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Negotiating Political Power in the Early Modern Middle East

Kurdish Emirates between the Ottoman Empire and Iranian Dynasties (Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)

METIN ATMACA

Introduction

After Shah Ismail I (1501–24), a charismatic and messianic Sufi leader who proclaimed himself as the reincarnation of the Hidden Imam of Shiite tradition, crushed the Aqquyunlu dynasty (1378–1501) in a battle in 1501 and entered their capital, Tabriz, he declared himself king of a new state named Safavid, whose members would rule Iran for over 220 years.¹ In 1507, he sought to expand the boundaries of his dynasty further west into eastern Anatolia where he came into direct contact with the Kurdish rulers. During Shah Ismail's conquest, the most influential *beg* (lord, ruler) among all the Kurdish lords was probably the *beg* of Bitlis, Emir Şeref.² When Shah Ismail seized Harput in 1507–8, Şeref welcomed him with a lavish banquet and pledged his allegiance to the shah in Ahlat, on the northern shore of Lake Van. Amused by the reception, the shah recognized the rights of Şeref Beg. However, this manoeuvre did not save his rule when he presented himself in the same year to the shah in Khoy. This time, he was arrested with fifteen other Kurdish rulers. After his detention, a Qizilbash commander was appointed to rule Bitlis. The power of Kurdish *begs* in the region was significantly weakened even after most of them were later released by the

¹ For the arrival of the Safavids and their encounter with the Ottomans, see Allouche (1983), Bacqué-Grammont (1975: 68–88) and McLachlan (2000: 401–3).

² I use *beg* (Turkish *bey*) and *emir* (Kurdish *mîr*; *umera* for plural Turkish *emir*) interchangeably here as historical sources use both titles to refer to Kurdish dynastical leaders. Whereas *agha* (Kurdish *axa*, Turkish *ağa*) in the Kurdish political context is mostly used to refer to a tribal chief. I prefer using *emir* instead of the Kurdish *mîr* as the former is widely used in English.

shah. The shah did not release Şeref Beg and Melik Halil of Hisnkeyfa due to their prominent position in Kurdistan.³

There was already a Kurdish–Turkmen rivalry during the period of the Aqqyunlus for the control of eastern Anatolia because of the trade routes and the abundance of pastures for grazing (Woods, 1999: 31–3). The appointment of the Qizilbash Turkmen commanders, including Khan Muhammad Ustajalu to Diyarbakir, further stiffened this rivalry.⁴ Therefore, just before the Ottomans arrived in Kurdistan, the Kurdish lords of Bitlis, Mardin, Çemişgezek, Egil, Hazzo (Hizo) and other centres revolted against this Qizilbash domination (Woods, 1999: 166). After İdris-i Bidlisi, an experienced Kurdish bureaucrat who worked for the Aqqyunlus and Safavids, decided to collaborate with Sultan Selim I, the Ottomans better organized their march on Iran in order to stop the Anatolian expansion of Shah Ismail. Once the Ottomans defeated the Safavids in the war of Çaldıran on 23 August 1514, Selim I assigned İdris with the duty of ‘earning the hearts of the kings and rulers of Kurdistan, encouraging the obedience to the sublime throne and standing up to the adversaries’.⁵ İdris immediately started with his shuttle diplomacy among the Kurds, who were still under the influence of the Safavids.⁶ He first met with the Kurdish emirs of Bradost, Soran, Baban and Sarım, and established an alliance among them.⁷ Later he moved to Amediye and Cezire, and met with the leaders of Hisnkeyfa, Siirt, Hizan and Bitlis. His aim was ‘to bring the order among the Kurds’, earn their loyalty to the sultan and unite them against the Safavids.⁸ Similarly, in February and March 1515, he secured the loyalty of Kurdish rulers of Urmiya, Amediye, Soran, Bohtan,

³ According to Şeref Xan Bidlisi’s *Sharafnâme*, at the beginning only three of the Kurdish lords were not arrested: Ali Beg of Sason, Emir Şah Muhammed of Şirvan (Şirvi) and Gazi Kıran (Yusuf Beg) of Bradost (Scheref, 1860: 191–3, 232, 297). In another part of his work, Şeref Xan states that only Ali Beg and Emir Şah Muhammed were not arrested (Scheref, 1860: 411).

⁴ Despite the initial arrest of the Kurdish lords by Shah Ismail and his brutal punishment of some Kurdish leaders who supported the Ottomans, Yamaguchi states that there was no great difference between the Kurdish policy of the two empires as both recognized the hereditary rights of the Kurdish rulers (Yamaguchi, 2012: 110).

⁵ TSMA (Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Arşivi), e.8333–1, in Genç (2019: 307).

⁶ While he was moving around Kurdistan, he was stopped by some Kurdish bandits who were collaborating with the shah. He named them as those who ‘wear the Qizilbash cap’. İdris must have been very upset about this looting since he did not lose the opportunity to write to the sultan about it and probably used it as part of propaganda while he was making his case against the Safavids (TSMA, e. 8333/2, in Genç, 2019: 309–10).

⁷ İdris-i Bidlisi’s travel and outreach among the Kurdish emirates and tribes was not easy as he was constantly followed by the shah’s spies (İdris-i Bidlisi, *Hakku’l-Mubin fi şerhiraleti’l-hakki’l-yakin*, vr. 7b, in Genç, 2019: 309).

⁸ TSMA, e.8333–1, in Genç (2019: 307).

Nemran, Rojikan and Eyyubi through agreements (İdris-i Bidlîsî, 2001: 253). Shah Ismail's oppressive policy further motivated Kurdish emirs to collaborate. With İdris's excellent skills of negotiation, an alliance was established among these Kurdish emirs against the Safavids. Shortly before the summer of 1515, this new alliance defeated the Kurdish regiments loyal to Shah Ismail at Erciş, north of Lake Van.

İdris deemed Diyarbekir as the final regional target for the Ottomans. He considered the subjugation of the city as 'completion of Istanbul's conquest and the prelude to the conquest of Arab and Iranian lands'.⁹ Similar to his earlier efforts with other Kurdish emirs, İdris used the language of diplomacy with the notables in the city and backed efforts to force the Safavids out of Amid. Shah Ismail sent more military support and surrounded the city whereas the people inside of the fortress started to defend the city with the help of Kurdish forces sent through the initiative of İdris. Both parties attracted Kurdish groups on their side with promises and religious propaganda and they faced each other in Diyarbekir. In the war that took place in September 1515, the Ottomans came out victorious (Genç, 2019: 315–18).¹⁰ Over the course of the following winter and spring, the Ottoman army marched on Mardin and decisively defeated the remaining Qizilbash forces in the battle of Koçhisar (Kızıltepe) in May 1516 (Markiewicz, 2019: 133).¹¹

İdris, without a military or administrative position, became the sultan's special emissary in Kurdistan from September 1514 until May 1516. He implemented Selim I's eastern policy in the region. This policy included the forging of military alliances and the organization of military expeditions. The other part of Selim I's policy was to establish long-term relations between the Ottomans and the Kurdish emirs after the military victories. To this end, Selim I handed İdris blank titles of investiture (*berât*) and treaties (*istimâletnâme*) with his seal on (Markiewicz, 2019: 133). Besides distributing these titles among the rulers in Kurdistan, İdris and his men struck deals with Turks and Arabs settled between Amid, Mosul and Shahrizor. It seems that the defeat of the Safavids by the Ottomans had an initial effect on the alliance between the Kurdish emirs and the Ottomans and the majority of the work was through the carefully crafted diplomacy of İdris. During eighteen months

⁹ TSMA, e. 1019, in Genç (2019: 313).

¹⁰ İdris-i Bidlîsî, *Salîmshâhnâme*, 133a, in Markiewicz (2019: 127). In Haydar Çelebi's *Ruznâme* the date for the conquest of Amid's fortress is recorded as 22 October 1515 (Ferîdûn Ahmed Bey, 1858: 1/470).

