ottoman] cavalymen attacked us from that side (Zaho) and caused a significant casualty and took my soldiers as captives. We had the power to resist but instead we thought on the consequence of it and decided to return and calm down those around us. God knows that this movement was not done with the intention of revolt or disgruntlement. God’s willing the intention is to reside in Cizre until 6,000–7,000 soldiers are gathered and then to join the war. If permitted, we will stay here with our dignity and honour until the right time arrives. If not permitted and the [Ottoman] forces march on us from all sides then there will be no way for us but to fight back.⁷¹

Yezdanşêr used a very careful language in his letter when he stated his innocence and described the revolt. The Ottoman officials were convinced that this was a tactic from Yezdanşêr in order to gain time. He sent letters after each move he made and he gave messages of reconciliation. For instance after taking over Siirt he sent a letter to the governor of Kurdistan in Diyarbekir stating that he did not intend to rebel and course of events developed without his interference.⁷² Besides his communication with the Ottomans he wrote letters to Colonel Behbutov in Bayezid and offered him to move together. It seems that his letters did not reach the Russians as they left Bayezid for Erivan in order to pass the winter there.⁷³

Meanwhile British authorities were particularly anxious to contain the rebellion. The British consul in Mosul was appointed to start negotiations between Yezdanşêr and the Ottoman officials. Colonel William Fenwick Williams, the British military commissioner with the Anatolian army, was already familiar with Yezdanşêr, since he met him in 1849 during negotiations of the Ottoman-Iranian border commission. Williams was against a military operation as this would weaken the position of the Ottoman forces against the Russian forces. Therefore, he wrote to Lord Stratford, the British ambassador in Istanbul, to put pressure on the Porte not to use the Anatolian army against Yezdanşêr. Upon Williams’ advice Stratford asked the Porte to send military forces from Istanbul instead of from Kars.⁷⁴ The Porte was convinced by Stratford and it decided to send troops from Baghdad besides those from Istanbul.

Meanwhile Williams reported that Şükrü Pasha, the acting commander-in-chief of the Anatolian army, decided to send a brigade from Toprakkale to advance upon Siirt and Cizre. Lord Stratford reacted to that move and suggested that the "detachment could never reach its destination, owing to the deep snow and intense cold, and finally, that so hazardous a measure as the one in question was adopted without reference to the opinion of the British commissioner and by orders transmitted from Constantinople".⁷⁵ The order to Şükrü Pasha was given long before Stratford's communication with the Porte. However, upon the British ambassador's request, the Serasker sent a new order to abstain Şükrü Pasha from sending any regiment.⁷⁶

On 22 February 1855 Ottoman forces left Mosul for Cizre and came across Yezdanşêr and his armed men in Deruniye (Dirun). Yezdanşêr was defeated in Deruniye and retreated to Cizre. After this defeat the Ottoman army decided to march on Cizre. Yezdanşêr attempted to escape from there but he was blocked by the governor of Mosul. Meanwhile Williams decided to move alone and sent a message to Yezdanşêr through Mahmud Agha, a Polish convert in the Anatolian army, to convince him not to rebel.⁷⁷ According to the report prepared by several Ottoman officials in the region Mahmud Agha did not even visit the commander of the Ottoman army surrounding Yezdanşêr and went directly to him. The move by Williams was a big surprise to the Ottomans. Williams in his letter to Yezdanşêr warned him as "standing against three states (the Ottoman Empire, Britain, and France) is beyond your capacity" and advised him to "search for an easy way to preserve your duty of loyalty". After threats and recommendations, Williams guaranteed on behalf of Britain and France that "no one would touch your life and property if you obey the state with your will".⁷⁸ In his letter, Williams also warned him not to rely on the Russians as Britain would bring in military forces in the spring from India and "finish with" them.

