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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/anatoli/602>

DOI: 10.4000/anatoli.602

ISSN: 2498-0730

Publisher

CNRS Éditions

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 October 2017

Number of pages: 43-57

ISBN: 978-2-271-11659-8

ISSN: 2111-4064

Electronic reference

Metin Atmaca, « Three Stages of Political Transformation in the 19th century Ottoman Kurdistan », *Anatoli* [Online], 8 | 2017, Online since 22 March 2018, connection on 26 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/anatoli/602> ; DOI : 10.4000/anatoli.602

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Introduction

The 19th century was a period of immense transformation for Kurdistan in terms of social, economic and political structure. At the beginning of the century it was already divided between two states, the Ottomans and Qajarian Iran. This division became more apparent when the two states tried to create a boundary. The boundary between Iran and the Ottoman Empire was made of mainly by Lake Urmia in the Northwest of Iran and the chain of Zagros Mountains between today's Iran and Iraq. On both sides of this geographical frontier there were Kurdish Emirates (Kurdish: sing. *mîratî*, plu. *mîratîyan*) thus it was not easy to draw a precise borderline between both states. In fact more than half of the 19th century was spent between Iran, Ottomans, British and Russians in order to create a boundary on these lands, though with little success¹.

Besides divisions created by sporadic clashes between the two states in Kurdistan, two the European powers, the Russians and British, came in the region and deepen up this division further. After 1820s Russia started to descend from Caucuses to the North Eastern Anatolia and furthered to south of Kurdistan. The wars Russia waged against Iran and the Ottomans during this period, especially the war of 1828-29 with the Ottomans helped its presence to become permanent. At the beginning the Russians wanted to make sure the Kurds remain non-partisan, thus keep them neutral. Later they expanded their policy toward the Kurds and tried to recruit allies among their tribes. On the other hand, the same Kurdish tribes in the Northern Kurdistan, after a while the tribes in the south of Kurdistan, found a third party in the region for the first time and started to adopt

1. For a comprehensive study of the frontiers and the commissions see ATEŞ S., *Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843-1914*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

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to this change by seeing Russians as an alternative to the Ottomans and Persians².

As the political and administrative divisions in Kurdistan increased the transformation of the land accelerated further. Thus, despite the Kurdish emirates lasted for several centuries, after the 19th century such political structures were replaced with the religious leaders and later with the tribal chiefs. Taking such a transformation into consideration one could follow three phases in the 19th century of Kurdistan: Firstly, the classical period, which was dominated by secular leaders, namely the emirates; secondly, the period of religious leaders, when the emirates were destroyed and replaced by sufi leaders; thirdly and finally, the period of tribal leaders, which became the rule of the day after 1890, when the Cavalry Regiments were established by Sultan Abdulhamid II.

Emirs: The Secular Stage

From the beginning of the Ottoman administration until mid-19th century the political system in Kurdistan remained almost the same. During this period Kurdistan was made of several Kurdish Emirates, mainly Bitlis, Hakkari, Bohtan, Bahdinan, Soran and Baban. There were several other smaller emirates and vassal territories in Diyarbekir, Mardin, and Bayezid. The emirates of Ardalan and Mukri remained mostly under the Iranian states and mostly known as Persian Kurdistan. However, once in a while the Ottoman Empire and some other times the Baban Emirate occupied the territories of these two emirates.

Abdurrahman Pasha Movement

At the beginning of the century the most influential emirate was the Babans centered in Sulaimaniya in today's Northeastern Iraq. Because of its powerful stance the capital of Babans was considered as the center of Kurdistan³ and

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2. LAZAREV M.S., MIHOYAN Ş. X., *Kürdistan Tarihi*, (translated by KALE I.), Istanbul, Avesta, 2001, p.106-107.

3. Heude writes underneath of the drawing of Sulaimaniya he had at the beginning of his book as "Sulimaney, the Capital of Kurdistan.", HEUDE W., *A Voyage up the Persian Gulf and a Journey Overland from India to England in 1817*, London, Longman, 1817.

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the leader of the emirate was titled as Pasha and *mir-i miran* (the emir of all emirs or *beglerbegi*)⁴. Among all the Baban pashas Abdurrahman Pasha (r. 1789-1813) stood out the most powerful one with his political career, charismatic personality, and desires for more autonomy from the Ottomans and the Iranians. Despite the hard time he had with the *valis* (governors) of Baghdad he was able to stay in power for twenty-four years, although with several interruptions.