¹¹ Based on Haydar Çelebi's *Ruznâme* Nejat Göyünç estimates that Mardin was taken sometime in October 1515 (Göyünç, 1991: 19).

of his efforts, he drew the *begs* of Hisnkeyfa, Sason, Bitlis, Bohtan, Amediye, Zirki, Merdisi, Egil, Hizan, Çemişgezek and some others to the Ottoman side. İdris struck a deal first among the Kurdish emirs themselves in order to unite them against the Safavids, and later prepared an agreement between each emir and the Ottomans.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Kurdish emirs had no interest in establishing an alliance with the Ottomans.¹² Instead, they were inclined more towards Shah Ismail after he destroyed the Aqqyunlus. Many Kurdish emirs had grievances towards the Aqqyunlu ruler as they were pushed out of their hereditary lands.¹³ Shah Ismail initially handed back their lands to some of the Kurdish *begs*. This period of confidence, however, remained short when Kurdish *begs* were arrested and their lands were distributed among the Qizilbash leaders. Shah Ismail also deported some of the Kurdish *begs* and tribes from the west of Kurdistan into central Iran, replaced some of the *begs* with those loyal to him and established kinship with some through marriages (Scheref, 1860: 410). İdris's endeavours persuaded many of those *begs* to side with Selim I. They considered Selim I as a new chance to reclaim their lost territories. Meanwhile, İdris tried to draw the sultan into a second war against the Safavids (Genç, 2019: 323–4). It seems that the bond he established among the Kurds was not sufficient. Shah Ismail still held influence over some of the Kurdish emirs. Furthermore, Sultan Selim I had not met his promises to the Kurdish emirs. Following their experience with Shah Ismail, these emirs were growing more suspicious of the Ottomans.

Once the Ottomans took Diyarbekir and divided it into twenty-three districts (*sancak*), the Ottoman commander in Diyarbekir, Bıyıklı Mehmed Pasha, was appointed as the supreme commander (*beylerbeyi*).¹⁴ Selim I sent

¹² Regardless of this, there were many Kurdish notables and religious scholars who pursued their career in the Ottoman Empire. For instance, during the first decade of the sixteenth century, a certain Kurd Maksud, who was accompanied by his uncle, went to war in Hungary as an Ottoman mercenary. After his uncle's death he decided go to another military expedition with Ali Pasha and later asked for his *ulufe* (lit. 'fodder money' or military wage) from the sultan. The story of Maksud is not traceable as the documents catalogued in his name at the Topkapı Palace Museum Archive are limited. This story nonetheless demonstrates that the Kurds saw the Ottoman Empire of the period as a land where they could pursue a career (TSMA, e. 753/42 (6062/1), 7 Safer 918 (26 Nisan 1512)).

¹³ Uzun Hasan (1457–78), the most prominent Aqqyunlu leader, tended towards conciliation with the Bulduqani of Egil and Zirki of Tercil while he had taken a much aggressive stance towards the Ayyubids of Hisnkeyfa and Malkişi of Çemişgezek (Woods, 1999: 91–2).

¹⁴ For further information on the first administrative structure established by the Ottomans in Diyarbekir, see Göyünç (1969).

new blank titles of investiture to İdris and instructed him to collaborate with Bıyıklı Mehmed and appoint suitable Kurdish *begs* to these districts. The sultan also sent seven treaties to those Kurdish lords to confirm their pre-existing rights and ancestral lands (Markiewicz, 2019: 128–9). The Kurdish *begs* who joined the 1515 Ottoman campaign in Diyarbekir received these seven treaties. İdris mediated the process. It was İdris, the sultan's special envoy who was delegated extensive authority, who determined which 'Kurdish leaders were worthy of formal recognition of status, what rights and privileges should be recognized, and where these rights and privileges should exist' (Markiewicz, 2019: 129). Utilizing the Ottoman facilities and documents he received, he divided the province into two types of administrative units. The central and western areas of Diyarbekir were put under the administration's direct control through the appointment of district commanders (*sancak beği*).¹⁵ Despite central administration of the districts, the Ottomans deemed it necessary to confirm the rights and status of some of the pre-existing local elites. İdris and Bıyıklı Mehmed accepted the hereditary rights and the independence of the Kurdish lords located in the east of the province. There is no record as to which of the Kurdish *begs* were accorded their ancestral lands. Most likely, because of their support for the Ottomans in the war with the Safavids, the beneficiaries of these treaties were the most powerful Kurdish lords in Bitlis, Amediye, Hisnkeyfa, Cezire, Hizan, Hakkari and Sason (Markiewicz, 2019: 130).

These initial efforts by İdris and the Ottomans would have long-lasting effects on Kurdistan in the successive three centuries. The experience of the Kurdish *begs* of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was interpreted as evidence for specific political prerogatives on the part of the Kurdish *begs*. That is, the Kurdish *begs* would always try to maintain good relations with strong rulers and with such 'wise politics they kept Kurdistan safe from the constant attacks of the rulers of Aqqyunlus, Safavids and the Ottoman'.¹⁶ The Kurdish lords, especially those close to the borders, would keep close relations both with the Ottomans and Safavids. They would establish an alliance with one side against the other if they deemed it necessary in a given

¹⁵ According to the cadastral survey completed in 924/1518, Amid, Mardin, Arabkir, Kiğ, Harput, Erhani, Siverek, Ruha (Şanlıurfa), Akçakale, Çermik, Sincar and Çemişgezek were classified as regular districts. Among these only Çemişgezek was accepted as the ancestral seat of a Kurdish *beg* as he assisted directly the Ottoman army in the campaign on Amid (TT.d.64, in Markiewicz, 2019: 130).

¹⁶ Although Şeref Xan makes this statement for the rulers of Sason, this was a rule that most Kurdish *begs* followed (Scheref, 1860: 192).

context. They would sometimes even ask for backing against a contestant from their own ruling family (Scheref, 1860: 425–30).

Shah Ismail, when compared with Selim I, appears to have been less successful in approaching the Kurdish tribes in the prelude and during the Çaldıran war. Sultan Selim I, on the other hand, appointed İdris with a special mission to persuade the Kurdish lords and ensure a constant flow of information before and in the aftermath of the Çaldıran war. This shows he carefully planned his Kurdish policy (Yamaguchi, 2012: 110–11).

The struggle between the Ottomans and the Safavids, especially during the first half of the sixteenth century, was pivotal in shaping the political landscape in Kurdistan. The policies of both empires had lasting effects in the region. İdris himself contributed tremendously by using the religious differences between the two empires. In his communications with the Ottoman sultan, İdris represented Kurdish rulers as staunch Sunnis despite the existence of a significant number of heterodox groups like Qizilbash, Shiite, Yezidi and Ahl-i Haqq among the Kurds. İdris focused on religious difference as a political tool because of Shah Ismail's emphasis on Shiism. The sectarian division between the Ottomans and the Safavids was the most important policy-forming element for both sides. The emphasis on the religiosity of the Kurds and their devotion to Sunnism persisted through the reign of the Ottomans and was remembered more often during political conflicts with Iranian dynasties.¹⁷ İdris believed that recognizing the hereditary rights of Kurdish emirs would be a lesser motive in terms of securing their loyalty. He saw the religious bond as the basis for a long-term bond. In addition to religious propaganda, İdris addressed the grievances towards Shah Ismail and attracted the Kurdish *begs* to the Ottoman side (Genç, 2019: 329–33). These Kurdish *begs* agreed to offer their allegiance to Selim I and accepted the sultan's name to be proclaimed in the Friday sermon (*hutbe*) in their territories. However, the official Ottoman religious doctrine did not deem the Safavids as infidel threats like their European rivals and wars against their eastern neighbour were not *gaza* (holy war). Religion, therefore, was less significant for the Ottoman side in the following period of relations with the Safavids. This situation also affected Kurdish rulers in the aftermath of the conflict between the two empires. This was when the right of inheritance and leadership became an issue among the Kurdish leaders.