Yezdanşêr accepted Williams' offer and accompanied by Mahmud Agha he went to Mosul to take refuge in the British consulate. Before leaving for Mosul, Mahmud Agha went to Mehmed Pasha, commander of the Ottoman forces waiting outside of Cizre, and told him Yezdanşêr surrendered to him. Mehmed Pasha tried one last time to arrest Yezdanşêr but it was too late as Mahmud Agha stated that he was guaranteed his safety by the British and French states. On 8 March 1855 Yezdanşêr left for Mosul with a group of 80 armed men including his brother Mansur Bey and retinue. The Porte was extremely irritated with this move as they considered it an insult to their sovereignty and power in the region. However, they accepted *fait accompli* and afterwards tried to take Yezdanşêr from the British. Meanwhile Victor Place, the French Consul in Mosul, tried to calm down the Porte by sending them a letter stating that no one in this move intended to infringe the rights and priorities of the Ottoman Empire over its subjects.⁷⁹

When Yezdanşêr arrived in Mosul the governor of the province tried to take him under his control but the French Consul prevented this attempt. After the surrender of Yezdanşêr, his brother Mansur and other Kurdish leaders, the rebel forces were disbanded very quickly. Despite the suppression of the revolt, the Ottomans continued to arrest several other leaders in Erzurum and Van. During the revolt thousands of people died, were captured or displaced. More than 1,500 rebels died and the same number of men were held captive in the war in Deruniye.⁸⁰ The survival of thousands of rebels during the winter and financing of the irregular forces were provided by seizing the goods and estates of Muslim, Christian and Jewish tradesmen in the region. According to Sandwith, the Yezidi and Nestorian people suffered the most from killing, looting and enslavement.⁸¹ The Ottoman forces, especially those under Mehmed Pasha's command, were also involved in looting and seizing the goods. In late March 1855, Rassam stated that he saw many Kurdish women on the streets of Cizre and asked them why they were in such a miserable situation. The women responded that before marching on Yezdanşêr, Mehmed Pasha came to Çelağa and looted their tribes. Rassam concluded that in order to bolster the authority

of the sultan, the Ottoman officials considered looting in these regions as a method to spread fear among locals.⁸²

Yezdanşêr, Mansur and his retinue remained in the residence of the British consul in Mosul for more than five months until the beginning of September 1855 when they were finally sent to Istanbul. Yezdanşêr and his men were handed over to the Ottoman officials under certain conditions and were transferred to their destination under heavy security via Mardin and Diyarbekir.⁸³ While Yezdanşêr and his entourage were kept imprisoned in Istanbul they were tried in *Meclis-i Vâlâ-i Ahkâm-ı Adliye* (The Supreme Council of Judiciary Ordinances) and in March 1856 he was found guilty of killing civilians, looting and disobeying the state.⁸⁴ The court sentenced him to capital punishment. Because British authorities handed them over to the Ottoman authorities with the condition of protecting their lives and properties, the decision of death penalty was converted into lifetime exile. Few weeks afterwards Sultan Abdülmecid approved the decision in mid-March, Yezdanşêr and his brother Mansur with 25 more names were sent to exile to Vidin. Although Lord Stratford protested the decision and asserted that such a decision could not be taken without consent of the British government, the Porte listed the crimes committed by the rebels in a note and refused to bring them back from Vidin.⁸⁵

When Yezdanşêr arrived at Vidin, he remained incarcerated in a castle. Together with his entourage he attempted to escape from there and return to his home in order to see his family. They were captured before going afar and forced back to their place of exile. The governor of Vidin, Ismet Pasha wrote to the Porte to ask the Ottoman officials to send their family there in order to prevent them from escaping again. Ismet Pasha's request was granted by the Porte and Yezdanşêr's family joined him and he was transferred to a house in the centre of the city.⁸⁶ In 1865 Yezdanşêr and Mansur made a request to the Porte to be appointed to a position with a salary so they could live on it. Meanwhile, the Porte informed them that they were free to move around within the province of Tuna (Danube). Later Yezdanşêr was appointed as the administrator of the Adliye district in Ottoman Albania. After this position in 1868 he was appointed as the *mutasarrıf* of Yanya (Janina) and probably remained in the post until his death sometime in 1870s.⁸⁷

After Yezdanşêr's removal from the Bohtan region, the "reconquest" of Kurdistan was completed. However, the officials appointed to the region by the Porte were never able to fill the power vacuum created by the destruction of the Kurdish emirates. Most of the conflicts between tribes were resolved by religious sheikhs, not by the Ottoman officials. After a time, the sheikhs of Naqshbandi-Khalidi and Qadiri Sufi orders started to gain power. Once they were sidelined during the reign of Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909) the tribal aghas replaced them as they were empowered by the sultan through Hamidiye Light Cavalry Regiments.⁸⁸ Before Abdülhamid's reign the state was in process of centralization, albeit with little success, and many of the Kurdish tribes who were involved in Yezdanşêr revolt reacted against the state's agenda of subduing rural regions that was gradually implemented. But after Abdülhamid took over the empire, state power was more centralized, thus the sultan became the only interlocutor for these tribes. From then on the provincial elites could communicate less with one another and more with the centre. The state became the "central actor that could behave as the broker among different sectors".⁸⁹ Interestingly many Kurdish aghas perceived the policy of centralization as an opportunity to empower themselves. As the empire was more modernized so the people were transformed, adopted the new order and renegotiated power with the state despite their initial resistance. The story of Yezdanşêr and the people who were involved in the revolt with him shows how they constantly renegotiated power with the state through resistance and submission to the state rule, while the state used punishment, amnesty, financial means and administrative posts to re-accommodate them.