Abdurrahman Pasha, for some historians, was a kingmaker in Iraq⁵, for the others, especially for Kurdish nationalist historians, he was a warrior of the independence⁶. His rebellion in 1806 has been much considered by the Kurdish historians as the first revolt with nationalist sentiments. Answers to such claims are challenged by a thorough study of primary sources. In fact, Abdurrahman Pasha tried to expand his realm in expense of the *vali* of Baghdad and he tried to be the only power in the province with the approval of the sultan and with the economic and military power he had in hand. Although the first Kurdish rebellion in 19th century in the Ottoman Empire was carried out by Abdurrahman Pasha of the Baban Emirate and recognized by many scholars for its importance in regional history, it was misinterpreted as a “nationalist” movement that aimed to have an “independent Kurdistan⁷.” As the British resident J.C. Rich, who was a close friend

4. NIEUWENHUIS T., *Politics and society in early modern Iraq: Mamluk Pashas tribal Shayks and local rule between 1802 and 1831*, Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1981, p. 42.

5. LONGRIGG S. H., *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*, Reading, Garnet, 2002, (first published by Oxford University, 1925), p. 226, 231.

6. Xemgin considers him as a rebel who “always tried to establish an independent Kurdish state.” XEMGIN E., *Osmanlı-Safevi Döneminde Kürdistan Tarihi, Vol. III*, Istanbul, Doz, 2004, p. 343. Kaws Kaftan, another Kurdish historian, states that the Ottomans were afraid of Abdurrahman Pasha because he moved with “national purposes” to occupy all of Kurdistan. Kaftan also claims that Abdurrahman Pasha’s movement had progressive nationalistic sentiments despite its feudal-emirate bases. KAFTAN K., *Baban Botan Soran*, Istanbul, Nujen, 1996, p. 35, 39. For further discussion on Abdurrahman Pasha’s motivation and the Babans see the chapter four in my doctoral thesis. ATMACA M., “Politics of Alliance and Rivalry on the Ottoman-Iranian Frontier: The Babans (1500-1851)”, Ph.D. Thesis, Albert Ludwigs University of Freiburg, 2013, p. 120-146.

7. Soane claims that Abdurrahman Pasha’s revolt was the first attempt to “throw off the yoke of the Turks” with a “national spirit.” SOANE E. B., *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise*, Boston, Maynard and Co., 1913, p. 371 ; For more discussion on Abdurrahman Pasha’s revolt of being a nationalist one should see also ROUSSEAU J. B. L. J., *Description du pachalik de Bagdad : suivie d’une notice historique sur les Wahabis, et de quelques autres pièces relatives à l’histoire et à la littérature de l’Orient*, Paris, Treuttel et Würtz, 1809, p. 103 ; EDMONDS C.J., *Kurds, Turks and Arabs*, London, Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 54.

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of Abdurrahman Pasha, puts it, the Pasha did not seek full independence, he only wished “to render his country tributary to the Porte, but independent of any neighbouring Pasha⁸.”

The Kurdistan Question

Abdurrahman Pasha’s struggle as well as negotiations with Istanbul and Tehran, and the local powers in Kermanshah and Baghdad from 1805 until 1811 did not yield to any results. However, because of his movement, for the first time the “the Kurdistan question” was raised by the Ottomans, Persians and European powers⁹. Besides the Ottomans and Persians the British and French counsels in Baghdad and Basra felt necessary to write day by day about this issue to their sovereign¹⁰. Mainly it was the Ottomans and the Persians who played an important role in the region, though we see the British, French and later Russians penetrating into Kurdistan.

After Abdurrahman Pasha’s rebellions, the border issues started to emerge between the Ottomans and Iranians. Thus the “Kurdistan question” became more international, especially with the involvement of the British and Russians. The Baban leaders after Abdurrahman Pasha continued with their struggle for more independence while the states tried to bring them under a more central administration. Thus another conflict erupted after 1820 and continued for three years. As a result, the first treaty of Erzurum was signed in 1823. The treaty did not solve the conflict over the Kurdish territories between two states but it helped the Iranian subjects to be considered as foreigners, thus treated equally with the Europeans, and Shah and the Sultan were treated as equal and sovereign Muslim leaders¹¹.