¹⁷ Şeref Xan Bidlisi stressed on the Sunni and Shafi'i credentials of the Kurds and for him being an Ottoman subject was closely identified with Sunni Islam, especially among the Kurdish rulers (Scheref, 1860: 14, 36; Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi, 2005: 36).

Some emirs even decided to switch to Shiism due to arising conflicts of interest. Their commitment to their new faith, however, remained superficial (Yamaguchi, 2012: 120–1). Despite that, in the following three centuries the sectarian difference between both empires and religious propaganda would once in a while come back as a useful political tool to justify the war.

The Sixteenth Century: The Age That Defined the Permanent Division of Kurdistan

After the Ottomans established their authority among Kurdish *begs*, they did not draw abstract lines between themselves and the Safavids. The sixteenth century was not a period of political conceptualization such that the Ottomans sought a boundary resembling today's specific lines between modern Turkey and Iran. Instead, they paid attention to the cities and their environs close to the frontiers. The majority of these areas between the two empires were controlled by Kurdish clans and notables. Kars, Pasin, Hınıs, Adilcevaz, Muş, Erzurum and Bitlis marked the northern frontier between two powers during the first half of the sixteenth century. Controlling such a wide range of distant territory from the capital, Istanbul, was difficult. The Ottomans, therefore, had to rely on the local rulers to settle their sphere of influence. Furthermore, settling precise boundaries meant the loss of large revenues for the client Kurdish tribes. Besides, the Iranians were reluctant to leave Iraq to the Sunni Ottomans where it sheltered some of the most important Shiite sanctuaries (Barthold, 1984: 206). Therefore, both empires left most of the boundaries undecided.

Following İdris's negotiations, Emir Şeref of Bitlis sided with the Ottomans against the Safavids. In the aftermath, however, the next ruler of Bitlis did not feel safe under the rule of the Ottomans because of some conflict. Therefore, he continued to seek protection from the Safavids (Scheref, 1860: 418). After the conflict between the Shii Pazuki and the Sunni Rozki (Rojiki, Rawzhaki, Ruzagi, Ruzbenis, Ruzgan) tribes, Emir Şemseddin, the then ruler of Bitlis, surrendered the city to the Ottoman authorities in the course of (Kanuni) Süleyman I's Irakeyn campaign (1534–36) and subsequently he left for the Safavid court to serve the shah. This resulted in the extension of the Ottoman border to the south of Kurdistan. However, tribes in the region never accepted direct Ottoman rule. It took more than forty years until the claim of the princely family of Bitlis was accepted by Istanbul when Şemseddin's son, Şeref Xan Bidlisi,

the author of *Sharafnama*, was allowed to return with the Rozki tribe in 1578/9.¹⁸

After Süleyman I's Irakeyn campaign, the division between 'Iranian Kurdistan' and 'Ottoman Kurdistan' was consolidated. However, for the successive centuries, some of the Kurdish lands kept changing hands after each war between the two empires. Sometimes Kurdish lords would switch their loyalty for another ruler or simultaneously pay tribute and tax to both empires.¹⁹ The allegiance of emirs of Ardalán, Hakkari, Baban, Soran, Bitlis and the aghas of tribes on the frontier was therefore always in flux. Besides, as Posch suggests the 'partition of Kurdistan' was in no way resembling, for example, the 'partition of Poland' of the eighteenth century since the lands populated by the Kurds were never united under one political unit named 'Kurdistan' (Posch, 2003: 211).

Before Kurdistan was partitioned between the two empires, Süleyman I (1520–66) succeeded in uniting almost all of it under his rule. He pursued conquests in the east, especially in Kurdistan, Armenia and areas around Lake Van. This was mainly to prevent potential Qizilbash intrusion into Anatolia. He also wanted to make the Euphrates River a natural boundary between his domain and the Safavids (Allouche, 1983: 103). He partially accomplished this through the Irakeyn campaign. During the second campaign in 1548–9, he captured Kars and Van, two key military strongholds between the Ottomans and the Safavids. The sultan used the policy of *istimâlet* ('to lean' or 'incline in the direction of') among the Kurdish tribes during his war against the Safavids. İbrahim Pasha, sending communications from his winter base at Aleppo, pursued the Kurdish tribes with vigorous diplomacy with message content similar to İdris's earlier engagements. He persuaded a number of frontier tribes. Ottoman officials attracted Kurdish rulers and tribes to their side through establishing better terms of association with the empire when compared with conditions with the Safavids. Registers of Imperial Surveys (*Tapu ve Tahrir Defteri*) show that the Ottomans attached importance to be recognized as 'more just rulers than their Safavid predecessors'. Therefore,

¹⁸ BOA (Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı), Mühimme Defteri (MD) no. 32, decrees 168, 185, 514 and 543 (March–November 1578). Posch states that it took nearly seventy years for the family of Bitlis to reinitiate their rule (Posch, 2003: 205–6).

¹⁹ Eskandar Beg, a Persian court scribe and chronicler during the reign of Shah Abbas I, emphasizes the tendency of Kurdish tribes to switch side in the conflict with the Ottomans (Eskandar Beg, 1978: 856; Mirza Shukrullah Sanandaji, 1366/1987: 96ff). Because of this tendency, many sources blame them of being fickle. Iranians during this period stereotyped the Kurds as 'evil-natured', 'stubborn', 'morose' and 'treacherous' (Kaempfer, 1977: 88).

they ended some of the abusive tax practices, so as to establish a long-lasting rule in Iraq (Murphey, 1993: 243–4).²⁰

Süleyman I's third campaign in 1553–4 resulted in full control of Kurdistan following the capture of Shahrizor and Balqas. Subsequently, the peace treaty of Amasya was signed between both empires. The Safavids recognized the sovereignty of the Ottomans over Iraq, north of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Following the treaty, Süleyman I pursued the 'policy of containment' vis-à-vis the Safavids. He wanted to keep two Muslim powers away from a mutually destructive war while the Portuguese were becoming more active in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. It was also pragmatic for the Safavids to sign such a treaty, considering the overwhelming military power of the Ottomans (Allouche, 1983: 144).

Selim I approached the Kurds more cautiously and handed hereditary rights to a limited number of Kurdish lords. Süleyman I differed from his father in his Kurdish policy by giving more autonomy to local rulers. In addition to Selim I's classification of Diyarbekir into *sancaks* (counties with tax and military obligations) and *hükûmets* (local governments with a high degree of autonomy), Süleyman I added eight more *sancaks*. He classified the rest of Kurdish emirates into twenty-eight administrative units as *yurtluk* and *ocaklık* (family estate or hereditary fiefdoms), as stated in a *ferman* (imperial decree), and granted them to Kurdish rulers with extensive autonomy and inheritance privileges from father to son (Barkan, 1953–4: 306–7).²¹ Despite their self-rule, most of the Kurdish territories were, in addition to Diyarbekir, put under newly created *eyalets* (province) of Dulkadir, Erzurum, Mosul, Baghdad, Van and Shahrizor. Most Kurdish lords nonetheless enjoyed direct access to the sultan, especially during periods of conflict with the Safavids. Süleyman I made sure to keep the Kurdish emirs empowered since he saw Kurdistan 'as a strong barrier and an iron fortress against the sedition of the demon Gog of Persia' (Aziz Efendi, 1985: 14). The sultan sought to preserve a strong leadership through the granting of inheritance, securing these lords against the intrusion of other rivals. This was to assure the continuity of the Kurdish emirates. His policy would also make these lords more dependent on the sultan to maintain their position. Süleyman I differed from his predecessor when he replaced the focus on religious fervour

²⁰ For a short account of the Ottoman Empire's legacy in Iraq in the early modern period, see Murphey (1987: 17–29).

²¹ The decree, which would set the Ottoman governing strategy of Kurdistan for the next three centuries, also detailed the rules of inheritance from father to son and their administrative privileges (TSMa, c.11696). For an English translation of the *ferman*, see Özoğlu (2004: 53–4).

with different state creeds blending 'ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious ecumenism' (Murphey, 1993: 248).