Notes

- 1 Averyanov (2010: 281–287).
- 2 Badem (2007: 291).
- 3 Hurşid Paşa (1997). Although not an official account, Mela Mehmûdê Bayezîdî’s *Adat û Rusûmatnameê Ekradiye* (2010) was written around the same time and provides some valuable details on the Kurdish society and culture.
- 4 Averyanov (1900). For the part on Yezdanşêr and Crimean War, Averyanov mostly relies on a report prepared during the revolt by the head of the Russian army in Erivan, Prince Vasiliî Behbutov. Averyanov also adds in the appendices of his book a valuable report by General Muravyov on Kurdish nomads residing in Van and Muş. See Averyanov (2010: 129–138, 300–319).
- 5 Some of these reports were published in Burdett (2015: 829–907).
- 6 “...zamân-ı teshirden beri bu havâlide bu makûle ekrâdın böyle yekdil ve yekvücûd müttefik oldukları ve bu misillu muharebe-i şedîde vukûu görülmüş ve işitilmiş mevaddan olmadığ...”, BOA. A. MKT. UM. 150/86, 15 January 1854, in Badem (2007: 293).
- 7 Ögün (2010).
- 8 Studies on Bedirhan revolt and its aftermath provide some scanty information about Yezdanşêr. See for instance Kahraman (2015) and Kardam (2011).
- 9 Emin Zeki Beg (2010: 222, 224).
- 10 Hakan, (2007: 283–322).
- 11 Badem (2010: 360–377); Badem (2007: 285–323).
- 12 Celil (1992: 163–164).
- 13 Halfin (1992: 56–62); Lazarev et al. (2010: 138–140).
- 14 Azizan family, which Bedirhan was a member of, had been ruling the region since the Ottomans arrived to the region (Scheref 1860: 119–144).
- 15 Badem (2010: 363).
- 16 Badger names this alliance as “confederate Coordish Emeers” (Badger 1852: 372).
- 17 Klein (2011: 58); Atmaca (2019: 522–523). Although Bedirhan’s reaction was to the centralization of the empire, Celil (in addition to Halfin and Lazarev et al. as stated above) claims that his movement was inspired by Kurdish nationalist sentiments (Celil 2005: 252).
- 18 “Visits of Messrs Wright and Breath to Bader Khan Bey”, *The Missionary Herald* 42 (1846: 380–382).
- 19 Commander of the Anatolian army Osman Pasha states in his report that Mîr Seyfeddin (also known as Mîr Sevdin) was a paternal cousin of Bedirhan. BOA, A. MKT 90/58, 27 April 1852.
- 20 Kutschera recorded in testimonies of some of Bedirhan’s descendants that when he was 11–12 years old, his family kept him in a safe place in the mountains, as they were afraid that Yezdanşêr would kill him (Kutschera 2001: 25).
- 21 In Kurdish historiography, besides the more commonly known version of Yezdanşêr, he was also named as Êzdin Şêr Bey. See Hakan (2007: 283–322). The British and French sources refer to him in various forms: Yezdasheer, Yezdansheer, Izdesheer, Yezdinshir, Yezdishir, Izdeen Sheer, Ezdinsheer and Yesdi Sheer Bey (Ögün 2010: 6).
- 22 Despite his young age even Yezdanşêr used the fame of his father to gather people around himself for his cause (Layard 1853: 54).
- 23 BOA, İ.MSM 50/1268-3, 18 April 1847. Governor of Mosul Esad Pasha’s report on Bedirhan’s preparation for revolt.
- 24 Gencer (2010: 175–178).
- 25 “...İşbu eyâletin Kürdîstân eyâleti tesmiye kılınması iktizâ-i hâle muvâfık ve cesban olarak...”, *Takvîm-i Vekâyi*, 360, 5 Muharrem 1264 (13 December 1847). For a detailed account on *Eyâlet-i Kürdistan* see Ülke (2014).
- 26 Çadırcı (2007: 194).
- 27 Bozarıslan (2018: 50).
- 28 BOA, İ.MVL 141/3921, 26 April 1849. Governor of Kurdistan Esad Muhlis Pasha’s report.
- 29 For a sample letter of Yezdanşêr to the Sublime Porte see BOA. İ.MMS 4/135, enc. 67, dated 7 January 1855.
- 30 BOA, İ.MVL 170/ 5068, 25–29 Recep 1266 (6–10 June 1850),
- 31 BOA, İ.DH, 317/20474, 2 March 1855; BOA, İ.MMS 3/117, 15 November 1854.
- 32 BOA, İ.MVL 353/15435, 13 July 1855. The governor of Baghdad, Reşid Pasha’s letter to Serasker.
- 33 BOA, İ.MMS 4/135, 11 January 1855. Letter from the *mutasarrıf* of Mosul Hilmi Pasha.