8. RICH J. C., *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan and on the Site of Ancient Nineveh vol. I*, London, James Duncan, 1836, p. 96.

9. See the series of Correspondance Concular de Constantinople (CCC), Serie D, Baghdad, 166PO/D7, dossiers 1 to 11, which dates from 1750s until 1840s, Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes, Ministère des Affaires étrangères.

10. Through my research in the French diplomatic archives in Nantes and La Courneuve, the British National archives and the British Library I came accross many correspondance and reports on Abdurrahman Pasha, especially for the year of 1811. For the period between 1809 and 1811 see CCC, Serie D, 166PO/D7, Dossier 7 in the French Diplomatic Archives in Nantes and F/4/288, Vol. 288, 1809-10 in Asian and African Studies Department, the British Library.

11. MASTERS B., “The treaties of Erzurum (1823 and 1848) and the changing status of Iranians in the Ottoman Empire”, *Iranian Studies*, 24:1 (1991), p. 3-15.

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During such conflicts the Ottomans used Sunnism of the Kurds against Shi'i Iran, though with little success¹². The Kurds did not see much difference in the faith of both powers when they seized moments of opportunity. In his report that he prepared on the Kurds The Russian military officer Avyarov states that the Kurds did not care much about the religious unity and many Kurdish sheikhs did not consider the Sultan as the legitimate caliph since he was not a descendent of the Prophet.¹³ Although his statement is a little exaggerated one, several cases through the century show that the Kurds were not moved by the calls of jihad by the caliph.

Towards Centralization

Tanzimat (reorder, restructure) created a central bureaucratic elite class but included almost no Kurdish or Arab origin of men. One wonders if this was the cause of the late arrival of Tanzimat to the Arab and the Kurdish provinces, as the measures of centralization did not have much impact on them until after the second half of the 19th century. However, both ethnic groups were more prominent in the judicial administration of the empire such as the abundance of Kurdish *ulama* among the total religious scholars in the Ottoman Empire. Though the upper echelons of the religious ladder were still occupied by those trained in Istanbul. Furthermore, with the implementation of Tanzimat new secular laws were introduced and this caused the Kurdish *ulema* to lose more power.¹⁴

Once the new regulations were introduced and centralization policies were imposed on the Kurdish notables, from 1834 until 1847 their emirates were started to be scratched off the ground of Kurdistan one by one. Before

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12. RICH C. J., *Narrative of a Residence and on the site of ancient Nineveh with journal of a voyage down the Tigris to Bagdad and an account of a visit to Shirauz and Persepolis, vol. I*, London, Duncan, 72.

13. As a proof of his assertion, Avyarov states that when Sheikh Ubeydullah called the Kurds for jihad under the "the banner of the prophet" many of them did not respond to him. Besides, he adds that the Kurds did not have much sense of national unity, rather they were more bound with their tribes and they were very much fond of their freedom. As in the case of Bedirhan, Yezdanşir and Ubeydullah, he claims that the Kurds were not much moved by their call to be united as one nation. AVYAROV, *Osmanlı-Rus ve İran Savaşları'ında Kürtler: 1801-1900*, (translated by VARLI M.), Ankara, Sipan, 1995, p. 147.

14. KAYALI H., *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, p. 20.

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moving on the Kurdish emirs Mahmud II had to deal with Ibrahim Pasha, the son of the famous Muhammad Ali Pasha of Egypt. In 1831-32 Ibrahim Pasha seized Syria and moved to cross Anatolia all the way to Kütahya. He was persuaded by the European powers to withdraw from the occupied region. Witnessing how a strong local notable from Egypt could devastate the Ottoman army, the Sublime Porte now determined to remove the local powers in Kurdistan.

Soon afterward, the Porte prepared to launch a campaign against all the Kurdish emirates in the region. Istanbul first decided to send off new governors to the region with new rules. Many emirs did not accept these rules and rulers, which were determined by the Porte, and had a fierce fight with the Ottoman and local armies in order to uphold their autonomous status. In the end, emirs were defeated one by one and were sent to exile with their family members as far as Albania, Crete, Mecca, Tunisia and Egypt. Alongside Soran, Botan, and Hakkari emirates, the Babans were the last Kurdish notables to be crushed in this struggle of centralization.