Some of the Kurdish tribes were located near the frontier between both empires and their territories were sometimes divided. Those tribes were very influential. The Ottoman and the Safavid regional leaders had to take them into consideration. The Mahmudi near Khoy and Mahmudiye, the Dunbuli around Khoy and Sugmend (Sukmanabad) and the Şenbo (or Şanbavi) in Hakkari were among some of the prominent tribes. The Şenbos, for instance, were almost independent and their name was not put on tax registers at least until the mid-seventeenth century despite their allegiance to the Ottomans (Posch, 2003: 206). The Bradost tribe dominated the territory from the east of Hakkari to Lake Urmiya and Sawujbulagh (Sablax). Sultan Hüseyin of Bahdinan, respected both by other Kurdish tribes and Ottoman sultans, was another strong tribal leader who ruled from the west of Mukri's dominion on the other side of the Zagros mountains in Amediye (Posch, 2003: 206–7). Further south were the Babans and their tribal confederation located around Shahrizor. The Babans later extended their territories up to Lake Urmiya. Their leader, Hacı Şeyh Baban, so threatened the Safavids that in 1540 Shah Tahmasp was compelled to send a military force against him (Scheref, 1860: 286).²²

Şeref Xan classifies some of the Kurdish tribes (Pazuki/Pazogi, Siyah Mansur, Çekeni/Çigani, Kelhor and Zengene) as the 'emirs of Iranian Kurds' (*omara-ye Akrad-e Iran*) (Scheref, 1860: 320–8).²³ These tribes were loyal to the Safavids as they were either Qizilbash or from a Sufi order close to them. Their leaders were promoted as *khan* or *qurchi*. Posch suggests that these tribes could be named as Qizilbash Kurds (*Akrad-e Qizilbash*) (Posch, 2003: 210). Many of these tribes were sent to Khurasan during the reign of Abbas I (1587–1629). In comparison, a second group was made of those who often switched loyalty between the Safavids and the Ottomans. The Sunni Rozki, Ardalan, Soran, Hakkari, Baban, Mukri, Mahmudi and Yezidi Dunbuli dominated the Ottoman–Safavid frontier. In each conflict between the two empires, they could and did shift alliances in order to keep their independence and hereditary rights.²⁴ Arising conflicts of leadership within a given tribe and members of

²² Hacı Şeyh Baban was also mentioned in the Persian and Ottoman chronicles of Hasan Rūmlū (1931: 382–3) and Lütfi Paşa (1341/1925: 383).

²³ Yamaguchi adds the tribes of Bana and Lur-i Kuchak to this list (Yamaguchi, 2012: 112).

²⁴ Besides these two categories, Yamaguchi suggests a third group of Kurdish lords who were made up of governors and emirs around Diyarbekir and gradually incorporated into the Ottoman administrative system after the creation of the province in 1515. Once their territories were seized from the Safavids and hereditary rights were recognized, these rulers pledged their near total obedience to the Ottomans (Yamaguchi, 2012: 111–13).

their ruling family would often result in an invitation to either the Ottomans or the Safavids to support them in their struggle.

While Kurdish tribes were important for both empires to keep the shared frontier steady, the towns and cities close to boundaries had further military, strategic importance. Places like Bitlis and Van were considered as a 'key and gate to Azerbaijan' by the Ottoman commanders.²⁵ Khoy and Urmiya on the Safavid side were the energetic towns for the Safavids to keep the Ottomans at the door. Therefore, Khoy often became the target of the Ottoman–Kurdish alliance. Together with their environs, these towns were strategically very important to check each other's power for the Ottomans and Safavids. Without the co-operation of the Kurdish tribes and lords around these towns, it was impossible to protect these settlements. Kurdish tribes on the frontier could unexpectedly change sides. In some cases, towns changed hands when the tribe in their alliance switched sides. Furthermore, the Ottomans and Safavids tried to avoid direct confrontation. They preferred proxy wars. The Kurdish emirs and their tribal confederates conquered the land of another Kurdish ruler under the rival empire. Sometimes they used such skirmishes among Kurdish tribes as a pretext for wars of a new conquest.²⁶

The Safavids remained on the north-east shores of Lake Van until the wars in 1548 and 1550–3. After the Ottomans incorporated Van into the territories of the empire, a province under the rule of *beylerbeyi* was created (Sinclair, 2009: 216–17). Despite Ottoman rule in Van, the Mahmudi *begs* remained loyal to the Safavids until 1554, several months before the treaty of Amasya was signed between the empires.²⁷ The treaty brought about some stability to the region by barring the Kurdish rulers from switching loyalty. This laid the foundation for long-term relations between the two empires. There were not many cases of shifting sides among the Kurdish ruling families during this period. The Safavids nonetheless got involved in the appointment of the Mahmudi *begs*. Some family members of the Mahmudis were appointed to positions

²⁵ BOA, A.DVN, I/52, in Posch (2003: 208).

²⁶ The Ardalanis, who expanded their territories over Sanandaj/Sinna and Shahrizor, are a good example of how the Ottomans and Safavids waged proxy wars on each other and tried to expand their frontier territories. Lands of the Ardalanis were ruled by two brothers (Biga Beg and Suhrab), one in Shahrizor and another in Sanandaj. Using the feud between these brothers in the second half of the sixteenth century, the Ottomans took over Shahrizor while the Safavids claimed Ardanan. The boundary between the two empires was defined as a result of the battles between family members in the coming years. More details on the history of the Ardalanis in the sixteenth century are available in Me'mun's memoirs, which were published both as transcription and facsimiles in Parmaksızoğlu (1973: 192–230 and 1a–45b).

²⁷ For the Ottoman view of the treaty, see Şahin (2013: 127–36).

in the Safavid army (Scheref, 1860: 302, 304–6). The Mahmudi case shows that the Ottoman authority was not the only option for the Kurdish lords, who saw the competition between the two empires as an opportunity to carve a political space for themselves. They did not passively accept the authority of their sovereign but maintained the power of negotiation.

When Shah Tahmasp (1524–76) succeeded his father, Shah Ismail, he recognized the hereditary rights of almost all the Kurdish rulers who sought refuge in his court. He rarely eliminated a Kurdish ruler unless they proved rebellious. He provided them with financial support whenever for some reason they lost territory. A distinctive feature of his Kurdish policy was that he received the young sons or brothers of emirs into his court, most of them as hostages, in order to assure the loyalty of their families and had them trained with his own princes (Yamaguchi, 2012: 114–21). Many of those would be raised with a sense of adoration and fidelity to the shah and would be later appointed as loyal rulers in their land. Devoted Kurdish rulers would be appointed with titles such as *qurchi*, a kind of royal bodyguard. The Safavids created the post of *amîr al-umarâ* (commander-in-chief) of Kurdistan and gave it to loyal Kurdish emirs to command other Kurdish chieftains.²⁸ Marriage alliances between Kurdish rulers and the Safavid royal family as well as Qizilbash commanders contributed to the integration of Kurdish emirs into the Qizilbash confederation. Shah Tahmasp's Kurdish policy seems to achieve its objective for a while as few Kurdish emirs changed their loyalty to the Ottomans. On the other hand, despite their attachment to the shah, the Kurdish emirs were never appointed to high positions in Tahmasp's court as it was dominated by Qizilbash Turkmen tribes. One had to wait for Shah Abbas (1578–1629) to reform the system until some Kurdish elites were accepted into the core administration.²⁹

After Shah Tahmasp's death, Iran was in a power vacuum and the Ottomans wanted to use this opportunity to expand their eastern territories after more than two decades of stability. Using Iranian Kurdish tribes' attack on Van and frontier raids as a pretext, in 1578 the Ottomans launched a new campaign on Iran and it took twelve years until the war ended (Kütükoğlu, 1993: 18–22).³⁰

²⁸ Among those who were appointed *amîr al-umarâ* were Halil Beg Pazuki during Ismail I's reign, Emir Şeref during the rule of Tahmasp and Şeref Xan Bidlisi, the author of *Şarâfname*, after Shah Ismail II (1576–77) came to power (Yamaguchi, 2012: 118–19).