- 34 BOA, A.MKT.UM 163/35, 19 July 1854.
- 35 BOA, İ.MMS 3/117, 28 November 1854. The governor of Kurdistan Hamdi Pasha's letter to the Sublime Porte and Serasker.
- 36 Averyanov (2010: 131).
- 37 von Moltke (1999: 238).
- 38 The Kurds around Lake Van told Russian Colonel Likhutin during his expedition there that Yezdanşêr's family lineage was older and nobler than the Ottoman sultan's family. See Averyanov (2010: 101).
- 39 BOA, İ.MMS, 4/135, 21 November 1854.
- 40 *ibid.*
- 41 TNA, FO195/394, 20 November 1854, Mosul. C.A. Rassam to Stratford de Redcliff.
- 42 BOA, İ.MMS 4/135, 26 December 1854. Governor of Kurdistan Hamdi Pasha's report to the Sublime Porte.
- 43 Badem (2010: 363).
- 44 Averyanov provides a list of rewards prepared by Colonel Loris-Melikov during meetings with Kurdish tribal leaders on 2 November 1854 (Averyanov 2010: 287).
- 45 Averyanov (2010: 134).
- 46 The letter was sent on 20 August 1854 to Yezdanşêr by Colonel Tsumpfort, commander of the Erivan detachment. See Averyanov (2010: 288). It seems that the Ottomans were aware of the letter as a Turkish translation of this letter is available in the Ottoman archives. BOA, İ.MVL, 353/15435 enclosure 49, 24 August 1854. Averyanov provides similar letters that were sent to other tribesmen and Kurdish leaders like Şeyh Abit of Haydaranlı Kurds, Derviş Bey, Şeyh Abdal, and Musa Ağa of Celali Kurds. See *op. cit.* 289–295.
- 47 Ögün (2010: 97).
- 48 BOA, İ.MMS 4/135, 30 November 1854.
- 49 Once the administrator of Dergül heard about the revolt he sought protection with the *kâimmakâm* of Siirt Kenan Pasha. BOA, İ.MMS 3/117, 14 November 1854.
- 50 Ömer, Ramazan, Ali and Mustafa aghas from Dergül visited Yezdanşêr in Cizre and told him they would “escape from the region if Cizre, Bohtan and Hacı Behram is not put” under his administration (Hakan 2007: 288–289).
- 51 Hakan (2007: 286).
- 52 BOA, İ.MMS 1/117, 10 November 1854. Yezdanşêr's letter to the *kâimmakâm* of Siirt Kenan Pasha.
- 53 The number of people who were involved in the revolt is disputed. According to the Ottoman sources the rebels were between 15,000 and 20,000, which I take it as a more reliable number since it is mentioned in several documents by different Ottoman officials (Ögün 2010: 105, 229). The Russian sources suggest a much bigger number between 60,000 and 100,000 rebels (Averyanov 2010: 133).
- 54 Celil (1992: 162).
- 55 BOA, İ.MMS 4/135, 3 December 1854.
- 56 BOA, İ.MVL 353/15435, 12 July 1855.
- 57 TNA, FO195/394, 29 January 1855, Mosul. C.A. Rassam to Stratford de Redcliffe.
- 58 BOA, İ.DH. 21234, 9 August 1855, letter from finance minister to the grand vizier, in Badem (2010: 368).
- 59 Hakan (2007: 290).
- 60 Badem (2007: 292).
- 61 BOA, HR.TO. 221/14, 15 February 1855.
- 62 Badem (2010: 369).
- 63 TNA, FO, 195/394, 4 December 1854, Mosul. C.A. Rassam to Stratford de Redcliffe.
- 64 Ögün (2010: 110–111).
- 65 BOA, İ.MMS, 4/135, 29 Safer 1271 (17 November 1854). Proceedings of Consul of Mosul.
- 66 TNA, FO195/394, 14 November 1854. C.A. Rassam to Yezdansheer Bey.
- 67 BOA, İ.MMS 3/117 27 Safer 1271 (19 November 1854). The governor of Kurdistan's letter to Yezdanşêr.
- 68 BOA, İ.MMS 3/117, 18 November 1854. The proceedings of the council of Diyarbekir.
- 69 BOA, İ.MMS 3/117, 19 November 1854. Governor of Kurdistan Hamdi Pasha's report to the Sublime Porte.
- 70 Prym and Socin capture a detailed account of the war between Yezdanşêr and Osman Pasha from a local *dengbêj* (story teller) more than three decades later (Prym and Socin 1890: 239–260).
- 71 BOA, İ. MMS 3/117, 22 November 1854.
- 72 Ögün (2010: 163).