The border that the Kurdish population settled around fluctuated for centuries because of wars and conflicts and it had never been a strict line in between two states. The tribes in the frontier region used lands in both states for their summer and winter camps. During the first half of 19th century, the state through the 1823 and 1847 treaties of Erzurum attempted to bring the boundaries under control, where the Babans and other Kurdish emirates were located. Although Ottomans and Iranians, as well as Russians and British, did not accomplish much in the first treaty, they achieved much more than they intended with the treaty of 1847, when they destroyed all Kurdish emirates and replaced local leaders with officers appointed by the Sublime Porte. The state did not totally bring these regions under full control of the central administration right away. It took another half a century until the central state secured these frontier regions and became visible in everyday life. As van Bruinessen states “officially, Kurdistan was from then on ruled directly by Ottoman governors – in practice, however, direct Ottoman rule was to prove very ineffective indeed. Near cities, the governors had some power ; nowhere did they have authority¹⁵. ” Despite that, the empire gradually brought the eastern frontier under its control. Demarking

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15. VAN BRUIJESSEN M., *Agha, Shaikh and State*, London, Zed, 1992, p. 176.

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and securing the borderlands allowed the empire to increase its surveillance capacity within its borders and consequently helped to create a modern state with the same rules applied in all over its territories. While leaving its territories in the Balkans, the empire hoped to bring home, with direct rule of the frontiers in the second half the 19th century, more taxes and manpower from the untapped sources of the region.¹⁶

Restructuring the state and the Kurds

Declaration of Tanzimat was not the starting point, but was just the official acceptance of this process of centralization and modernization in the periphery. Although such policies were intended and started in the early 19th century, with Tanzimat it was proved that this was an ongoing project and was going to take a while to accomplish it. As Sabri Ateş put it, this was an “ Ottoman citizenship project ” which included “ the making of the boundaries, the forceful replacement of local notables and interest groups with salaried appointees, the reorganization of regional administrative divisions, the reform of landholding patterns, the forced settlement of itinerant populations, the introduction of new taxes, and the conscription of hitherto unconscribed locals¹⁷. ” These new standards, which were introduced by the center to regulate the periphery, meant the introduction of travel documents, passports, new customhouses, and border patrols.

Despite the new structure and centralization of the state there was little change in the centers and rural areas of Kurdistan. The Ottomans simply could not overcome with the geographical challenges as the mountains in the east and south of Kurdish regions did not allow developing a transportation and communication system. The Ottoman qadis and muftis had jurisdiction in most western and central provinces but they had no power over some certain urban and rural areas in Kurdistan.¹⁸ While the judiciary system evolved slowly in Kurdistan, the economic and social life changed much faster thanks to the Western encroachment into the region with its trade and political dominance. The locals had already met with the

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16. ROGAN E., *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850-1921*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 5, 11-12.

17. ATEŞ S., *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderland, Texas, Southern Methodist University*, p. 35.

18. NATALI D., *The Kurds and the state: evolving national identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2005, p. 6.

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transformation and changes before the new regulations were announced in Gülhane. With the policy of restructuring the state, namely Tanzimat, after 1840s the Ottomans decided to destroy the classical Kurdish emirates and appoint administrators from the center instead. Twenty years later the Qajarians followed the footsteps of the Ottomans and eliminated the last Kurdish rule in Sinnah. After this initiation a power vacuum was in Kurdistan, where the Qadiri and Naqshbandi-Khalidi sheikhs reestablished the order and filled the vacuum.

Sheikhs: The Religious Stage

Religion became more important and central in 19th century when the Empire became weaker and the Westerners, both politically and religiously, became more dominant. While the political figures emphasized on the threats to Islam by the Westerns Christians and Eastern Shi'is and asked for the people to be more cautious of the external enemies beyond the borders, there were already some Sufi orders who responded such a call. One of these orders was Naqshbandiyya, which gained further strength with arrival of Sheikh Mawlana Khalid al-Baghdadi, who was from Shahrizor and sought knowledge from a Naqshbandi Sheikh in India. Mawlana was received well and supported financially by the Baban pashas as well as by the Mamluk governors in Baghdad. Once he arrived to Sulaimaniya he immediately started to expend his sphere of influence among the nobles of the town, therefore caused some fury among the old establishments like Qadiri Sufi order since he threatened their domination. Mawlana proved that the balance established among the local notables could be infiltrated and shaken, though with little success for the moment. However the change did not come right away and the Babans, who supported him earlier, drew their political support back. Consequently, he decided to seek a more powerful entity outside of the town that would transform not only his native lands but the whole empire. Therefore, like all the other Sufis, who left their home for their belief, he decided to leave his lands for Baghdad in 1820 and later for Damascus, where he died in 1827. This forced journey would transform the sheikh from being a local notable to a transcontinental figure well known from North Africa to South East Asia. However, a long and thorny road awaited him before he could accomplish goal.