²⁹ 'Alî Khan Zanganah, who was a member of the prominent Kurdish Zangana tribe, reached to the position of grand vizier during the reign of Shah Sulayman (Matthee, 1994: 77–98).

³⁰ See also the same source (Kütükoğlu, 1993: 53–82) for a detailed account of the war. Giovanni Michiel, a resident of the Venetian consulate in Aleppo until 1587, bluntly states that the Ottomans waged war on Iran not for the usual issue of faith but simply for the sake of expanding their territory (Bibliotecada Ajuda, Lisbon, 46–10-X,

The Ottomans also sent an order to Kurdish emirs and aghas to move into Safavid territories, occupy their cities and kill all the 'heretics' (*mülhid*) in the area (Uzunçarşılı, 1995: 3/57–8). Hüsrev Pasha, the governor of Van, is said to have armed the Kurdish tribes and the emir of Hakkari with a promise of land and hereditary rights, with the condition that they seize the region of Salmas (Matthee, 2014: 15). A joint Ottoman-Kurdish force later attacked the Qizilbash forces in Toprakkale-Urmiya and occupied the area. Proxy wars between the two empires were carried out through Kurdish forces. The Ottomans kept denying responsibility and blamed the Kurds for disturbances in the frontier area. In 1585, the Ottomans eventually occupied Tabriz and large swathes of Iran's most productive territories in the empire's north-west regions. The Iranians mounted a counter-offensive after one and a half-decade later and regained these lands. The decades-long conflict in the vicinity of Kurdish territories drained resources and caused tremendous economic instability with a number of forced population deportations in Azerbaijan and Shirvan (Matthee, 2014: 2). Several factors underlie the Ottoman decision of war. One is its religious ideology vilifying the Safavids as 'heretics worthy of death' (Matthee, 2014: 19).³¹ Considering the weakness of the Safavids and Ottoman military superiority it seems the latter calculated its military strategy very well. The Kurdish tribes played an undeniable and active role in the planning, outbreak and course of the war. The Kurdish lords and tribes who supported the Ottomans had an interest in it. In the words of Murphey, the Kurdish lords and tribes retained 'sufficient fluidity and dynamism to defend their own interests and in exceptional circumstances, especially during wartime, even to extend their sphere of independent action and influence within those states' instead of remaining as 'participants in and contributors to the fixed agendas set by their respective imperial "masters"' (Murphey, 2003: 151).

The Seventeenth Century: From Agents to Partners of the Empire

In 1603, Iranian lands once again became the battleground between the two empires and this resulted in the recapture of Tabriz by the Safavids. Shah Abbas I and his Ottoman counterpart Sultan Ahmed I (r. 1603–17) along with the sultan's successors re-established the loyalty of the tribes on the frontier.

'Relazione delle successi della Guerra fra il Turco e Persiano all anno 1577 al 1587', fols. 299v–300, in Matthee, 2014: 12).

³¹ For a discussion on religious elements in the wars between the Ottomans and the Safavids, see Hess (2013: 199–204).

In contrast to the sixteenth century, the earlier Kurdish policy of the Ottoman Empire to 'unite and rule' forced to change into 'divide and rule' (*divide et impera*) because of the competition with the Safavids for the control of Azerbaijan. At the same time, the tribes saw this competition as an opportunity offered by 'the complex matrix of fluid borders, changing alliances and the heightened strategic importance that their own native and patrimonial homelands now possessed in the wartime context to renegotiate and redefine the terms of their clientship, loyalty and dependence in relation to their respective nominal overlords both sultan and shah' (Murphey, 2003: 152).

Despite the autonomous and hereditary status of Kurdish *hükûmets*, their influence on the frontier remained local and they were not appreciated much by the Ottoman centre for their patrolling and defending the eastern frontier. Neither the Ottomans nor the Kurdish lords and their tribes sought a fuller integration between them. As the Ottoman documents of appointment and investiture during this period formulate, the Kurdish emirates were *mefrûz-ül-kalem ve maktû'-ül-kadem* (separated from the pen [of revenue assessors] and cut off from the feet [of the inspectors]). This formulation denoted their autonomous status with no tax obligation and free of inspection (Ayn-ı Ali Efendi, 1280/1863–1864: 30). Their co-operation with the Ottomans during wartime gave the Kurdish lords the prestige they sought and put them on equal terms with accompanying Ottoman provincial officials. They projected more power during military activities in their territories than in times of a lack of conflict. They served as scouts during the war. They were information collectors and intelligence agents, establishing links between the Ottomans and various anti-Safavid allies (Murphey, 2003: 154–5). In times of crises with Georgian princes, for example, the Ottomans would rely mostly on Kurdish emirs of the Azerbaijani-Caucasian frontier to supply them with reliable information. The Ottomans made explicit their unreserved confidence in the permanence and sustainability of good relations with Kurdish rulers because the empire needed stability and predictability in a frontier where the population easily shifted allegiances (Ferîdûn Ahmed Bey, 1858: 2/221).

The Ottomans relied on the Kurdish leaders to the extent of even employing them as peace negotiators with the Safavids. For example, in 1604, the Ottoman commander Cağaloğlu Sinan Pasha delegated Süleyman Beg, a Mahmudi and the ruler of Hoşab, to put forward his proposal for peace with the Safavids (Eskandar Beg, 1978: 857). The leaders of the Mahmudi tribal confederation were able to carry this and other roles owing to their cross-border relations with members of the same or affiliated tribes. Once the

shah became aware of anti-Safavid coalition among the Mahmudi Kurds, he took immediate steps to relocate them to other less militarily active parts of the frontier (Eskandar Beg, 1978: 878). The case of the Mahmudis demonstrates that both empires often targeted semi-subordinate tribal groups and attempted to make them clients. They also tried to divert the loyalty of subordinate groups under the allegiance of their enemy. To this end, Shah Abbas I equalized the status of the Kurdish and Turkmen Qizilbash groups, both of whom were indispensable in the defence of the frontier (Murphey, 2003: 158–9).

During the seventeenth century, the Safavids preferred to be heavy-handed on the non-co-operative elements among the Kurdish tribes in western Iran. Abbas I was faced with the dilemma of choosing between maintaining a workable balance between the Kurds and the Turkmens or suppressing semi-subordinate Kurdish groups. The shah opted for the second option in the case of Emir Khan, the leader of Bradost, who built the fortress of Dimdim near the western shores of Lake Urmiya and rebelled against him. Emir Khan surrendered his fortress after three months of siege by the Safavid forces between November 1609 and February 1610. In the end, those who voluntarily surrendered were indiscriminately massacred along with the rebels who did not lay down their arms as such (Eskandar Beg, 1978: 998–1002).³² Fifteen years after the Dimdim massacre, Şir Beg of Mukri revolted in a similar fashion, marched on Maragheh and plundered the inhabitants. A punitive expedition was sent over his capital, Gavdal, by the shah. However, Şir Beg was able to save himself when he fled into the mountains (Eskandar Beg, 1978: 1253).

For the rest of the seventeenth century, the Safavids saw Kurdish lands as alien and treacherous. Contrary to the Safavids, the Ottomans pursued a longer-term strategy to win the support and loyalty of the tribes through investitures and concessions. The policy aimed at creating robust, steady and self-sufficient allies in the border regions who could react against sudden attacks when Ottoman forces were not on the ground. Mîr Şeref, the hereditary ruler of Cezire, was delegated with a special position and extensive cross-clan authority during the early seventeenth-century Ottoman–Safavid wars. The Ottomans would not have been able to overcome the Safavid

³² Kurdish literature is rich in the battle scenes of Dimdim. The Kurds treated the conflict as a struggle against the foreign domination and in their ballads portrayed the massacred people as martyrs (*şehid*) in a holy war (*gaza*) (Hassanpour, 1995: 404–5). For ballads with musical notation and short stories on the battle, see Dzhaliyov (1967: 5–26, 37–9, 206).

threat without the collaboration of local rulers like Mîr Şeref. Kurdish rulers gained further power by exploiting their new positions to the point to co-opt the Ottomans into serving their purposes (Na'îmâ Mustafa Efendi, 1281/1864–1865: 2/17).³³ For instance, the governor of Diyarbekir, Nasuh Pasha, who was also the son-in-law of Mîr Şeref Pasha, wanted to put an end to a rebellion in Baghdad in 1606. Mîr Şeref diverted Nasuh Pasha's attention at the close of campaigning season to a project to expand his own territory and persuaded him to attack the stronghold of Kurd Ali, a leader of the Aşti tribe. A prolonged siege of four months proved to be fruitless and the campaign on the Iraqi front was postponed to the following year.