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- 73 Badem (2007: 293).
- 74 *Papers Relative to Military Affairs in Asiatic Turkey, and the Defence and Capitulation of Kars* (PRMA) (London: Harrison and Sons, 1856), 19 February 1855, No: 136, 130, Lord Stratford de Redcliffe to the Earl of Clarendon, in Badem (2010: 371); Ögün (2010: 220).
- 75 PRMA, 17 February 1855, 131, Lord Stratford de Redcliffe to M. E. Pisan, in Badem (2010: 371–372).
- 76 Badem (2010: 372).
- 77 For detailed accounts of Williams’ negotiation with Yezdanşêr and his role in pacification of the revolt, see Badem (2010: 372–377); Averyanov (2010: 129–138); Ögün (2010: 267–306); Hakan (2007: 294–301); Celil (1992: 154–167) and Burdett (2015: 829–907).
- 78 BOA, İ.MVL 353/15435, 28 January 1855. The special commissioner of Her Britannic Majesty and the Ferik of the Glorious Sultanate to Izzeddin Sheer Bey, cited in Hakan (2007: 295–296); Ögün (2010: 276). Also see Sandwith for Mahmud Agha’s confrontation with the Ottoman commander Mehmed Pasha before handing the letters to Yezdanşêr (Sandwith 1856: 213).
- 79 TNA, FO195/394, 15 March 1855. The French Consul in Mosul Victor Place’s report on the surrender of Izzeddin Sheer Bey.
- 80 The numbers are provided in the report prepared by Osman Pasha 15 days after the revolt was suppressed. BOA, İ.DH, 318/20545, 9 March 1855. According to the British Consul in Mosul more than 3,000 rebels died and 800 men were captured. TNA, FO195/394, 26 February 1855, Mosul. C.A. Rassam to Stratford de Redcliffe.
- 81 Sandwith (1856: 212).
- 82 TNA, FO, 195/394, 26 March 1855, Mosul. C.A. Rassam to Stratford de Redcliffe.
- 83 According to the governor of Mosul’s report there were 475 armed men accompanied Yezdanşêr to Istanbul. BOA, İ.MMS, 6/240, 4 September 1855 and İ.MVL 353/15435, 12 September 1855.
- 84 BOA, İ.MVL 353/15435, 25 March 1856.
- 85 For Stratford de Redcliffe’s letter to Fuad Pasha see BOA. HR.TO. 222/59, 17 April 1856. For Fuad Pasha’s response to Stratford see BOA. İ.HR. 131/6698 enc. 2, 3 June 1856. Badem (2007: 317–323).
- 86 BOA, İ.MVL 98/17346, 17 May 1858.
- 87 Badem (2010: 377). Mehmed Süreyya does not provide a date for his death but he states that Yezdanşêr died during the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz (r. 1861–1876) (Süreyya III, 1308/ 1890-1: 454).
- 88 For the political transformation of Kurdish notables see Atmaca (2017: 43–58).
- 89 Barkey (2008: 18).

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