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It was not going to be easy for the sheikh to find support outside of his lands since the sultan did not feel comfortable about supporting him because he suspected all religious movements due to their infiltration into the ranks of the Janissaries and the bureaucracy. His order did not accomplish much about being influential outside Iraq and Syria during his lifetime, but he succeeded to produce well amount of mullahs and assigned them to all around the empire and beyond. After his decease, somehow the sultan changed his policy and supported Mawlana Khalid's disciples financially. The sultan not only allocated stipends to his successor and family members but also built a tomb for him as well as Sufi lodges for his followers. Accordingly, the order came to be known as Khalidiyya-Mujaddidiyya (shortly Khalidi) and became more influential in the high ranks of the Ottoman bureaucracy than any other order in the empire.

After Mawlana Khalid Seyyid Taha-i Hakkari (also known as Nehri or Shamdhinani) became the head of the Khalidi order. This was an important moment since the center of the sufi order was transferred from Sorani speaking south to Kurmanji speaking northern Kurdistan. From then on we see a new division between north as Khalidi dominant and the south as Qadiri dominant regions.

Seyyid Taha started to engage with the regional politics as early as the beginning of 1828, just a year after the death of his master. In a letter from the governor of Van to the governor of Erzurum, we learn that Seyyid Taha organized the Kurdish tribes on the Iranian frontier against a possible invasion by the Russians¹⁹. From this period on Seyyid Taha became an interlocutor between the Kurdish emirs and the Ottoman and Iranian authorities. For instance he tried to save Nurullah Beg of Hakkari from the Ottoman authorities but his effort was in vain²⁰. Later he started to fill the position that these emirs occupied. He had very good relations with the Shah of Iran. One of the wives of Shah Muhammad and mother of Shahzade Abbas Mirza, the crown prince, was disciple of Seyyid Taha. As a result of such relations the Shah bestowed on him the revenues of some Kurdish villages on Iranian

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19. Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA), Hatt-ı Humayun Collections (HAT), 803/37114-C, 23 Cemaziye-lahir, 1243(11 January 1828) in HAKAN S., "Dini bir Otoriteden Siyasi bir Hüviyete: Seyyid Taha-yı Nehri" in YALÇIN H. et al. (eds.), *Uluslararası Seyyid Taha-i Hakkari Sempozyumu Bildirileri*, Istanbul, Hakkari Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2014, p. 91-105.

20. BOA, İ.DH 193/10876, 03 Ca, 1265 (28 March 1849) in *ibid.*, p. 100-01.

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side.²¹ He had disciples spread all over the Ottoman territories as well as in Caucasus, Balkans, Egypt, Syria and Iran.

After Seyyid Taha's death in 1853 his brother Seyyid Salih continued the family tradition of teaching sufi principles. Salih did not show any appetite for the politics and remained off radar until his death. Once Salih passed away in 1873, Seyyid Taha's enigmatic son Sheikh Ubeydullah took his place. With the change of political structure in Kurdish regions, the family transformed from "prominent religious figures to political leaders²²." With Sheikh Ubeydullah's leadership this transformation became obvious. He established himself as the true ruler of central regions of Kurdistan, especially after he rebelled against the rulers in the frontier areas and attempted a failed occupation of northwestern Iran. In the month of October in 1880, Sheikh Ubeydullah gathered tens of thousands of armed men from among the Ottoman and Iranian Kurds and seized several cities in the northwestern of Iran. The Iranian army marched on the occupied regions after a short while and silenced the rebellion. Iran's response coupled with great violence against the Kurdish tribes and villages. As a conclusion, thousands of families were displaced. Sheikh Ubeydullah was captured and exiled first to Istanbul and later to Mecca, where he died in 1883. His family, including his influential son Seyyid Abdulqadir, remained in exile until 1908, when Abdulhamid II was deposed²³.