The Kurdish tribal forces became indispensable for providing some of the basic services in the areas of army transportation and logistical support. The supply lines of the Ottoman army extended beyond the imperial *menzilhâne* (post stations) network confined to the core provinces of the empire thanks to these tribal forces. According to Aziz Efendi, Kurdish forces constituted a military force of 50,000 to 60,000 soldiers during this period.³⁴ After the Ottomans recaptured Baghdad in 1638, the tribes were encouraged to extend their sphere of influence and build cross-border bonds with their tribal brethren in Safavid territories (Murphey, 2003: 162–3).³⁵ Furthermore, in the absence of Ottoman commanders or pashas to lead their forces, tribal commanders assumed leadership positions in their own particular sectors of the wider frontier. When several fronts had been opened on the eastern frontier in 1627, the leadership for the battle in southern Kurdistan was assigned to the chief of the Mukri confederation, Mira Beg (Kâtib Çelebi, 1287/1870: 2/96–7).³⁶ In such cases, the usual order of superiority was temporarily reversed and the hierarchical distinction between the overlord and vassal was blurred. Besides, the Ottomans during this period could not rely on the central treasury as they did in the sixteenth century. Therefore, Kurdish tribes had to share the cost of wars despite their tax privileges. Such shared responsibility and burden redistribution during the war gave the opportunity to Kurdish lords to redefine their role and status. These emirs

³³ Topçular Kâtibi, *Tevârih-i Âl-i Osmân*, fol. 241b–242b, 265a, Vienna: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Ms, Mxt 130, in Murphey (2003: 162).

³⁴ Aziz Efendi notes that after the provincial governors corrupted and started to extort money from the Kurdish *begs*, their forces shrank substantially to a mere 600 or 700 men at the beginning of 1630 (Aziz Efendi, 1985: 14–15).

³⁵ Before Baghdad was permanently taken under control, the Ottomans used eastern Anatolia and the province of Mosul as the centres of military mobilization against the Safavids.

³⁶ Aziz Efendi, too, in his report tries to draw the sultan's attention to the campaigns that took place under the command of Kurdish *begs* (Aziz Efendi, 1985: 14).

obtained further immunity against the encroachment of state authority in their lands and 'extended regional authority and a re-confirmation and of long-standing autonomous control within their own patrimonial lands designated as *hukumets*' (Murphey, 2003: 167).

After the two sides agreed to sign the Treaty of Zuhab (better known in Turkish historiography as Kasr-ı Şirin, 1639), which reaffirmed the essential elements of the treaty of Amasya that was ratified more than eighty years before, the Ottoman authority in eastern Anatolia slowly eroded.³⁷ The Kurdish territories on the Iranian side were faced with a similar fate once the weakening Safavid dynasty could not stand strong in the region after the second half of the seventeenth century and ultimately lost control in the eighteenth century when Iran plunged into anarchy because of political weakness. The long-enduring Ottoman-Safavid conflict eventually created a suitable environment for the autonomous status of Kurdish emirs who became part of a buffer zone, which afterwards was left almost untouched.³⁸ Neither side was able to dominate in Kurdistan. As a result, the Kurdish lords were able to turn this stalemate to their own advantage.

Aziz Efendi suggested that the eastern frontier significantly declined due to the rapacious attitude and their continual intervention into the family affairs of the Kurdish emirates. He stated that the *beylerbeyi*'s interference into the autonomy of the Kurdish *begs* caused the decline. The *beylerbeyi* collected huge sums of money from Kurdish *begs* despite their exemption from financial obligations. The only solution to improve the military situation in the east, Aziz Efendi suggested, was to give their hereditary privileges of tenure and protect them against financial demands by provincial governments. 'Kurdish warriors' would once again be able to 'put to use the sharpest swords' and 'bring about many conspicuous victories on behalf of the imperial throne' (Aziz Efendi, 1985: 14-17).³⁹

The control of the central government in Diyarbekir became weaker in the second half of the seventeenth century as only nine ordinary *sancaks*, out of the eighteen which were registered in the sixteenth century, remained.

³⁷ For more details on the agreement, see Na'imâ Mustafa Efendi (1281/1864-1865: 3/406-10).

³⁸ Evliyâ Çelebi, who passed through the region in the mid-seventeenth century, refers to Kurdistan as a 'stronghold' (*sedd-i sedid*) (Evliyâ Çelebi, 2005: 4/219a).

³⁹ Aziz Efendi adds that the Ottomans were in 'debt' to the Kurdish *begs* for the services they provided on the frontier. He therefore suggests, 'no one shall, in contradiction to that judicial decree, request a single akça or a single kernel [of grain] from the Kurdish commanders' (Aziz Efendi, 1985: 17). For the administrative organization of the province of Diyarbekir in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see van Bruinessen (1988: 13-28).

Nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes in the province remained marginal within the political structures of the Kurdish principalities. These tribes were not integrated into any administrative units and their classification as *sancak* was merely for fiscal purposes as the Ottoman tax agents wanted to collect taxes before they took the journey to their summer pastures.⁴⁰ By the mid-eighteenth century, the tribal population of Diyarbekir decreased further. Princely emirs like those in Bitlis, Hakkari, Amediye, Baban and Soran were based more on tribal lineages and they received their power from tribal confederates. Some of these confederates, like the Heyderan and Boz Ulus, broke up. The Ottomans bolstered these newly born tribes so as to recruit them into the military, by distributing fiefs and grazing grounds among them. Such redistributions caused further political conflict inside the Hakkari and Bitlis emirates. Kurdish rulers in these emirates had limited power on tribes and were sometimes challenged by their chieftains. This situation forced them to establish their legitimacy and claim to power with imperial support. Therefore, they needed the sultan to back their rule (Fuccaro, 2012: 243).

The emirates and tribes kept changing sides and sometimes expanded their borders. Eventually, the frontier became harder to control or navigate on the Ottoman and the Safavid side. This situation is clearly visible in the maps in Kâtib Çelebi's seventeenth-century geographical account *Cihannüma*, which details Anatolia but the Kurdistan region is left blank despite the author's knowledge of the region. In the text, he provides some details on the region. He gives a description of towns and cities like Van, Adilcevaz, Bitlis, Muş, Mosul, Hakkari, Siirt and Diyarbekir. He defines Cezire as the centre of Kurdistan and emphasizes the Sunniness of the Kurdish population (Kâtib Çelebi, 2007: 1/448–50).⁴¹

Evliyâ Çelebi, an Ottoman traveller who spent some time throughout Kurdistan in the second half of the seventeenth century, presents more details on the geography, politics, people and culture of the region. When he visited Kurdistan, he found some politically stable administrations. During his visit, almost all Kurdish principalities were based in towns like Bitlis, Amediye, Cezire, Hiskeyfa and Colemerg.⁴² He spent most of his time in Bitlis, and thus presents it as the most important emirate among all the others. He gives

⁴⁰ A new study on the political economy of Kurdistan shows that the power of *beylerbeyi* increased and the autonomy of Kurdish rulers eroded in Diyarbekir during the seventeenth century (Yadirgi, 2017: 75–6).

⁴¹ For more discussion on Kâtib Çelebi's perception of Kurdistan, see Atmaca (2018: 82–4). See also my forthcoming work (Atmaca, 2021).

⁴² By the end of the seventeenth century, Naima imagined the 'domains of Kurdistan' (*memâlik-i Kürdistan*) as a region larger than that described by Evliyâ Çelebi, by

some details about southern Kurdistan, especially the province of Shahrizor, centred in Kirkuk. He finds the province with eighteen ordinary *sancaks* and two fully autonomous Kurdish districts, Gaziyan and Mehrevan. During the war with Iran, he claims, Shahrizor could put out an army of 30,000 men.⁴³ He adds the emirates of Harir, Ardalan and Soran to the autonomous Kurdish entities classified under the province of Shahrizor, but does not provide any detail about them. He calls Bahdinan with its capital, Amediye, as the most autonomous and powerful of all Kurdish emirates. The emirate was divided among several districts and appointments to rule these districts were made by Emir Seyyid Han, not by the governor of Baghdad. The emir would partake in the military campaigns against the Safavids with his own army of 40,000 men, standing beside the army of Shahrizor. Both armies would constitute the front guard.⁴⁴

The Eighteenth and First Half of the Nineteenth Centuries: From Imperial to Regional Alliance

From the 1639 Treaty of Zuhab until the 1720s, no significant conflict took place between the Ottomans and the Safavids. During this period, the Ottomans mostly focused on wars in the Balkans and rebellions inside of the empire. Istanbul sought the help of the Kurdish forces usually during a revolt in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan or Iraq. For instance, the emir of Bahdinan sent his uncle Kubad Beg, with a military force of 16,000 men, to join an Ottoman campaign to suppress an uprising in Basra in 1700 (Saadi, 2017: 83).

The Safavids went through a period of relative decline during this period. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, before the Safavid shahs were replaced by Nader Shah (1736–47), the founder of the Afsharid dynasty, the Ottomans wanted to occupy western Iran. They sent Dürri Ahmed Efendi to Iran to assess the military condition of the Safavids. After he completed his journey at the end of 1721, he prepared a detailed report about the Safavid

including Erzurum and Ruha (Urfa). He also recorded the Kurdish population in Sivas (Na'imâ Mustafa Efendi, 2007: 2/550, 899).

⁴³ It seems that Evliya Çelebi exaggerated the number of soldiers, which he substantiated without any evidence (Evliyâ Çelebi, 2005: 4/372b).

⁴⁴ 'İmâdiyye diyâr-ı Kürdîstân'da ulu hükûmetdir . . . eyâletinde asla timâr u ze'âmet ve alâybeği ve çeribaşı ve serdâr u dizdâr ve kethudâyeri hâkimleri yoktur. Cümleten melik kendüsü hâkim-i dünyadır' (Amediye is an almighty rule in the realm of Kurdistan . . . in its province there is no fiefdom or vassalage and no officer, commander, castle warden or rulers of stewardship. The king all by himself is the ruler of the land.) (Evliyâ Çelebi, 2005: 4/377b). More details on the Bahdinan emirate are available in Saadi (2017), al-Damalûjî (1952), al-'Abbâsî (1969) and al-'Azzâwî (1949).

court, their military forces and the society (Dürri Ahmed Efendi, 1820). Once Sultan Ahmed III and his grand vizier, Damad İbrahim, read the report, they decided that conditions were ripe for declaring war on Iran. The wars were waged from three fronts: the Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Iraq. Led by the governor of Baghdad, Ahmed Pasha, the Ottoman army marched from the Iraqi front and occupied Kermanshah. In order to expand the eastern frontier further, the Ottomans relied on the Kurdish forces led by the leader of the Baban emirate, Han Ahmed Pasha (Zeki, 1939: 54–5). The Ottomans, therefore, succeeded in occupying Hamadan in July 1731. After Nader Shah took over Isfahan and replaced the shah with his eight-month-old son in August 1732, he reclaimed the territories lost to the Ottomans and declared war on Baghdad. The Ottomans came out of this second war victorious as well (Vak'anüvis Subhî Mehmed Efendi, 2007: 102–3, 188–92).

In 1736, Nader Shah had usurped the throne of the Safavids and intensified his irredentist policy towards the west as much as the east of Iran. From the beginning of his rule until his death in June 1747, he waged a series of wars against the Ottomans.⁴⁵ During these wars, some of the territories that belonged to the Kurdish emirs changed hands several times. Among those lands, the emirate of Ardalan was occupied by the Ottomans and the Afsharids more than any other. Besides these states, the Mukri, Baban and Shahrizor emirates also invaded territories of Ardalanis (Sawaqeb and Muzaffari, 1393/2015: 97–120).

The Ottomans must have been planning to remain in Iranian Kurdistan for a while as they prepared land registers for Ardalan together with Luristan, Kermanshah, Urmiya, Mahabad, Sawujbulagh, Khoy and Maku in the late 1720s (Özgüdenli, 2003: 87–93; Uzunçarşılı, 1995: 4/180–2, 193). The Ottomans organized Ardalan, Kermanshah and Hamadan as *eyalets*. According to this new organization, Ardalan was planned as the largest province divided into seven districts (*liva* or *sancağ*).⁴⁶ Despite planning and registration, the Ottomans decided to sign a peace agreement with Iran in February 1732 and retreated from most of Iranian Kurdistan, including Ardalan (Uzunçarşılı, 1995: 4/222). The Kurdistan region and Mosul suffered continuous blows as a result of Nader Shah's campaigns. Just before he died, a peace agreement confirmed the 1639 borders between the Ottomans and the Afsharids. The periods of

⁴⁵ On wars and peace agreements between the Afsharids and the Ottomans, see Tucker (1996: 16–37) and Olson (2017).

⁴⁶ Sinne (Sanandaj), Mihreban (Meriwan), Evruman (Awraman), Cevanrud (Javanrud), Bane (Baneh), Sakız (Saqqez) and Afşar were organized as *liva* under the province of Ardalan (*Tahrir Defteri* (TD), no. 1066 (c. 1726–27), in Özgüdenli, 2003: 90–2).

peace, however, did not endure, on the whole, for a long time (Fattah and Caso, 2009: 126).

Karim Khan Zand came to the throne immediately after Nader Shah's assassination. He largely settled down Iran and started a military campaign targeting Ardalán territories before the winter of 1749. The Kurdish emir, Hasan Ali, was ill-prepared and tried to solve the crisis through diplomacy. He failed to convince Karim Khan. His capital, Sanandaj, was sacked and burned by the Iranian army (Perry, 2006: 25, 102–3). Kurdish rulers were never given high positions as governor-general in the administrative division of the Zand dynasty. The hereditary posts were subject to royal ratification and Karim Khan did not necessarily confirm as rulers those who were waiting in line to take the rule in their hereditary lands.

The rivalry between Ardalán under the rule of the Zandis and the Baban emirate (corresponding to present-day Sulaimaniya in Iraq and its surrounding), which was part of Ottoman Baghdad, provided the pretext for new interferences. Both emirates had 'traditional east-west ties of culture and kinship, which were bisected by the north-south frontier' between the realms formally under the rule of the Ottoman and Iranian dynasties, respectively (Perry, 2006: 103). The Ardalán–Baban rivalry would dominate the political scene of Kurdistan until the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Therefore, the Kurdish centre of power started to move down further to the south of Lake Van and the north of Iraq.⁴⁷ Similar to the late sixteenth century, the Ottomans and Iranians waged periodic proxy wars through these two emirates. At the beginning of the conflict, Hasan Ali Khan had to withdraw to Sanandaj against an assault by the ruler of Baban, Salim Pasha. Despite the collaboration of the emirates of Baban and Ardalán with the Qajar contender against Karim Khan, the latter's victories left them with no choice but to transfer their allegiance to the Zandis. The Babans had fallen increasingly under the influence of their rival Kurdish emirs, the Ardalánis, until 1774. The governor of Baghdad, Ömer Pasha, finally decided to reverse this situation and replaced the ruler of the emirate with another family member. A joint Zandi–Kurdish force was sent over Baghdad to reimpose Iran's rule in the Baban emirate but failed to accomplish the mission. During the following year, Karim Khan opened up a new offensive on two fronts, the Shatt al-Arab and Baban territories. Three-pronged attacks by the Zandi army resulted in the defeat

⁴⁷ On the rivalry and the rise of the Babans in Kurdistan in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, see the first chapter in Atmaca (2013). On the oscillation of political power among the Kurdish emirates, see my forthcoming work (Atmaca, 2021).

of the Ottoman–Baban forces. The status quo in the Kurdish emirate was reinstated (Perry, 2006: 75, 78–9).