Official correspondence of various states and memoires of missionaries in the region indicate that Sheikh Ubeydullah had project of self-governance in a certain form of autonomy under the banner of caliphate. One year after the revolt, in a conversation with the British consul in Tabriz, William Abbot, the sheikh stated that he wished to "reorganize Kurdistan" and rule with an "iron hand" as "the moment had arrived when something ought to be done" in the region. He also added that the people of Kurdistan were "sorely in need of reforms" and he was "anxious" to "place his people in the position to which human beings they were entitled" as the Turks and Persians²⁴.

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21. RUHANI B. M., *Tarikh-i mashahir-i Kurd*, Vol. 1, Tehran, Soroush, 1390, p. 430.

22. ATEŞ S., "In the Name of the Caliph and the Nation: The Sheikh Ubeidullah Rebellion of 1880 – 81", *Iranian Studies*, 47:5, (2014) p. 735-798.

23. *Ibid*, p. 783.

24. The British National Archives (TNA), Foreign Office (FO) 60/441, Abbot to Earl Granville, Tabriz, 1 October 1881.

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Meanwhile, from the mid-19th century and on the Ottomans continued to appoint the governors to the Kurdish provinces and sub-provinces. Muhammed Emin Zaki beg gives the list of all governors appointed by the Sublime Porte to Sulaimaniya from 1851, the year the last Baban emir was deposed, until the beginning of World War One²⁵. While the officials were appointed from the center of the empire religious leaders, especially after Sheikh Ma'ruf Node (d. 1836) of Qadiri order, continued to expand their realm through the region. With the help of politics he played with Baban pashas Sheikh Ma'ruf forced Mawlana Khalid to leave Sulaimaniya for Baghdad in 1820. From this period on, Southern Kurdistan was reconfirmed as the ground of Qadiri order. Node was followed by his son Kak Ahmad (d. 1887), who became the most influential religious leader in Southern Kurdistan. His influence continued until today, as his tomb is situated in the center of Sulaimaniya close by the Great Mosque. Although religiously active among the Kurds, Qadiri sheikhs never gained as much political importance as their Khalidi counterparts during the 19th century. It had to wait for Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji (1878-1956), the great-grandson of Kak Ahmad, for the Qadiri sheikhs to claim the leadership of Southern Kurdistan in the early 20th century. When the last Ottoman governor had to leave Sulaimaniya in 1918 the only alternative for the British authorities to maintain the order was Sheikh Mahmud²⁶.

On the one hand, the sheikhs were ascending in the political echelon of Kurdistan, where the emirs left. On the other hand, even though the Kurdish emirs were removed from their native lands, their descendants were trying to reestablish the ancient political structure. When the war between the Ottomans and Russians broke out in 1877 two sons of Bedirkhan, Osman Pasha and Husain Kenan Pasha, went back to their native lands and succeeded to establish a new order in Hakkari, Zakho, Amediya, Mardin and Midyat for a short period²⁷. In 1854 Izzaddin Shar (Yezdanshar) also rebelled against the newly appointed governors in Bohtan and Hakkari. Izzaddin Shar was supported by other Kurdish notables, such as the Bedirkhanis,

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25. ZEKI M. E., *Tarixê Sûlimani û Welatê lê Devreyê Zûr Kedîmeve ta evvelê Îhtilal 1918* (History of Suleimaniya and its province from the ancient times until early of 1918 war), Baghdad, Al-Najah, 1939, p. 146-48.

26. ALI O., "British Policy and the Kurdish Question in Iraq, 1918-1932", Ph.D. thesis, the University of Toronto, 1992, p. 111-12.

27. ZEKI M. E., *Kürtler ve Kürdistan Tarihi*, (translated by INCE V. et al.), Istanbul, Nubihar, 2010, p. 222-23.

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and expanded his dominion over Van and Müküs. Besides the Kurds, the Nestorians in Hakkari also rebelled and this caused fear that the Armenians and other non-Muslim Christians would join the movement. By 1855, the number of armed rebels reached sixty to hundred thousands people. Izzaddin Shar tried to have the Russian support but could not succeed. In the end the rebellions were suppressed and their leaders were captured and sent to Istanbul. The Ottomans handed a special “medallion of Kurdistan” to the head of the military personnel as a symbol of “reconquest” of the region²⁸.