During this period, local notables in Ottoman Iraq became quasi-independent to such an extent that the governors, who were sent from Istanbul to Baghdad and Mosul, remained symbolic. From 1750 to 1831, the dynasty of the Mamluks ('owned' or 'slave'), who would come from Georgia as Christian slaves and be converted to Islam, ruled Baghdad, then Basra and later extended their sphere of influence in Mosul. The Mamluks forged a close alliance with the Babans. The Baban emirate provided a significant proportion of Baghdad's budget. During the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Baban emirate under the rule of Abdurrahman Pasha (r. 1789–1813) became more powerful than the Mamluks in Baghdad and other Kurdish emirs in Ottoman Kurdistan. Abdurrahman was called a 'kingmaker' because of his role in the appointment of Mamluk leaders to the head of Baghdad (Longrigg, 1925: 226, 231–2). He even asked the sultan to bestow upon him the province of Baghdad. In return, he would suppress the Wahhabi rebellions in Iraq and reinstate the Ottoman rule in Aleppo, Diyarbekir, Rakka and some other provinces that the rebels attacked. He also offered to pay annually 30,000 piasters as tax, an amount more than the Mamluks paid.⁴⁸ Abdurrahman attacked Baghdad, Kirkuk, Sanandaj and Koy Sanjaq, and expanded, at the expense of other Kurdish emirates, the boundaries of his emirate to the north and east (Atmaca, 2013: 53).

Abdurrahman used the rivalry between the Ottomans and the newly emerging Qajar dynasty (1794–1925) in Iran. In times of conflict with Mamluk governors, he would seek help from Fath Ali Shah (1797–1834), the second Qajar ruler. After losing a war against the governor of Baghdad, Ali Pasha, he sought refuge in Iran. Fath Ali received him well and later pressured Ali Pasha to reappoint Abdurrahman to the leadership of the Baban emirate.⁴⁹ Instead of occupying Ottoman lands, Fath Ali decided to maintain close relations with the emir in order to interfere in the internal affairs of Baghdad. On the other hand, the pasha utilized the political turmoil between the two states. Abdurrahman switched several times his loyalty between the two powers to ensure his political survival. The Ottomans considered the Baban territories (called 'Kürdistan' in the official correspondence) as

⁴⁸ BOA, Hatt-ı Humayun (HAT), 20880-F (17 Rebiülâhîr 1225/22 April 1810). For an English translation of Abdurrahman Pasha's letter to the grand vizier, Yusuf Pasha, see Atmaca (2013: 55).

⁴⁹ BOA, HAT, 20880-F.

a gateway to Iraq and larger lands of the empire.⁵⁰ Hence, the Porte considered Abdurrahman's position very critical to the safety of its eastern frontier. The Ottomans expressed concern about Abdurrahman due to his close relations with the shah and Iranian governor in Kermanshah.

Qajar shahs were frequently involved in the internal affairs of Ottoman Kurdistan until the mid-nineteenth century. Such interferences often resulted in conflict between the Ottoman Empire and Iran. Two conflicts, one in the early 1820s and the other in the early 1840s, resulted in two agreements signed in Erzurum. The first treaty was signed in 1823. As part of the treaty, Iran agreed not to interfere in the politics of Ottoman Kurdistan. The Ottomans did not want the Baban ruler to get involved in the peace negotiations since the Porte considered the Babans as a 'bond between two states and having no concern with the war'. Therefore, the report concluded, the issue of the Baban emirate should be 'left out of peace terms'.⁵¹ The treaty did not stop Iran exercising influence through the emir. This led to further clashes and culminated in the second treaty of Erzurum in early 1847. One of the major topics of negotiation was the status of Sulaimaniya, the capital of the Baban emirate, and some of the Kurdish lands on the frontier. The Iranian delegate claimed some of the districts in Van, Bayezid and Sulaimaniya. When the Ottomans did not accept such demands, Iran offered to act together in the appointment of the Baban rulers and to receive dues from the tribes of the emirate for the usage of summer camps on the Iranian side. The Ottomans rejected these requests altogether and in contrast to the previous treaty, this time they made sure that the Baban territories would be recognized as part of the empire (Ateş, 2013: 92; Aykun, 1995: 39–41). Following the 1847 treaty, the Ottomans replaced the Baban ruler with a new administrator of its choice. This ended Iran's plan to claim the emirate.

Conclusion

Both states removed the Kurdish notables from their position and incorporated their lands into the central administration with the 1847 treaty. To this end, the Ottomans waged a decade-long war against the Kurdish nobility in

⁵⁰ A report on Abdurrahman Pasha and Baban territories, prepared by the governor of Baghdad, Ali Pasha, states 'Kurdistan [means acquisition] of Iraq and Iraq means acquisition of all Anatolia (*Kürdistan Irak'ın ve Irak cümle Anadolu'nun ittihâzı olduğu*).'
BOA, HAT, 6671-B (undated – probably May or June 1806).

⁵¹ BOA, HAT, 37113-S (29 Zilhicce 1239/25 August 1824). For more details on both treaties, see Masters (1991: 3–15) and Aykun (1995).

the Bohtan, Soran, Baban, Bahdinan, Hakkari and Müküs emirates. The Ottomans eventually defeated them and appointed administrators from the centre. Two decades later, Iran followed suit. Iran removed the last members of the Ardalan dynasty from Sanandaj. Despite delimited borders and an altered political system in Kurdistan, the Kurdish tribes continued to have close relations with their brethren on the other side of the border.⁵² The Sunni Kurds under Iranian authority continued to be influenced by the Ottomans' pan-Islamism propaganda in the second half of the nineteenth century, while Iran kept close relations with the aghas and members of their tribes, which were divided by new borders (Harris, 1896: 285–7).

After the second treaty of Erzurum was signed, the Ottomans and the Iranians avoided any major war. Iran no longer posed a military and ideological threat to the Ottoman Empire. However, low-intensity violence continued in the following decades. Kurdistan remained politically fragmented because of its geography, the sporadic feuds caused by Kurdish tribes and the ever-changing administrative and political rearrangements in Kurdish territories in both states. The boundaries were roughly established and the border disputes caused only minor modifications in the following period. Kurdish lands remained a 'buffer zone' between the two states until the mid-nineteenth century when finally a borderline was drawn with the help of an international commission. Despite the Ottomans' intention of turning the eastern frontier into a borderland, Kurdish territories remained as a 'fluid zone of passage, warfare and imperial administration, an area of economic and cultural exchange with a harsh natural environment' (Fuccaro, 2012: 237).

From the arrival of the Ottomans and the Safavids to Kurdistan until the removal of the Kurdish emirates in the mid-nineteenth century, the Kurdish nobility was actively involved in regional and trans-border politics. Tools of power politics varied from time to time but remained mainly the same in essence. The Kurdish lords sometimes used the least resources to achieve the most gains and at other times, they employed all their men and financial means if they saw clear victory in the conflict. Their 'advantageous' position turned into a 'disadvantageous' one during the two treaties of Erzurum. As a result of these treaties, the Ottomans, for the first time, recognized Iran as a separate nation from the rest of the Muslim world. This meant that the Ottomans considered Iran as their equals in terms of sovereignty. The shift in Ottoman politics reshaped diplomatic relations with Iran. This had some

⁵² For the centralization of Kurdish emirates and its consequences, see Atmaca (2019: 519–39).

permanent consequences on Kurdish political entities. In the end, both states decided to move together against the Kurdish rulers. Only then were they able to bring about the demise of the Kurdish emirates.

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