Aghas: The Tribal Stage

After Sheikh Ubeydullah and his family were removed from Nehri in 1883, Kurdistan experienced a second period of power vacuum. Sublime Porte tried to integrate Kurdish lands further into the lands of empire, thus looked for alternative policies. As part of this search Sultan Abdulhamid II in 1890 invited several powerful Kurdish tribal leaders to Istanbul in order to bring the tribes together and establish light cavalry regiments. Two of his trusted confidantes, marshal Zeki Pasha and Shakir Pasha, were appointed to realize this mission. Named Hamidiye Light Cavalry Regiments (*Hamidiye Hafif Süvari Alayları*) these tribal militias were made of Sunni Kurdish tribesmen especially from those proven loyal to sultan’s regime. In most cases the regiments were made of approximately 600 men, preferably drawn from one tribe and commanded by the chief of the same tribe²⁹. The regiments were part of the Forth Army under the command of Zeki Pasha. The Forth Army was responsible to protect the Eastern provinces from Erzincan to Month Ararat, from Hakkari to Cizre. Thus, it was only the Kurdish tribes in the Northern Kurdistan, where those regiments were created. This is the part of Kurdistan where Russia’s treat was imminent and most of Armenian population dwelled.

There are many reasons behind the establishment of these regiments, but they were apparently launched against increasing Russian threat from the Ottoman Empire’s frontier in the Eastern Anatolia. As Janet Klein states,

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28. CELIL C., *19. Yüzyıl Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Kürtler*, (translated by DEMİR M.), Ankara, Özge Yayınları, 1992, p. 154-167.

29. MCDOWALL D., *A Modern History of the Kurds*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2004, p. 59.

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the creation of these regiments was a “manifold mission” beyond to defend the Eastern frontier. Sultan and his pashas also aimed to weaken and disperse Armenian activities, to strengthen the Islamic unity by establishing special bonds between the Sultan and the Kurds, to transform the tribes into “peaceful agriculturalists” and Ottoman “citizens” most significantly “to bring the region into the Ottoman fold and to ensure, by almost any means necessary, that it remained there³⁰.”

The regiments caused many troubles in the region among the local population, both the Muslims and Christians. Some of tribal regiments gained more power over the other tribes and started to appropriate lands belong to the peasants. The state turned such unintended consequences to its advantage by offering an unrestrained reign over the Armenian peasants with the long-term effect of pushing them out of their lands and emigrate elsewhere. While decreasing the number of Armenians, on the one hand, the state used this as an incentive in order to settle the Kurdish tribes and assure their loyalty to the sultan³¹.

Hamidiye Cavalry regiments remained in place after the deposition of Abdulhamid in 1909 with a renewed name of the Tribal Light Cavalry Regiments (*Aşiret Hafif Süvari Alayları*). During the World War One, the regiments were no longer employed to repress the internal threats; instead they were employed in different fronts of the empire. Some participated to Turkish War of Independence with the Kemalists, while some other tribal chiefs opposed the newly emerging Turkish government in Ankara and jointed the Kurdish national movement³².

Conclusion

In conclusion, Kurdistan in the 19th century went through various political phases. On the one hand the Kurdish polity tried to adapt to the new changes in the region, while the state was going through the modernization. Despite

30. KLEIN J., *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2011, p. 5-6.

31. *Ibid*, p.6.

32. *Ibid*, p. 7.

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state's all efforts to create a central administration, the Kurdish notables constantly established their own alternative administrative structure. The state did not totally ignore these structures, instead tried to use them for its own political interest. In the end both the Ottoman and the Kurdish polities depended on each other, sometime by working with each other some other time by combating with one another. As the state and the society transformed through the century, both sides tried to balance each other with gains and compromises. During this period the Kurds used all options of political leaderships in order to save their political autonomy. Meanwhile the state tried to use these options to its own interest. In terms of political power, the mirs were at the top of the power pyramid, next the religious leaders came and then the tribal aghas. The 19th century of Kurdistan became a theatrical scene for all these leaders. In order, first emirs, then sheikhs and finally aghas, each played his political role and left this scene with final close of the curtains.

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